

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

UST Research Online

English Master's Essays

English

Fall 2019

Reason, Sensibility, and Harnessed Trauma in Mary Wollstonecraft's Epistolary Writing

Claire Prescott
University of St. Thomas

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.stthomas.edu/cas_engl_mat



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

Recommended Citation

Prescott, Claire, "Reason, Sensibility, and Harnessed Trauma in Mary Wollstonecraft's Epistolary Writing" (2019). *English Master's Essays*. 46.

https://ir.stthomas.edu/cas_engl_mat/46

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UST Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Master's Essays by an authorized administrator of UST Research Online. For more information, please contact libroadmin@stthomas.edu.

Claire Prescott

Professor Young-ok An

MA Essay

December 21, 2019

Reason, Sensibility, and Harnessed Trauma in Mary Wollstonecraft's Epistolary Writing

An Introduction to Mary Wollstonecraft and Her Posthumous Reputation:

18th century feminist, writer, and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) envisioned a just and rewarding society for women in a time when vast gender inequalities were the norm. She imagined a culture invigorated by women's education and was motivated by the subsequent promise of order and advancement. One reason Wollstonecraft earned acclaim as a prominent (if not primary) contributor to the feminist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries was her attempt to disseminate ideas in a detailed and systematic way. In an era that often characterized women by their involuntary surrender to emotion, Wollstonecraft purposefully checked her sensibility in her social and political prose, endeavoring toward a reputation as a thinker throughout her life and career. One reviewer of her most famous philosophical treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, writes, "In the class of philosophers, the *author* of this treatise—whom we will not offend by styling authoress—has a right to a distinguished place. The important business, here undertaken, is to correct errors, hitherto universally embraced, concerning the female character; and to raise woman, from a state of degradation and vassalage, to her proper place in the scale of existence; where, with the dignity of independence, she may discharge the duties and enjoy the happiness of a rational Being" (E. 198). The reviewer commends Wollstonecraft for her logical arguments and insistence that the mind itself is distinct from sex and gender, therefore making women as capable and deserving of education as men. Importantly, the reviewer identifies

Wollstonecraft's attempts to undo flawed perceptions of women and their inability to think, write, and participate equally in society. Furthermore, the reviewer commends Wollstonecraft for her insistence that women must be called to action; they must be independent in order to fully realize their rational potential.

Wollstonecraft maintained a professional reputation as a rational thinker throughout her life. It was only after her death, when Wollstonecraft's private matters became public knowledge through the well-intentioned blunder that was her husband William Godwin's posthumous distribution of many of her unpublished works, that Wollstonecraft's reputation as a distinguished and rational thinker suffered. The vast majority of Godwin's publication, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798), was comprised of Wollstonecraft's personal letters to family, friends, and colleagues. The text detailed and revealed Wollstonecraft's unorthodox lifestyle, including affairs with married men, a child out of wedlock, and suicide attempts.

While reading some of these letters feels a bit like peeping through a diary, and many of her more impassioned, impulsive expressions must be seen for what they are—fleeting and appropriately human moments of discontent—her letters accomplish what Godwin set out to do: provide a more multi-dimensional look at the real woman behind the distinguished philosophy. Wollstonecraft's unpublished letters show her veering from the rigid intellectualizing that was required for a woman of her time to generate public reform and acknowledging the more personal and emotional impulses that motivated her most famous philosophies. Through her epistolary expression, we are able to understand more fully the mind of an unfiltered Wollstonecraft, the one that fueled the passion behind her layers of calm authority and reason. Furthermore, the study of Wollstonecraft's letters helps to destigmatize female sensibility, not just in the context of Romantic era sexism, but in relation to our 21st century discomfort surrounding the implications of mental and emotional health, as well. The opportunity to categorize Wollstonecraft as a “sentimental heroine”

could be conveniently seized through the study of her personal letters; however, there is an even greater opportunity to appreciate the way reason and sensibility collaborated within this distinguished, complex, and brilliant mind. It becomes apparent that what may seem like two disparate qualities in Wollstonecraft—reason and sensibility—actually worked together and resulted in Wollstonecraft becoming what many have called the mother of feminist philosophy. There is much to explore about the way in which Wollstonecraft set the foundation for what we today define as feminism, but the study of her personal, unedited correspondences alongside her carefully curated publications can add further depth to the emotive and intimate side of Wollstonecraft and the foundation from which her feminist theories were born.

