BARBARA TAYLOR

Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination

CAMBRIDGE

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# MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION

In the two centuries since Mary Wollstonecraft published A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), she has become an icon of modern feminism: a stature that has paradoxically obscured her real historic significance. In the most in-depth study to date of Wollstonecraft's thought, Barbara Taylor develops an alternative reading of her as a writer steeped in the utopianism of Britain's radical Enlightenment. Wollstonecraft's feminist aspirations, Taylor shows, were part of a revolutionary programme for universal equality and moral perfection that reached its zenith during the political upheavals of the 1790s but had its roots in the radical-Protestant Enlightenment. Drawing on all Wollstonecraft's works, and locating them in a vividly detailed account of her intellectual world and troubled personal history, Taylor provides a compelling portrait of this fascinating and profoundly influential thinker.

BARBARA TAYLOR is Reader in History in the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of East London. She is a leading intellectual and cultural historian, specialising in the history of feminism, and the author of *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* and numerous articles on Mary Wollstonecraft.

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# MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION

#### CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN ROMANTICISM

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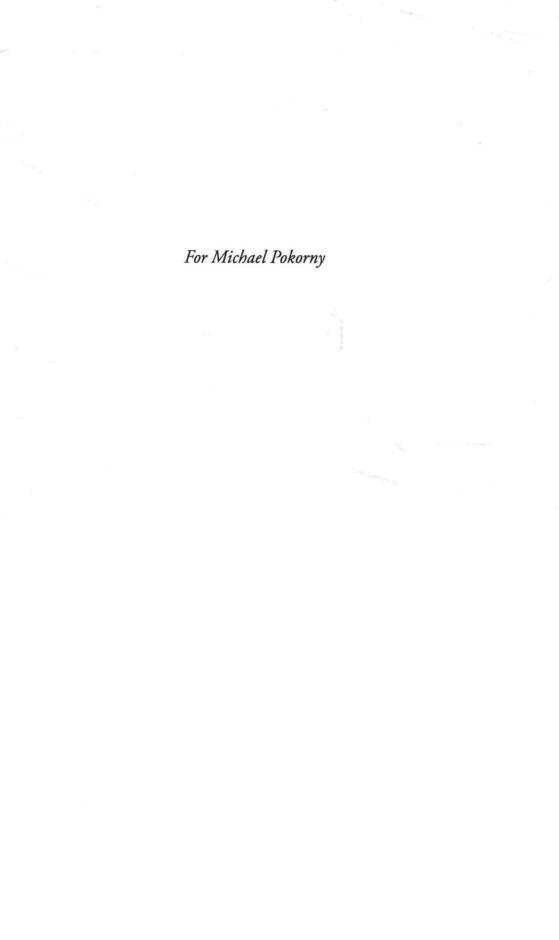
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This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those 'great national events' that were 'almost daily taking place': the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion and literature were reworked in texts such as Frankenstein and Biographia Literaria; gender relations in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Don Juan; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of response or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of 'literature' and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

The categories produced by Romanticism have also been challenged by recent historicist arguments. The task of the series is to engage both with a challenging corpus of Romantic writings and with the changing field of criticism they have helped to shape. As with other literary series published by Cambridge, this one will represent the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.

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#### Acknowledgements

This book was originally commissioned by Ursula Owen in 1982 for a series of short books about pioneering women intellectuals. In the two decades since, I have accumulated a very long list of debts to individuals and grant-giving agencies. To begin with the latter: my grateful thanks to the Nuffield Foundation (for a Postdoctoral Fellowship in 1983/4); to the Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada (for a Postdoctoral Fellowship in 1984/5 and 1985/6); to Clare Hall, Cambridge (for a Visiting Fellowship, in 1984/5); to the Leverhulme Trust (for a Research Fellowship, in 1996/7); to the British Academy (for a Research Leave Grant in 1997); and to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (for a Research Fellowship in 1998). I am also grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for its award of an Institutional Fellowship (1998–2001) which, among other things, permitted me to finish the book.

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University Press, 2002). Passages from the introduction and chapter I will appear in 'Mary Wollstonecraft', *The New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 2004). The discussion of Wollstonecraft's 'misogyny' in the introduction was rehearsed in 'Feminism and Misogyny: the Case of Mary Wollstonecraft', *Constellations: an International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 6:4, 1999 (reprinted in C. Jones and D. Wahrman, eds., *The Age of Cultural Revolutions: Britain and France*, 1750–1830, University of California Press, 2002).

