

## MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: A FEMINIST EXILE IN PARIS

E.J. Clery

*In A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) and other writings, Mary Wollstonecraft described the state of Englishwomen in their native land figuratively as that of a slave, an outlaw and an exile. This view was shared by other women writers across the political spectrum in the 1790s, including Charlotte Smith and Frances Burney. The idea of women's dis-patriation by the laws of England provides a context for reconsidering Wollstonecraft's twenty-seven month period as an expatriate in revolutionary France. Three specific questions are addressed: Why did she go to Paris in December 1792? Why did she decide to stay at the outbreak of war between Britain and France in February 1793? And why was she so resistant to the idea of leaving Paris and returning to London in early 1795? The trope of the feminist exile offers valuable guidance when exploring her motivations. A distinctive set of priorities comes into focus, setting Wollstonecraft apart from her compatriots and fellow-radicals in the French capital at the time. Both the influence of working-class citoyennes on economic policy and the liberalisation of family law at the outset of the Republic made a profound impression on her, revealed most fully in her correspondence and in the unfinished novel The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria (1798).*

### Introduction

[...] as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country.  
As a woman my country is the whole world.

Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938)<sup>1</sup>

When Virginia Woolf wrote *Three Guineas*, her feminist rejection of militaristic patriotism on the eve of the Second World War, she took inspiration from Mary

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986) 125.

Wollstonecraft. The heroine of Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel *The Wrongs of Women; or, Maria* (1798) states that wives can be robbed and mistreated by their masters "with impunity," for "the laws of her country – if women have a country – afford her no protection or redress from the oppressor."<sup>2</sup> Woolf had immersed herself in Wollstonecraft's works in order to produce a pen portrait of her experimental life that has influenced all subsequent biographers. In this article, I take the idea of Englishwomen's dis-patriation in their native country as the basis for reconsidering Wollstonecraft's period as an expatriate in revolutionary France from December 1792 to March 1795. This sojourn has typically been explained either with reference to personal relationships or by setting her in the context of the community of radical enthusiasts initially centred on the British Club in Paris and associated with the Girondin party.<sup>3</sup> I will suggest, by contrast, that Wollstonecraft's decision to leave England was governed by a distinctively feminist set of priorities that, in spite of her condemnation of political violence, made life in Paris under Jacobin rule feel like a homecoming.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published at the start of 1792, Wollstonecraft described the condition of woman as that of a slave, and argued that education and the possession of rights alongside duties was necessary to the spirit of patriotism. The dedicatory letter to Talleyrand states that "the upbringing and situation of woman at present shuts her out" of citizenship.<sup>4</sup> She has no stake in her country. Legally speaking, women are exiles in the land of their birth. In Woolf's coinage, they form an entirely distinct, potentially oppositional and critical "Outsider Society."<sup>5</sup>

Wollstonecraft shared this outlook with a number of other women writers of the 1790s, regardless of their differing views on the French Revolution as it unfolded. Charlotte Smith, attempting to raise nine children by her pen and separated from a violent and profligate husband who from time to time legally claimed her earnings, gradually made her plight known to the public by comparing it to that of the exile and the emigrant. *The Emigrants* (1793), her verse

<sup>2</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman*, ed. Gary Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 140.

<sup>3</sup> See Rachel Rogers, "White's Hotel: A Junction of British Radical Culture in Early 1790s Paris," *Caliban: French Journal of English Studies*, 33 (2013): 153-72; and Rogers's essay in the present issue.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men with A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Hints*, ed. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 68.

<sup>5</sup> Woolf 122.

Mary Wollstonecraft

meditation on the experience of French émigrés in England, also makes apparent the permanent state of alienation of the author in her own country:

my weary soul recoils  
From proud oppression, and from legal crimes  
(For such are in this Land, where the vain boast  
Of equal law is mockery [...])

(I, 35-38).<sup>6</sup>

As Jacqueline Labbe has described, Smith places herself outside her culture and dramatises that dislocation.<sup>7</sup> The manoeuvre gained a hostile response from the *Critical Review*:

Herself, and not the French emigrant, fills the foreground, begins and ends the piece; and the pity we should naturally feel for those overwhelming and uncommon distresses she describes, is lessened by their being brought into parallel with the inconveniences of a narrow income, or a protracted lawsuit.<sup>8</sup>

Undeterred, the following year Smith published a novel, *The Banished Man*, fictionalising her own state of alienation in the form of the penniless author Charlotte Denzil. The narrative had the working title “The Exile,” which would have allowed full play to analogies between the stateless male protagonists D’Alonville and Carlowitz, and the dispossessed Mrs Denzil. Critics have debated whether it should be categorised as a Jacobin or an anti-Jacobin novel.<sup>9</sup> There is textual evidence to support both views but the solution may be that Smith’s anger relates less to the “Banished Man” than to the “Banished Women,” and displaces androcentric mapping of the political terrain.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Curran (ed.), *The Poems of Charlotte Smith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 136.