Godwin's publication of his wife's letters and incomplete manuscripts allows for an illuminating investigation of Wollstonecraft's personal life; however, at the time of its publication in 1798, the text cast a dark shadow on Wollstonecraft's reputation. Due to an unconventional personal life riddled with unrequited love, an illegitimate child, and divisive social and political views, Wollstonecraft's character was already subject to gossip in select circles; however, with the rapid publication of some of her most intimate writing, Godwin tainted Wollstonecraft's reputation for decades to come. Reviews were scathing and written with vitriol. A reviewer, signed with the initials Y.S., shows concern with Wollstonecraft's unconventional love life, asking, "*Did Mrs. G ever renounce an attachment?*" He who reads her letters will declare, that the possibility of such a conduct did not exist in her nature. Her love was more lasting than its object" (Y.S. 293). The moral majority was scandalized by Wollstonecraft's love life, and they categorized her as impulsive and irrational, entirely ruled by her whims. On the more compassionate end, a reader concerned with the ripple effects of Wollstonecraft's legacy reviews Godwin's publication with a combination of pity and repugnance:

It is indeed to be sincerely regretted, that eccentricity should be the almost inseparable attendant on genius. Hence, meteor-like, whilst it dazzles, it oftentimes confounds every thing within the reach of its influence . . . Had Mrs. Wollstonecraft avoided those singularities by which her character in the latter part of life stands distinguished, and of which her biographer boasts in a peculiar strain of exultation—she might have passed through the world with a far greater portion of felicity—might have proved eminently useful to the rising generation of her own sex, and her many virtues would have shone forth with an unclouded lustre. (249)

This review is much softer; however, it still suggests that the emotionally bold and unconventional side of Wollstonecraft was more of an Achilles' heel than an important facet of her personality. The reviewer suggests that Wollstonecraft's eccentricities hindered her from reaching her full potential as an intellectual and a leader.

Wollstonecraft's uphill quest for intellectual esteem and respect was largely undone by her husband's misstep. Her personal conduct now overshadowed her professional achievements, all facets of her life having been released without her involvement or blessing. A particularly scathing anonymous reviewer encapsulates the general response to *Memoirs* in the following passage:

Such was the catastrophe of a female philosopher of the new order; such the events of her life; and such the apology for her conduct. It will be read with disgust by every female who has pretensions to delicacy; with detestation by every one attached to the interests of religion and morality; and with indignation by any one who might feel any regard for the unhappy woman, whose frailties should have been buried in oblivion. ("Memoirs of Mrs. Mary" 301)

The study of these reviews reveals the culture of rigid propriety in which Wollstonecraft lived and wrote. Her "frailties" were something that should have been hidden for the sake of her art, not

appreciated as a contributor to her work. These reviews suggest a society that was reluctant to accept public female figures as multi-dimensional people, or one that was overly eager to condemn an influential woman at the first sign of an atypical existence. Perhaps, the critical response to *Memoirs* was a combination of both these things. Whatever the case, these reactions would have, no doubt, confirmed any fears Wollstonecraft may have had about potential public hostility to unorthodox lifestyle. Knowing the climate in which she lived even further eliminates the inclination to categorize the emotional depth present in Wollstonecraft's letters as instability, for—considering the public's response to her most personal recorded moments—who could blame Wollstonecraft for creating a level of privacy and protection around her private life?