## Chronology

1759 (27 April)	MW's birth in Spitalfields, London.	
1763	Wollstonecraft family moves to Epping Forest.	
1765	MW's family moves to Barking. Paternal grandfather	
	dies, leaving his fortune to MW's father and eldest	
	brother.	
1768	MW's family moves to Beverley, Yorkshire. MW meets	
	Jane Arden whose father, John Arden, is the first	
	intellectual influence on MW.	
1774	MW's family moves to Hoxton, north of London.	
1775	MW meets Fanny Blood, the woman who (according to	
	Godwin) became the 'ruling passion of her mind'.	
1776	MW's family moves to Laugharne, in south-east Wales.	
1777	MW's family moves to the London suburb of	
	Walworth, near the Bloods' home in Newington Butts.	
1778	MW becomes paid companion to Mrs Dawson of Bath,	
	the widow of a wealthy merchant. Her summers are	
	spent in Southampton and Windsor.	
1780	MW's parents and younger siblings move to Enfield,	
	north London.	
1781	MW returns home to nurse her dying mother.	
1782	Mrs Wollstonecraft dies. MW's sister Eliza marries	
	Meredith Bishop. Mr Wollstonecraft remarries and	
	returns to Wales. MW goes to live with the Blood family.	
1783	MW engineers Eliza's separation from her husband after	
	her sister suffers a post-partum breakdown.	
1784	MW, her sisters Eliza and Everina, and Fanny Blood	
	open a school for girls in Newington Green. MW meets	
	Richard Price and other radical Dissenters.	

	8
1785	Fanny Blood marries Hugh Skeys in Lisbon, becomes pregnant and sends for MW. Fanny goes into premature
	labour and dies in MW's arms.
1786	MW closes her school, which has got into financial trouble. She writes <i>Thoughts on the Education of</i>
	Daughters and meets Joseph Johnson, who agrees to
	publish it. She becomes governess to the daughters of Viscount Kingsborough of Mitchelstown, County Cork,
	Ireland.
1787	MW is dismissed by the Kingsboroughs and returns to
	London, where she stays for a time with Joseph Johnson
	and writes Mary, a Fiction and Original Stories.
1788	Mary, a Fiction and Original Stories are published by
	Johnson, along with MW's translation of Jacques
	Necker's The Importance of Religious Opinions. MW
	begins writing for Johnson's Analytical Review, and
	meets other radical writers in Johnson's stable, including
	Fuseli and Holcroft.
1789	Johnson publishes MW's Female Reader. She becomes
	romantically involved with Fuseli.
1790	MW's A Vindication of the Rights of Men is published
	anonymously by Johnson, along with her translations of
	Christian Salzmann's Elements of Morality and Maria
	Geertruida van de Werken de Cambon's Young
	Grandison.
1791	MW meets William Godwin. The second edition of A
	Vindication of the Rights of Men is published with her
	name on the title-page.
1792	A Vindication of the Rights of Woman is published. MW's
	involvement with Fuseli ends; she leaves for Paris in
	December.
1793	MW meets Gilbert Imlay in Paris, and they become
	lovers. Imlay registers her as his wife so as to afford her
	the protection of American citizenship.
1794	MW, pregnant, joins Imlay in Le Havre, where their
	daughter Fanny is born. Her Historical and Moral View
	of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution is
	published.

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1795	MW and Fanny follow Imlay to London. MW attempts suicide for the first time. In June she travels to Scandinavia, accompanied by Fanny and her maid. In October she discovers Imlay is living with an actress and
	attempts suicide for the second time.
1796	MW's Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark is published. She and William
	Godwin become lovers, and she becomes pregnant.
1797	MW and Godwin marry (29 March) and their daughter,
	Mary, is born (30 August). MW dies of septicaemia (10 September).
1798	Godwin publishes his <i>Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman</i> along with a number of hitherto unpublished works by MW, including <i>The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria</i> . The personal revelations contained in Godwin's biography, combined with the forthright sexual opinions expressed in <i>Maria</i> , lead to an
	outcry and MW is widely vilified.

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# Introduction: Mary Wollstonecraft and the paradoxes of feminism

A wild wish has just flown from my heart to my head, and I will not stifle it, though it may excite a horse-laugh. I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society, unless where love animates the behaviour.

(Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 1792)1

A mind vigorous in imagining is also vigorous in judging.

(Thomas Beddoes, Alexander's Expedition, 1792)<sup>2</sup>

... fantasy's supreme characteristic is that of running ahead of itself.

(Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy*, 1998)<sup>3</sup>

As a young woman, Mary Wollstonecraft regarded herself as an inveterate fantasist, a compulsive manufacturer of 'Utopian dreams'.<sup>4</sup> In some moods this was cause for self-criticism. 'I too frequently... forget the convictions of reason, and give way to chimerical hopes which are as illusive [sic] as they are pleasant,' she wrote to her sister Everina in 1787 from Ireland, where she was employed as a governess by the aristocratic Kingsborough family.<sup>5</sup> 'I commune with my own spirit – and am detached from the world...' Twenty-eight at the time, confused and unhappy among the Irish bon ton ('a poor solitary individual in a strange land'6) she spent her free hours alone in her room reading and 'moulding shapes in the fire'. 'I think, and think,' she sighed to Everina, 'and these reveries do not tend to fit me for enjoying the common pleasures of this world...'<sup>7</sup>

The melancholy fantasist was a fashionable image in the late eighteenth century, one particularly attractive to a young intellectual just starting out in the world, keen to distinguish herself from the common run of humankind. Writing to another correspondent in 1787, Wollstonecraft lamented the 'too great refinement of mind' which made her unsuitable for the society of the 'silly females' of the Kingsborough set. '[R]efinement genius — and those charming talents which my soul instinctively loves' drew her away from the vulgar concerns of ordinary mortals onto mental terrain where only