<sup>7</sup> Jacqueline Labbe, *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry and the Culture of Gender* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) 135.

<sup>8</sup> *Critical Review*, series 2, 9 (1794): 299-302, 299-300. See also Kerri Andrews, “‘Herself ... Fills the Foreground’: Negotiating Autobiography in *The Elegiac Sonnets* and *The Emigrants*,” *Charlotte Smith in British Romanticism*, ed. Jacqueline M. Labbe (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2015) 13-28.

<sup>9</sup> *The Works of Charlotte Smith*, vol. 7: *The Banished Man* and *The Wanderings of Warwick*, ed. M.O. Grenby (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006) xxix.

For some female commentators, women's exclusion from political society was a state of affairs to accept rather than resist. Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, a socially and politically conservative bluestocking, wrote *Letters on the Female Mind* (1793) as a rebuke to her former friend Helen Maria Williams, author of the serial *Letters from France* (1790-96), whose crime, in her eyes, had been to turn a visit to revolutionary France voluntarily into permanent expatriation, and to switch allegiance to her adopted country. Hawkins makes clear that an Englishwoman can have no country and has no business masquerading as a citizen with political views:

In this age of female heroism, I shall gain no credit by avowing myself inimical to the idea of female patriotism; but in truth, I know no such virtue. A woman's country is [...] that which her protector chuses for her.<sup>10</sup>

The complications of this issue are further illustrated by Frances Burney's *The Wanderer*, set in the period of the Terror. Burney wrote much of the novel in the 1790s but due to her own involuntary exile in France, where she was trapped by the collapse of the Treaty of Amiens in 1803, she was unable to publish it until 1814. In spite of holding political views closer to Hawkins than to Wollstonecraft, she nevertheless actualises Wollstonecraft's central metaphor of woman as slave by initially disguising her heroine in blackface. It is not long before the dye wears off to reveal skin of "dazzling fairness" and the heroine declares herself to be English by blood.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the narrative insistently uses her homeless, nameless and penniless condition to point to the fundamental analogy between womanhood and slavery. She is fleeing political tyranny and a mercenary forced marriage in France, but England proves to be very different from the imagined sanctuary of "liberty and felicity."<sup>12</sup> Her labour is exploited and often unpaid whether as a lady's companion or in a milliner's sweatshop. As the subtitle insists, she faces a long succession of ordeals ("*Female Difficulties*") which provide a window for British readers onto a land vitiated by gender inequality: "rise as they rise, feed as they feed, and work as they work! like mine, then, your eyes would open."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, *Letters on the Female Mind, its Powers and Pursuits; with Particular Reference to the Dangerous Opinions Contained in the Writings of Miss H.M. Williams*, 2 vols. (London: J. and T. Carpenter, 1801) 2:194.

<sup>11</sup> Frances Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties*, ed. Margaret Anne Doody et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 43.

<sup>12</sup> Burney 751.

<sup>13</sup> Burney 701.



Sarah Salih has rightly observed that Burney's novel introduces racial difference, exposes "negrophobia," and then effaces the topic without real challenge or resolution.<sup>14</sup> It is problematic, nonetheless, to pigeon-hole *The Wanderer* as a "conservative" text, though understandable for this and other reasons.<sup>15</sup> The inclusion of the absurd anti-heroine Elinor Joddrel, who proclaims the rights of women and, like Mary Wollstonecraft, has been infected by French democracy during a two-year residence in Paris, did nothing to deflect a hostile response to the Burney's own Wollstonecraft-inspired critique of patriarchy. Male critics in the left-wing *Edinburgh Review* and the right-wing *Quarterly Review* united to savage the novel. William Hazlitt, arch-defender of revolutionary France, denied in the *Edinburgh* that "Female Difficulties" even signified: "they are difficulties created out of nothing."<sup>16</sup> John Wilson Croker, a rabid loyalist, predictably took exception in the *Quarterly* to its lack of patriotism: "her long residence in France has given Madame D'Arblay a very novel and surprising view of the state of religion, manners, and society in England."<sup>17</sup> This unanimous condemnation is a clear indication that *The Wanderer*, like Smith's writing on exile and emigration, challenged the *status quo* not along party or nationalist lines, but as patriarchy. Furthermore, within the psychodrama of contemporary reception the author's own lack of clear national affiliation – the foreign name she assumed on marriage to a French émigré, her accidental twelve-year expatriation – registers as a troubling aberration and becomes part of the story.<sup>18</sup>

With these larger issues in mind, the remainder of this article will address three specific questions relating to Wollstonecraft's period as an expatriate: Why did she go to revolutionary Paris in December of that year? Why did she decide to stay at the outbreak of war between Britain and France in February 1793? And why was she so resistant to the idea of leaving Paris and returning to England in late winter 1795, after all that she had seen and suffered under successive Jacobin

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Salih, "'Her Blacks, Her Whites and Her Double Face!': Altering Alterity in *The Wanderer*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 11.3 (1999): 307.