Scandals aside, Wollstonecraft's epistolary materials within *Memoirs* are a repository of opportunity for the reader to see a different side of Wollstonecraft. They reveal a less reserved and precise thinker; far different from the fastidious and analytical Wollstonecraft of her widely read and admired manifestos. Many of the personal letters in *Memoirs*, some written more than a decade before the apex of her professional career, capture Wollstonecraft's early musings on philosophies such as female education and women's equality that she later refines in her published works. Her contemplations can be sporadic and unstructured at times within these personal correspondences; yet, they contain the type of combined passion and reason that Wollstonecraft would have needed in order to develop them into her manifestos, essays, and novels. In fact, Godwin's publication ends with one of Wollstonecraft's final essays, "On Poetry, and Our Relish for the Beauties of Nature," which was first published in *Monthly Magazine* in April 1797 and encapsulates some of Wollstonecraft's most dearly held beliefs. Godwin selects his wife's essay—taking some editorial liberties along the way—for the finale of his book, likely selecting it as the culminating point of *Memoirs* because the essay depicts Wollstonecraft's fully formed philosophies at, what would have been, the end of her life and career.

Furthermore, the essay as a whole passionately defends poetry as a craft that is genderless. Wollstonecraft argues the best educated with the greatest resources (i.e. affluent men) are often the most stilted poets, determining that it is a deep and genuine appreciation of nature (the rawest of all muses) that creates the poet. Through this argument, Wollstonecraft opens the world of poetry and art to women; she stresses the demand for genuine art that women, ironically due to their many imposed disadvantages, are particularly adept to supply. When the writer is driven and restricted by adherence to manmade poetic convention, her poetry does not “speak”; when inspired by God’s “temple not made with hands,” her poetry “speaks the language of truth” (162). In essence, Wollstonecraft tells women that it is their time to step up as the poets, theologians, writers, and philosophers; the poetic void needs to be filled by the female voice. This essay, written shortly before Wollstonecraft’s death, asserts that women are the much-needed truth-tellers.

Godwin’s *Memoirs* offers fascinating bookends to the birth and development of Wollstonecraft’s ideas. The knowledge of Wollstonecraft’s philosophies in the year preceding her death in combination with the insight into her younger, unfiltered mind allow the reader to see the scope and developing maturity of Wollstonecraft’s ideals. The unpublished works that scandalized her admirers and bolstered her critics open a window into the working mind of Mary Wollstonecraft. Seeing her philosophies in their full reality—somewhat messy, varied, and emergent—allow for an understanding of not only her fully formed ideas, but also the nonlinear processes Wollstonecraft trekked in the creation of her craft.

The letters, journals, and manuscripts in *Memoirs* are not the only resource available for the study of Wollstonecraft’s unpublished letters. In the past two centuries since her death, many correspondences of varying scope and importance have come to the surface. Janet Todd compiles many of these letters in her 2004 book titled *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*. A significant undertone in these seemingly random materials is that journals and letters allowed Wollstonecraft to

safely address not just her own thoughts, emotions, and daily struggles, but also complex social issues from a more intimate and anecdotal perspective. The epistolary form gives Wollstonecraft permission to detach from the logos of *Vindication* and lean into the artistic pathos she describes in her posthumous essays. Without the constrictions of structure and convention, Wollstonecraft's letters reveal to the reader her developing sense of self within a socially restrictive time period. Wollstonecraft allows the reader insight into her ideals, fears, and evolving—and often contradictory—self-perception. The epistolary genre in particular was an accessible form that allowed Wollstonecraft to sift through the intertwined, clashing messages with which she was inundated in order to investigate her sense of self. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft's letters, both published and unpublished, show her profound loneliness and sense of displacement, her inability to fit the mold. She often struggles with the idea that she is different, and tries to find purpose in her feelings of isolation. Writing through letters allows Wollstonecraft to investigate her experiences and assign meaning and order to her otherwise elusive emotional energy. Reading Wollstonecraft's letters allows us to see her for the multi-dimensional thinker she truly was.

Isolation, the Women Travel Writers, and Critical Response to the Epistolary Form:

Feelings of loneliness and isolation were necessary components of Wollstonecraft's creative process.¹ Wollstonecraft certainly wasn't the only artist examining the concept of detachment—or solitude— from the social sphere; however, it's important to delineate Wollstonecraft's experience of solitude and the artistic—and primarily male—experience of the identically labeled, but vastly dissimilar, term. The Romantic period was characterized by a turn inward, a focus on the individual,

¹ Brenda Ayres details how biographers have characterized Wollstonecraft's career, reputation, and mental health over the course of the past century in her 2017 text, *Betwixt and Between: The Biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

intuition, and emotion. Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* paints the explorer—the conqueror—overlooking the great expanse of sublime nature, transcending the common human experience. The solitary wanderer was the image of intense aesthetic pleasure and discovery, and his solitude in particular was seen as a critical part of the intellectual and emotional experience.

Wordsworth celebrates this experience, calling it “the bliss of solitude” (“I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”); Percy Shelley exclaims, “I love tranquil solitude” (“Song: Rarely, rarely, comest thou”); and Byron notes “the feeling infinite, so felt/ In solitude,” as “where we are *least* alone” (“Childe Harold's Pilgrimage”). Yet, despite the Romantic poets' overwhelmingly positive response to solitude, its definition is also tied to its more melancholy aspect. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines solitude as “The state of being or living alone; loneliness, seclusion, solitariness (of persons).” These male Romantics elevated the concept of the solitude and its negative connotation to a transcendental connection with nature. Yet, solitude was much more synonymous with the formal definition's more negative connotations: loneliness, seclusion, exclusion, isolation, alienation. Solitude was privilege for some and predetermination for others. When provided with the option to return to a socially and intellectually welcoming society, solitude is a pleasure, a brief respite from normal life. However, when solitude is an everyday emotional, physical, or intellectual reality, it takes on less empowering associations. A discrepancy in the reaction to and definition of solitude is evident when comparing male and female authors' reflections on their solitary experiences during the Romantic period.

The life of the Romantic male writer was one of intellectual, social, and, oftentimes, economic engagement; they were welcome participants in anything from social to scholarly discourse. Solitude, for them, was a choice, an optional experience to enhance the quality of their introspection. For women, on the other hand, solitude was an involuntary lifestyle. Women's options for intellectual advancement were limited, their activities were constrained by societal

expectations, and, more often than not, their finances were out of their control. It was a state of existence women had been forced to accept. In “Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics,” Elizabeth Bohls notes, “not only [were] women excluded from educational institutions, they [were] written out of the very structure of [what was known]” (1). Women were on the margins of the hub of growth and change. They were written out of the social and intellectual experience and pushed to the peripheries of discourse. Furthermore, they had become accustomed to, and sometimes unaware of, this type of isolation and exclusion. This regular exclusion led women writers to interact with and respond to moments of chosen solitude in a way that was different from the Wordsworths, Shelleys, and Byrons of the era².

While certainly not the only group of people facing marginalization during the Romantic era, aspiring women writers like Wollstonecraft felt the distressing and limiting effects of systematic isolation. In her “Introduction,” Bohls describes the difficulty women writers faced in their attempts to fully entering 18th century intellectual discourse:

Throughout the century a handful of women made careers as painters . . . and increasing numbers of women published works of fiction, poetry, drama, and even literary criticism. Much more common for the ladies of Britain’s privileged classes, however, was amateur aesthetic activity. The genteel accomplishments that occupied ladies’ enforced leisure and enhanced their value on the marriage market included drawing and appreciation of scenery, as well as music and needle work. As literate Britons (though denied classical education) . . . They were tolerated as second-class practitioners or passive consumers. (2)

Particularly in the upper classes, many women practiced their aesthetic and intellectual interests, yet few could turn their work into careers. As Bohls notes, women’s intellectual product was often

² Elizabeth Dolan examines how Wollstonecraft approached Romantic Era aesthetics, isolation, and society differently than men in her 2008 book, *Seeing Suffering the Women’s Literature of the Romantic Era*.

minimized and considered a leisurely pastime or “genteel accomplishment.” Although literate, creative, and actively seeking artistic outlets, women were often only accepted as superficial contributors to the arts without the ability for depth or lasting influence. Despite talent, drive, and ample contributions, women writers had trouble breaking away from the amateur classification and into the realm of revered professional thinkers. They were cut out, frustrated, and stuck in the margins of intellectual discourse. It is within this context that Wollstonecraft fought for professional distinction and acceptance; it is also within this context that Wollstonecraft wrestled with her mental health and feelings of dejection and discontent.