<sup>15</sup> Salih 314.

<sup>16</sup> [William Hazlitt], review of *The Wanderer*, *Edinburgh Review*, 24 (February 1814): 125-26.

<sup>17</sup> [John Wilson Croker], review of *The Wanderer*, *Quarterly Review*, 11 (April 1814): 128.

<sup>18</sup> The reverberations of this were still felt in 1843 when Macaulay reviewed Burney's posthumously published letters and diary: "Madame d'Arblay had carried a bad style to France. She brought back a style which we are really at a loss to describe. It is a sort of broken Johnsonese, a barbarous patois, bearing the same relation to the language of Rasselas, which the gibberish of the negroes of Jamaica bears to the House of Lords." Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Literary Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913) 595.

and Thermidor governments? Discussion of these points has remained speculative. The evidence stemming from Wollstonecraft herself is fragmentary and sometimes oblique. The views offered in the memoir written after her death by William Godwin are unreliable, for reasons to be explained. I will argue that reference to the trope of the feminist exile offers valuable guidance when attempting to interpret indications of her motives.

### **“A Rational Desire”**

In the planning, Mary Wollstonecraft envisaged a mere six week stay in Paris. It is clear from her correspondence that the enterprise at the outset was bound up with her sister Eliza’s aspiration to visit France and improve her teaching credentials. Mary had for many years been tireless in promoting schemes to launch her younger siblings. Her sense of responsibility in Eliza’s case was especially acute and fundamentally related to her developing feminist beliefs. In 1783 Eliza suffered “extreme wretchedness” and mental disturbance following the birth of her first child, and Mary had been instrumental in her escape from marriage to Meredith Bishop.<sup>19</sup> The absconding wife “bit her *wedding ring* to pieces” as she left (CL 45). The baby, called Mary, remained in her father’s care as the law demanded and died soon after. Eliza recovered but was condemned to the narrow joyless existence of a provincial governess. Eliza’s marital trauma informs *The Wrongs of Woman* in a variety of ways. The novel depicts the heroine Maria’s deteriorating relationship with her husband and mental breakdown, the terror of the hunted fugitive from domestic tyranny and the mother’s despair at the loss of her daughter. There is also allusion to Eliza’s subsequent misery through the fate of the heroine’s two younger sisters, isolated and forlorn in a series of menial teaching posts.

In 1792, Eliza was exiled to a damp castle in Wales, charged with educating the three hapless daughters of an East India Company nabob. Mary agreed that Paris and the acquisition of fluent French would liberate her sister, and repeatedly represented this as the object of her own intended journey to France. Eliza was somewhat sceptical regarding Mary’s intentions, supposing that ambition and the pursuit of love were uppermost (CL 200-201 n. 461). Mary was thirty-three years old, and until this point had lived the life of a studious spinster. The success of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had certainly fed her

<sup>19</sup> *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet M. Todd (London: Allen Lane, 2003) 44. Subsequent references to this edition are marked CL and a page number, and are given in brackets in the main text.

ambition, and in June she wrote to her other sister Everina, about the journey to the French capital: "I shall be introduced to many people, my book has been translated and praised in some popular prints" (CL 200). When she set out for Dover in the company of her publisher Joseph Johnson, a living legend in radical circles, Henry Fuseli, the internationally celebrated artist, and his wife Sophia Rawlins, the expedition had the glamour of a celebrity tour. It was called off when news arrived of the storming of the Tuileries Palace on 10 August by the insurrectionary Commune of Paris, leaving more than a thousand dead and precipitating the fall of the monarchy.

Johnson and Fuseli would not renew the attempt to visit revolutionary France. The situation became increasingly unstable and alarming. Panic among Parisians over food shortages, the threat of foreign invasion and rumoured infiltration by counter-revolutionary agents resulted in the prison massacres of 2-6 September. The national government veered sharply to the left, imprisoning the royal family and declaring the Republic on 21 September. The majority of British visitors hurriedly made arrangements to leave. In England meanwhile there was a political backlash and radical sympathisers were increasingly under suspicion and isolated. Thomas Paine, facing trial for seditious libel after the publication of the second part of *Rights of Man*, was smuggled out of the country and arrived in Paris on 19 September. War was imminent. Yet it was at this point that Wollstonecraft determined to visit France, alone.