A Selection of Wollstonecraft’s Personal Correspondences:

Elizabeth Bohls notes the condition of intellectual discourses for women and how difficult it was for a woman writer to deal with the confining and restricting conditions of her society. Undoubtedly, Wollstonecraft dealt with these feelings at both personal and social levels, and her unpublished works reveal the extent to which she forged that struggle. While not the only letters that have been preserved, a significant portion of the collected letters of Wollstonecraft were written from 1786-1789, the years immediately preceding the most successful of her career (*A Vindication of the Rights of Man* was published in 1790, bringing Wollstonecraft her first real acclaim as a writer).

These letters allow the reader to experience Wollstonecraft’s personal struggles as well as budding philosophies, both undoubtedly informing and influencing each other. Her fluctuating emotional health, which can only be deciphered through deduction in her published works, is the common denominator in many of these personal correspondences, despite their being written almost a decade prior to her first suicide attempt. Yet, this emotional turmoil seems to act as the catalyst for her most profound observations and ideas about women and education, the ones she more fully develops in later works.

In particular, Wollstonecraft's letters to the headmaster of Winchester, Reverend Henry Dyson, in 1787 offer unique insight into her struggle to reconcile her emotional pain, gift of intelligence, and faith in God. The correspondences reverberate with heartbreak, depression, and purposelessness. In her letters to Dyson, Wollstonecraft dissects the heavy burden of her intelligence and her increasingly bleak perspective of the world. At the time of a letter written April 15, 1787, Wollstonecraft is a governess for Lord Kingsborough in Ireland just a year after the death of her dearest friend Fanny Blood and the failure of the school she ran with her two sisters in London. She writes: "I thought it would be uncivil to send the promised little book, without a line —yet be it known to thee—I am both sick and sleepy—it being past the witching time of night—and I have been thinking how stale, flat, and unprofitable this world is grown to me." In this very first line of her note, Wollstonecraft calls her physical state *sick* and *sleepy* and her emotional world *stale* and *flat*. She suffers in both body and spirit. Within the letter, she warns the reverend not to expect too much vision or creativity, the condition of her mental health taking control over her thoughts. Although this is the first letter within the collection to Reverend Dyson, it can be assumed this is not the first time Wollstonecraft used the reverend as a sounding board for her pain: "You'll say I am always running on in the same strain—and, perhaps, tell me, as a friend once did, alluding to music, that I mistook a *flat* for a *natural*." While this letter might suggest that Wollstonecraft has a flair for the emotionally dramatic, it also demonstrates that her intellect runs deep. She repurposes Shakespeare's words from *Hamlet* ("How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/Seem to me all the uses of this world!") and acknowledges her own inclination toward gloom by referencing her musical friend's implication that Wollstonecraft's "flat" might be other people's emotional status quo. Here, she is acutely aware of her own despondency, and she expresses concern that Reverend Dyson could be growing tired of her melancholy spirits.

As alluded to in the previous letter, Wollstonecraft's emotional distress had an unrelenting and cyclical nature. Wollstonecraft's mental agony seemed to be exacerbated by her intellect; however, because Wollstonecraft was a keen thinker, she had to acknowledge her mental state. While this was painful, this acknowledgement helped her reach deeper intellectual reasoning. She directly addresses this idea on April 16th (the day following her initial letter to the reverend), writing: "A good understanding prevents a person's enjoying the common pleasures of this life—it does not prepare him for a better. It is a curse. Why have we implanted in us an irresistible desire to think—if thinking is not in some measure necessary to make us wise into salvation." Wollstonecraft wants to believe that her "curse of knowledge" (as she references later in "On Poetry") has a greater purpose, but often it only serves to submerge her in misery. Yet, knowledge has an irresistible hold over Wollstonecraft. She explains, "Indeed intellectual and emotional improvements seem to me so connected—I cannot even in thought separate them. Employing the understanding purifies the heart, gives dignity to the affections, by allowing the mind to analyze them." To funnel her emotion distress, Wollstonecraft must seek intellectual improvement. Emotions and intellect are inseparable for Wollstonecraft, and her emotional experiences (however distressing they may be) play a significant role in her intellectual pursuits. In the end, it's Wollstonecraft's emotional struggle that leads her to be a more trenchant thinker. In her letters she often talks of her mental health as sickness, pain, and weariness. Mental distress is as tangible for Wollstonecraft as physical discomfort. The mind is Wollstonecraft's guiding force; she does not have faith in the impulses of the mindless body: "How can the mind govern the body if it is not exercised . . . the appetites will rule if the mind is vacant." Wollstonecraft is chained to the cycle of cultivating a mind whose cultivation causes her great distress.