The standard explanation originates in William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'* (1798). He relates that she was fleeing sexual rejection by Fuseli and "the single purpose she had in view" was "an endeavour to heal her distempered mind."<sup>20</sup> The main problem with this theory is that there is no evidence of this scenario in any of her surviving letters that can be securely dated to this period. Instead, the assertions of Fuseli have been accepted unquestioningly, and undated letters and letter fragments used to corroborate the claim. This was a man whom Wollstonecraft described as "slimed" by "that reptile Vanity;" he evidently had his own reasons for withholding the letters she had written to him and smearing her reputation after death through a selective account given to Johnson and to the naïve Godwin.<sup>21</sup>

Two dated letters from November 1792 are addressed to Mary Hays, a novice author and self-declared disciple; they briskly deal with the professional

<sup>20</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Short Residence in Sweden* and William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'*, ed. Richard Holmes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) 238.

<sup>21</sup> John Knowles (ed.), *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831) 1:363.

business of preparing a book for publication. The last before departure in early December is to Everina, expressing fears for Johnson's safety at a time when loyalist mob violence threatened in London. This letter also reveals in detail the way the trip was financed by her sisters on the basis that Wollstonecraft was acting in their interests (she refers to a potential employer in Paris), and her accommodation arrangements secured through a female network of teaching associates (in Paris she would stay in the 3<sup>rd</sup> arrondissement household of a wealthy merchant, M. Fillietaz, and his wife Aline, the daughter of Mrs Bragantz, who had formerly employed Eliza and Everina in her Putney school). Through her involvement with Johnson's business Wollstonecraft was acquainted with many of the leading lights of the radical "British Club" that was established in November at White's Hotel in the 2<sup>nd</sup> arrondissement, including Paine, Joel Barlow and Thomas Christie. However, her mission on behalf of sisters, fuelled by feminist analysis of the obstacles faced by women in the labour market, meant that Wollstonecraft would tread a distinctly different path through the unfolding events of the Revolution.

Beyond Wollstonecraft's commitment to her sister, the best indication of ulterior motives can be found in a letter dated 12 November 1792, addressed to Fuseli's friend and patron William Roscoe. She tells him she will be leaving for France within the next two or three weeks, "for I intend no longer to struggle with a rational desire" (CL 206). This has been almost universally interpreted as a reference to the alleged infatuation with Fuseli. Yet as Lyndall Gordon has argued, the word "desire" was synonymous with "wish" in this period, and it is more logical to suppose that Wollstonecraft meant she would *give in* to her wish to improve her French and see the Revolution at first hand.<sup>22</sup> Support for such a reading is found in a letter to her sister Everina from the previous year: "I am studying French, and wish I had an opportunity of conversing indeed, if I have ever any money to spare to gratify myself, I will certainly visit France, *it has long been a desire floating in my brain*" (CL 152, emphasis added).

A further clue to Wollstonecraft's motivation has previously been unconsidered. There is a vein of flirtatious banter in the letter to Roscoe, at odds with the story that she was suffering heartbreak at the time. She ends by teasingly describing herself as "a Spinster on the wing":

<sup>22</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *Vindication: A Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Virago, 2005) 180-81, 479n.

Mary Wollstonecraft

At Paris, indeed, I might take a husband for the time being, and get divorced when my truant heart longed again to nestle with its old friends; but this speculation has not yet entered into my plan.

(CL 208)

This apparently casual remark indicates that Wollstonecraft had taken note of a new law that had barely figured in political debates at a time of political and economic crisis and amid a rush of extraordinary occurrences. On 20 September 1792, on the final day of its existence before making way for the republican Convention, the Legislative Assembly had passed a decree making divorce accessible to men and women of all classes on a radically egalitarian basis.<sup>23</sup>

For Wollstonecraft, this would have been a development of the greatest significance. She had been severely disappointed by the revolutionary government's failure to implement a public school system available to girls as well as boys. This had been the spur to her treatise on the rights of woman. The new legislation was the clearest sign yet of a commitment to equal rights and to the reshaping of marriage as an institution along feminist lines. Between 1790 and 1792, reforms abolishing primogeniture, providing for distribution of inheritance to daughters and making marriage a civil contract all had strong personal resonance for Wollstonecraft. But the introduction of a right to divorce, including on a no-fault basis due to incompatibility, was of a different order of importance. It meant not only that women as well as men had an escape route from disastrous matches, but that they could demand positive happiness in married life and leave if it failed to meet their expectations. And so they did: up to three quarters of applications for divorce came from women.<sup>24</sup> From 1792 until 1803, when the Napoleonic Code reduced access, 38,000 to 50,000 divorces took place.<sup>25</sup>

Maria in *The Wrongs of Woman* protests that marriage has "bastilled me for life."<sup>26</sup> For women suffering marital abuse or coercive control on the other side of the Channel, the passing of the divorce bill in France would have appeared their own Fall of the Bastille. The doctrine of *feme covert* dictated that "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended into the marriage, or at least

<sup>23</sup> See Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 175-85.

<sup>24</sup> Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 99-100.

<sup>25</sup> Desan 94.

<sup>26</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman* 137.

incorporated into that of the husband.”<sup>27</sup> *The Wrongs of Woman* examines not only the economic and social injustice faced by women under coverture, but also the psychic pain arising from the near impossibility of ending a bad marriage, “goad[ing] the soul almost to madness.”<sup>28</sup>

No wonder Wollstonecraft described herself as a “Spinster on the wing”; it was as if the French nation had opened the door of a birdcage, and she felt it as a personal liberation. She spoke playfully of taking a husband, now that she could be sure of divorcing him at will. Yet the depth of her principled resistance to matrimony must not be underestimated. At the time that Eliza and her friend Jane Arden married, ten years previously, she wrote to the latter resolving to live “like a true born Englishwoman” and therefore reject marriage and remain free (CL 38). To marry, she implied by the joke, was to give up any notion of the freedoms of citizenship and become a slave on English soil, and the sentiment became the driving force of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Now she had the opportunity to witness a great national experiment allowing love and liberty to be combined. It was a hopeful augury to outweigh any fears for her own safety. The divorce decree was like an invitation.

#### “Just Turning the Corner”

On 1 February 1793 France declared war on Britain. British subjects remaining in France would consequently be subject to surveillance and potential prosecution as enemy aliens. Those who returned to Britain potentially also faced a hostile reception.

The outbreak of war was a test of Mary’s intentions. On 20 January, approximately five weeks after her arrival, she admitted to Eliza that her efforts to find a position for her sister had been ineffectual so far, but repeated the assurance that “I will not leave P. till you are settled” (CL 217). She was later forced to admit the obvious: that there was very little prospect that the original aim of the visit could be fulfilled (CL 225). It would have been the most natural thing in the world, then, for Mary to return to London at this point. She had not given up the lease on her lodgings in Store Street; she had intended only a six-week visit, and six weeks had now passed; she was offered a place in a carriage by a gentleman travelling back to England, and “knew not how to say no,” she

<sup>27</sup> William Blackstone, *Commentaries of the Laws of England*, 15<sup>th</sup> edn., 4 vols. (London: Thomas Cadell and William Davies, 1809) 1:441.

<sup>28</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman* 140.

Mary Wollstonecraft

told her friend Ruth Barlow (CL 221). And yet she did say no. She rejected a timely opportunity to return home: why?

Wollstonecraft's letter to Barlow, speculatively dated 1-14 February 1793, explains how she disregarded the risks and states elliptically the reasons for her fateful decision to stay in France:

All the affection I have for the French is for the whole nation, and it seems to be a little honey spread over all the bread I eat in their land. Yesterday a Gentleman offered me a place in his carriage to return to England and I knew not how to say no, yet I think it would be foolish to return when I have been at so much trouble to master a difficulty, when I am just turning the corner, and I am, besides, writing a plan of education for the Committee appointed to consider that subject.

(CL 220)

There is a sacramental quality to the imagery: eating the bread of France, spread with the honey of affection. Bread, of all products, had political as well as religious meaning. The protests against food shortages that were gaining momentum in the first months of this year were spurred by the high price of flour. Merchants and speculators were accused of hoarding grain. To consume bread is, in Wollstonecraft's formulation, is to live the Revolution, sweetened by sympathy for the insurgents. Her allegiance is in part expressed by the project in hand, the "plan of education" intended for the Committee of Public Instruction. It is unknown whether it was commissioned or was a self-driven attempt to intervene, as the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had been; the plan has not survived.

Even more telling is the reference to her attempt to "master a difficulty," probably the ambition to "acquire the language" described elsewhere in the letter. "I should not be content to speak as many of the English speak," she writes (CL 220). On arrival in Paris, Mary told Everina of her shock, "unable to utter a word and almost stunned by the flying sounds" (CL 214). She immediately set to work: "I apply so closely to the language, and labour so continuously to understand what I hear that I never go to bed without a head ache – and my spirits are fatigued with endeavouring to form a just opinion of public affairs" (CL 214-15). Like bread, language is something to be consumed, shared and exchanged. Her determination to achieve fluency in French in order to more fully and directly grasp "public affairs" set her apart from many other British expatriates, not least Paine, who relied on translators.

Her first formal commentary on current events was titled *Letter on the Present Character of the French Nation*, one of a planned series, dated 15 February 1793.