Wollstonecraft ends her letter to the reverend with a dose of humor steeped in melancholy: "I promised you a sermon, and behold I have written one—yet I have not done with the subject.

The main hinge on which my argument turns, is this, refinement [sic] genius—and those charming talents which my soul instinctively loves, produce misery in this world—abundantly more pain than pleasure.” Wollstonecraft’s soul loves intelligence, but her spirits suffer in the pursuit of knowledge. Her intellectual gifts cause her great discomfort; yet, she compulsively develops them. She desperately reasons, “It appears to me self-evident, that an all-wise and good being created nothing in vain. He cannot be mistaken or cause needless pain.” Here, we can see the beginning stages of Wollstonecraft’s contemplations on the transcendence of the creative process and, most importantly, her vocation.

Some of Wollstonecraft’s letters to the reverend discuss pieces of her childhood and her current relationship with her family members. On September 13, 1787, Wollstonecraft provides the reverend a glimpse of her childhood within the context of her frustrating desire to help her sisters, who suffer from unhealthy relationships and financial hardship:

“I dare say you have gathered from my conversation, that I have been in every respect very unfortunate; indeed from my infancy I have drank of the bitter cup, my fortune has not been chequered [sic], on the contrary one color has prevailed, and given its structure to my frame of my mind—the tone of melancholy you observed on our first acquaintance . . . I give you an account of all my misfortunes, and vexations. I should write a volume instead of a letter.”
(135)

Wollstonecraft’s tumultuous childhood has created for her life a “tone of melancholy,” suggesting that her temperament is as much nurture as nature. Yet, in this particular passage, Wollstonecraft mentions her craft for the first time: “You have read my sentiments relative to those unfortunate females who are left by inconsiderate parents to struggle with the world, and whose cultivation of mind remember the endeavor doubly painful—I felt what I wrote!” (135). In works such as *Mary: A Fiction* and *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, Wollstonecraft writes of the pain of women who are thrust into the world without the necessary tools to flourish. She writes about the hardships

confronting women because she herself has a painful familiarity with them.

Wollstonecraft implores Reverend Dyson to talk to a mutual acquaintance about employing her sister in his home. She writes, “The sister I am at present anxious about, a fine girl . . . wastes her youth in wishing for some of the pleasures of the world, which she just tasted, and acquired a relish for . . . if it was *possible* for me to persuade her that the pleasures she sighs for would prove fallacious when attained” (136). Here, Wollstonecraft demonstrates her pragmatic mind and desire for control, as well as a certain confidence in her estimation of her sibling’s needs. Her sister, Everina, has lofty dreams and a taste for the finer things, which deeply concerns Wollstonecraft. She fears her sister will still be left dissatisfied when or if she achieves her material goals. This is not the first time in her letters Wollstonecraft can be seen attempting to quell her sisters’ ambitions from afar, worrying about their ability to manage their money, home, and emotional health. On September 11, 1787, Wollstonecraft writes to her friend, George Blood, about her uneasiness concerning her sisters’ prospects:

Eliza wants activity [here two words have been defaced]; and Everina’s vivacity, would by the injudicious, be termed giddiness; --her youth too would furnish another pretext for doubting her abilities; and besides, they could not pretend to teach French, and without a knowledge of that language it is vain to attempt anything in the school line. (132)

Erratic dispositions seem to be a Wollstonecraft family affliction, and Mary wants to spare her siblings further hardship; however, the painful family life she escaped is not one to which she wants to return. She longs for her family’s happiness, but she only elicits help from afar, calling on friends and acquaintances to place her siblings in respectable homes and positions. It is clear that while Wollstonecraft feels responsible for her family, she desires independence above all else. As she tells Joseph Johnson just two days after her letter to George Blood,

I am determined!—Your sex generally laugh at female determinations; but let

me tell you, I never yet resolved to do, any thing of consequence, that I did not adhere resolutely to it, till I had accomplished my purpose, improbably as it might have appeared to a more timid mind. In the course of the near nine-and-twenty years, I have gathered some experience, and felt many *severe* disappointments—and what is the amount? I long for a little peace and *independence!* Every obligation we receive from our fellow-creatures is a new shackle, takes from our native freedom, and debases the mind, makes us mere earthworms—I am not fond of groveling! (Todd 134)

Wollstonecraft experiences emotional dissonance over her duty to her sisters. Inclined to assist them, yet “shackled” by the obligation, Wollstonecraft desperately seeks independence. She is a woman who does not like to “grovel,” but the circumstances at home require her to call upon the connections she has formed in her budding professional life, likely revealing more about herself than Wollstonecraft wishes to divulge to her esteemed peers.

Furthermore, in this letter, Wollstonecraft exhibits a level of detachment from the raw emotional self she reveals to the reverend; she uses a cold logic, disconnecting from the empathy she unveils in previous notes. In her mind, her difficult past in combination with her emerging success means she should be freed from the debasement of these draining attachments. Wollstonecraft exhibits her tenacity and drive as well as a certain hardness. The same mind that so readily demonstrates vulnerability to Reverend Dyson is fiercely resolute in her pursuit of independence in this letter.

If Wollstonecraft’s letters to friends suggest a woman struggling with crises of identity, faith, and purpose, her letters to her sister, Everina, give way to even more vulnerability. A letter written to Everina Wollstonecraft on May 11, 1787 serves as an example of the way in which Mary wrote to her siblings. Her letter begins:

Do pray write oftener—suspense wears me away— . . . I then am mad—deprived of the only comforts I can relish, I give way to whim—and yet when the most sprightly sallies burst

from me the tear frequently trembles in my eye and the long drawn sigh eases my full heart—so my eyes roll in the wild way you have *seen* them. A deadly paleness overspreads my countenance—and yet so weak I am a sudden thought of any *recollected* emotion of tenderness will occasion the most painful suffusion.

Wollstonecraft paints a portrait of volatility. In this letter, she is frayed and erratic, quick to extremes of emotion. She describes her appearance in these moments as akin to a woman possessed. Her eyes roll back wildly; her face goes pale. The controlled and analytical Wollstonecraft admired in her political and philosophical works falls to the wayside, and an entirely emotive being takes her place. Furthermore, the resolutely independent—perhaps even coldhearted—Wollstonecraft from the Johnson letter is absent from this correspondence. She openly expresses to her sister the profound and exhausting effect of her empathetic nature:

You know not my dear girl of what materials this strange inconsistency [sic] heart of mine is formed and how alive it is to tenderness and misery. Since I have been here I have turned over several pages in the vast volume of human nature, and this is the amount? Vanity and vexation of spirit—and yet I am *tied* to my fellow creatures by partaking of their weaknesses—I rail at a fault—sicken at the sight—and find it stirring within me—new sympathies and feelings stir up—I know not myself.

Wollstonecraft loses herself in the plight of others. “I know not myself,” she proclaims. Moreover, Wollstonecraft’s writing appears frantic and frenzied. Punctuated with dashes, scribbles, and running ink, this letter embodies a person in distress. There is something wild about Wollstonecraft’s writing in this letter: ‘Tis the only time I *live*, in the morning I am a poor melancholy wretch—and at night *half* mad . . . Good night! I’ll finish this to-morrow—for ‘tis the very *witching* hour of night!!!!!!—.” The fragmented sentences, italics, dashes, and exclamation points hold a chaotic energy and suggest a highly active mind. In a letter written thirteen days later, Wollstonecraft admits her anguish using some language that she later recycles in her previously mentioned letter to Reverend Dyson: “I am,