She did not mention the war or relations with Britain; instead her immediate concern is with the “morals” of the French, and whether their native gaiety and sensuality can be converted into solid political improvement. Strikingly and unexpectedly, given the close ties of many British residents with the Anglophile Brissot and his followers, she characterises the present government, the Girondins still in the ascendant and at that moment putting forward a draft constitution, as mere opportunists: “every thing whispers me, that names, not principles, are changed [...] the turn of the tide has left the dregs of the old system to corrupt the new.”<sup>29</sup>

She observes that “the aristocracy of birth is levelled with the ground, only to make room for that of riches” and that “little is to be expected from the narrow principle of commerce which seems every where to be shoving aside *the point of honour* of the *noblesse*.”<sup>30</sup> Her commentary is in the vanguard of a process noted by the historian Albert Soboul: the broadening of the term “aristocrat” in Year II of the Revolution “to encompass every social group against which the *sans-culottes*,” the popular classes, “were struggling.”<sup>31</sup>

“[E]very thing whispers to me,” Wollstonecraft remarks. The language employed in this open letter does not belong to the Girondin discourse of expatriates such as Thomas Paine, who signed the failed draft constitution. Nor does it belong to the Montagnards at this stage. Both factions in the Convention advocated free trade and the rights of property. Instead, it draws on the words of those surrounding her in rue Meslée; the linguistic landscape of her district, one of the poorest in Paris, in the form of broadsheets, posters and gossip. This is the environment that gives rise to her condemnation of the commercial speculator, the “cold calculator who lives for himself alone” and considers

his fellow-creatures merely as machines of pleasure [...] Keeping ever within the pale of the law, he crushes his thousands with impunity; but it is with that degree of management, which makes him, to borrow a significant vulgarism, a villain *in grain* [...].<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letter on the Present Character of the French Nation* (1798), *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7 vols. (London: Pickering, 1989) 6:443-46; 446.

<sup>30</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letter* 444, 445.

<sup>31</sup> Albert Soboul, *The Parisian Sans-Culottes and the French Revolution 1793-4*, trans. Gwynne Lewis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964) 22.

<sup>32</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letter* 445-46.



Wollstonecraft's denunciations of a new aristocracy of riches and the dangers of speculation channels the language issuing from a source extremely close to her first Parisian home:

The merchant aristocracy, more terrible than that of the noble and sacerdotal aristocracy, has made a cruel game of invading individual fortunes and the treasury of the republic; we still don't know what will be the term of their exactions, for the price of merchandise rises in a frightful manner, from morning to evening.<sup>33</sup>

These words were proclaimed by Jacques Roux in the National Convention in his "Manifesto des Enragés" (1793). Roux was vicar of the church of Saint-Nicholas des Champs, on rue St Martin, just round the corner from Wollstonecraft's lodgings. "I am just turning the corner," she wrote to Ruth Barlow. Was this a politically symbolic turn? The Section des Gravilliers in which both Roux's parish and Wollstonecraft's lodging were situated was among the most radical of the Paris Sections, and took a leading role in the "grocery riots" of February and March.

Wollstonecraft must have been seen signs of the crisis over bread and other staples in her neighbourhood on a daily basis. Female protestors insisted on their economic rights and successfully shifted government policy. Through February, women were prominent in mass invasions of grocery and chandlers' shops with the demand that prices be restricted to customary levels. On 24 February a deputation of laundresses was admitted to the National Convention to present a petition calling for an end to excessive prices for essential foodstuffs and punishment for "hoarders and speculators" who drove up the cost of essential raw materials needed for their work: soap and bleach.<sup>34</sup> The following day they continued to besiege the Convention with the cry of "Bread and soap!"<sup>35</sup>

Wollstonecraft adopted the anti-commercial discourse of the *citoyennes* of Paris that arose in early 1793, internalised it and made it her own. This goes some way towards explaining why in spite of her revulsion at the bloodshed of the Terror she nevertheless felt at home with the command economy of the Jacobin government. Robespierre's imposition of the *Maximum*, the cap on the price

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Roux, "Manifesto of the Enragés," trans. Mitchell Abidor, <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/roux/1793/enrages01.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Darline Gay Levy et al. (eds.), *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents Translated with Notes and Commentary* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979) 131.

<sup>35</sup> Levy 132.

E.J. Clery

of staple commodities, met the central demand of the *citoyennes*. She would soon enter into a relationship with the American entrepreneur Gilbert Imlay, who worked for the government as a blockade runner, smuggling desperately needed supplies, including soap and alum, into wartime France. The influence of the grocery riots on Wollstonecraft's thinking can be seen not only in the emphasis on bread shortages in *An Historical and Moral View... of the French Revolution* (1794), unique in the commentary of British expatriates as Catherine Packham has noted, but also in her letters, as she comes to realise that Imlay is himself a speculator; her very own "villain in grain."<sup>36</sup>

#### **"My Girl Would Be Freer"**

In January 1795 Wollstonecraft was living in Paris, ill and suffering from the food shortages and cruel winter weather that ushered in a year of famine under the new Thermidor government. Imlay was in London. Americans continued to move freely between the two capitals. She resented his engrossment by matters of business and began to suspect that he was unfaithful not only to her but to the principles of patriotic trade for the benefit of the French republic. Her first concern, however, was their daughter Fanny, just eight months old. When Imlay wrote inviting her to join him in England, she resisted. England was no country for young women:

What! is our life then only to be made up of separations? And am I only to return to a country, that has not merely lost all charms for me, but for which I feel a repugnance that almost amounts, to horror, only to be left there a prey to it?

Why is it so necessary that I should return? – brought up here, my girl would be freer. Indeed, expecting you to join us, I had formed some plans of usefulness that have now vanished with my hopes of happiness.  
(CL 284-85)

At one time Wollstonecraft would have regarded Imlay as a fellow traveller when it came to the significance of the legal subordination of women. At the time their relationship began, in April 1793, he was preparing a novel titled *The Emigrants* for publication in London. Though intended in part as propaganda for settlement

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Packham, "'The Common Grievance of the Revolution:' Bread, the Grain Trade, and Political Economy in Mary Wollstonecraft's *View of the French Revolution*," *European Romantic Review*, 25.6 (2014): 705-22.

schemes in which Imlay had business interests, it frames America as a refuge for victimised wives and their male protectors.<sup>37</sup> The focus on the hardship caused by British marriage laws, the condemnation of marital rape and the arguments for a loosening of divorce laws all anticipate Mary Wollstonecraft's polemic in *The Wrongs of Woman*, to the extent that it has even been claimed the earlier novel was secretly authored by her (CL 222-23, n. 520). While on stylistic and other grounds this notion has been convincingly dismissed, it is not impossible that she contributed ideas, and very likely that a reading of the work in manuscript helped to endear Imlay to her. She may well have heard from him about the relatively liberal laws on marriage and divorce in the Pennsylvania and New England.<sup>38</sup>

In February 1795 when Wollstonecraft believed herself close to death, she attempted to put practical arrangements in place that would allow Fanny to be raised in Paris by a German woman, a friend and neighbour with a daughter the same age (CL 282). She did the same in September (CL 326). Implicitly, she suggests that France as a fatherland could offer better protection than Fanny's unreliable father. By this time Wollstonecraft seems to have considered herself an emigrant in France, rather than an expatriate. Exile was a state of being associated with the country of her birth.

As Adriana Craciun has observed, Jacobin reforms to family law "remain important milestones in family and women's rights."<sup>39</sup> Yet most commentators have failed to make sense of Wollstonecraft's continuing allegiance to the French republic. The standard context brought to bear is the defeat of female militants, both bourgeois and working class, in the public realm. Olympe de Gouges, author of *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* which predated Wollstonecraft's feminist treatise by a few months, and Madame Roland, chief strategist of the Girondin party, both fell beneath the Jacobin blade in early November 1793. Their deaths were immediately preceded by the outlawing of women's political clubs and popular societies by the National Convention, and the barring of women from sessions of the Paris Commune.<sup>40</sup> There is an assumption that these events fed Wollstonecraft's disillusionment with the revolutionary project, although she makes no mention of them in her surviving writings.

<sup>37</sup> See W.M. Verhoeven and Amanda Gilroy, "Introduction," Gilbert Imlay, *The Emigrants*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998) xxvi-xxxiii.

<sup>38</sup> Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: Norton, 1986) 157-84.

<sup>39</sup> Adriana Craciun, *British Women Writers and the French Revolution: 'Citizens of the World'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 124.

<sup>40</sup> See Levy 213-24.

In early November 1793 Wollstonecraft was preoccupied by the discovery that she was pregnant, a development communicated in a series of loving but increasingly anxious letters to Imlay, absent for longer than expected on business in Le Havre. As in the case of the divorce decree, a historic change in family law coincided with a major change in her life. The law of 12 *brumaire an II* (2 November 1793) granted illegitimate offspring the same property rights as their legitimate peers, provided they were acknowledged by their parents. One of the aims of the reform was to remove social stigma from the unwed mother and her children, a huge and unprecedented cultural shift.<sup>41</sup> It was passed just three days after the official suppression of women's organised political activism, perfectly illustrating the uneven effect of revolutionary legislature as it touched the lives of women and transformed established patterns of gender relations.

Although Wollstonecraft was registered as Imlay's wife at the American embassy as protection against the increasingly punitive treatment of British subjects as enemy aliens, they seem to have taken a joint decision not to marry. Suzanne Desan has described the way family law under the Jacobin government involved altering "the legal boundaries of the family" and "regenerating its moral makeup," and even providing a "validation of romantic love."<sup>42</sup> The paternity suits of the *ancien régime* were abolished, in the belief that paternal feeling should not be coerced and men would do their duty when they witnessed the mothers fulfilling their patriotic responsibilities towards their children as ordained by nature. In theory, the state would intervene where needed to support *mères célibataires* and fatherless children, nurturing the moral independence of all.

Wollstonecraft's experience is set against a substantial rise in illegitimacy in the 1790s, stemming from the removal of patriarchal safeguards, correspondent freeing up of courtship and the increased mobility of men under the republic.<sup>43</sup> Her letters to Imlay show that her own feminist convictions coincided with the new-modelled Republican family. They convey her belief that a free union can be as authentic and enduring as legalised marriage, her confidence that Fanny will take her place in society as an equal unaffected by prejudice, and her own sense of self-worth as an independent agent. She constantly demonstrates the strength of her maternal care and affection as a spur to Imlay's commitment, while acknowledging (with increasing and understandable bitterness) that the involvement of a father in parenting outside wedlock should be a matter of choice rather than obligation.

<sup>41</sup> Desan 179.

<sup>42</sup> Desan 180, 193.

<sup>43</sup> Desan 186, 187.

Responding to Imlay's proposal to return to England with Fanny, Wollstonecraft anticipates that both she and her daughter will have their prospects blighted by legal and moral codes that now more than ever seemed intolerably harsh when compared to their situation in France. She touches on "some plans of usefulness" that would be prevented by leaving Paris; a reprise of remarks made at the end of December regarding a "project" and her determination to earn money (CL 274, 275). She also mentions her progress in the French language and socialising with prominent Frenchmen, including "a judge of the tribunal" and the author of the *Marseillaise* (CL 270). Parisian society was in a period of transition following the overthrow of the Jacobin regime in July 1794. The Thermidor government ushered in conservative social policy and first lifted then abolished the *Maximum général* price cap on staple goods, both adversely and disproportionately affecting women.

Yet in late 1794 there were glimmerings of hope on the political scene and Wollstonecraft was now far better able to grasp the complexities of current debate than on her first arrival. It is likely to have been at this time that she became acquainted with the socialist "Gracchus" Babeuf, who would go on to lead the "Conspiracy of Equals" against the Directory in 1796. Robert Southey in later life recalled her saying that "she had never seen any person who possessed greater abilities, or equal strength of character."<sup>44</sup> Biographers have assumed that she met him in company with the expatriates of the British Club and their Girondin allies in early 1793. However, at that stage he was an unknown. The acquaintance probably started in the autumn of 1794 when Babeuf began broadcasting his views in newly established journals. Babeuf stressed the need for a national education system inclusive of girls, the cause closest to Wollstonecraft's heart. Perhaps she saw an opportunity to influence policy reforms, as she had done in February 1792. Women were welcomed in his democratically-organised Club Electoral, and when the conspiracy came to a head, many of its most ardent supporters were women.<sup>45</sup> The connection is another indication of Wollstonecraft's distinct and idiosyncratic path through the politics and society of revolutionary Paris, and possible evidence of a previously uncharted area of her activism on behalf of women.

<sup>44</sup> *Quarterly Review*, 45 (April 1831): 177. Although the remark is quoted in a negative review of a memoir of "The Conspiracy of Equals," it seems credible in view of the fact that Southey came to know and ardently admire Wollstonecraft in the spring of 1797. Southey and his wife dined with the newly married Godwin and Wollstonecraft on 3 May, the date that Babeuf began a speech in his own defence lasting 5 days.

<sup>45</sup> R.B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978) 169.

E.J. Clery

## Conclusion

Wollstonecraft was eventually persuaded by Imlay to return to London and the periods of deep depression she suffered there may have had as much to do with the loss of a promising context for her feminist politics as his eventual dereliction. Following two suicide attempts, in the autumn of 1796 she experienced a renewal of personal happiness with William Godwin. A second pregnancy led her to put aside lifelong opposition to the English marriage laws for the sake of her unborn child. She was nevertheless determined to publicise her enduring opposition.

The result is *The Wrongs of Woman* which, in spite of its fragmentary state, succeeds in dramatising the sense of exile endured by women of all walks of life in England, and ends with an allusion to the relative freedom enabled by French reforms. In the novel, a judge opines that "French principles" are not wanted "in public or private life" when presented with the heroine's defence against the gross injustice of the criminal conversation case in which judicially she can appear only as her husband's property, trespassed upon by her lover.<sup>46</sup> Recognition of Mary Wollstonecraft as a feminist exile in Paris allows us to see the lasting importance of "French principles" as she imagines the possibility of female citizenship.

<sup>46</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman* 174. See Elaine Jordan, "Criminal Conversation: Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman*," *Women's Writing*, 4.2 (1997): 221-34.