at present, rather melancholy than unhappy—the things of this world appear flat, stale, and unprofitable to me, and, sometimes, I am perhaps, too impatient to leave the *unweeded* garden. I do now complain, a listless kind of despair has taken possession of me, which I cannot shake off’ (Todd 136). In another *Hamlet* reference, Wollstonecraft describes her mind as “unweeded” and her spirits low. The Shakespeare reference suggests that, even in emotional lows, Wollstonecraft is always calling on her intellect. Although she may be suffocating in an unchecked overgrowth of mental and emotional misery, she is still experiencing these feelings in conjunction with her desire for knowledge.

Wollstonecraft’s Harnessing of the Epistolary Genre:

Although the series of personal correspondences detailed in the last section circles many of Wollstonecraft’s most inspired ideas, the letters are written in the years preceding the bulk of her professional success and the fullest formation of her philosophies. The years 1790-1795 saw the publication of Wollstonecraft’s two most famous manifestos: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, her response to Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in which she denounces antiquated political and social structures, and the ground-breaking *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, her call for reform in women’s education. As her professional life gained momentum, her personal life was equally fast-paced. A painful and unreciprocated love affair with married Henry Fuseli led to humiliation and slander, and a torrid romance with American Gilbert Imlay culminated in an illegitimate child and absent father. Wollstonecraft’s intense response to emotional chaos was not curbed by her professional success with her first of two suicide attempts occurring in May of 1795. However, as witnessed in her personal letters, the mental crises Wollstonecraft experienced still lent themselves to the creation of her best work. Again, her discontent with the current workings of the world, compulsive acquisition and evaluation of knowledge, deep sense of empathy, and irrepressible

independence lead Wollstonecraft to create works that change and challenge people's perceptions of the world.

Wollstonecraft's philosophical texts may have been motivated by her discontentedness, but are not a means through which Wollstonecraft processes her emotional pain. 1795 brings Wollstonecraft to a crossroads. Wollstonecraft leaves England just two weeks after a suicide attempt on an expedition to Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. During this time, she revisits the epistolary form, but as a travelogue and with publication in mind. Remarkably, this structured form of letter writing allows Wollstonecraft to blend the pragmatic and emotional, and cross into discourse previously unavailable to her sex. Most importantly, while Wollstonecraft's personal correspondences are flooded with insightful emotional waves, they also have a sense of disorder and randomness. Ten years later, she uses the epistolary genre for a new purpose: publication. She writes *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, harnessing the epistolary genre as a tool to aestheticize the emotional discontent she references in the personal letters of her youth.

In the first letter of her travelogue, Wollstonecraft addresses her painful relationship with the world, relationships, and isolation:

How frequently has melancholy and even misanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me, and friends have proven unkind. I have then considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind—I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still part of the mighty whole from which I could not sever myself—not, perhaps, for the reflection has been carried very far, by snapping the thread of an existence, which loses its charms in proportion as the cruel experience of life stops or poisons the current of the heart. (11)

Wollstonecraft identifies life's cruelties, but recognizes that she is drawn toward being a part of the whole despite her frequent disgust with the workings of her society. In her travels to Scandinavia, Wollstonecraft often finds herself in literal isolation, not the emotional isolation she details in her personal letters. Yet, a physical removal from the sites and situations of her traumas refreshes and invigorates Wollstonecraft, and it's as if this perspective shift brings Wollstonecraft back to "part of the mighty whole." It is within this context of a new environment and perspective that Wollstonecraft revisits the comforting and familiar genre of letter-writing. Yet, instead of merely detailing her hardships, Wollstonecraft examines them, synthesizes them, and reshapes her traumas into detailed reflections, intricate questions, and striking philosophies.

When examined beside Wollstonecraft's unpublished correspondence, the 1796 travelogue, *Letters written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, offers a prime example of how Wollstonecraft uses the epistolary genre as a crucible in which her profound loneliness, displacement, and despair become art. Wollstonecraft's use of travel writing highlights women's difficult intellectual experience in the Romantic Era and the role travel had in women's exploration of this kind of solitude. Naturally, women writers approached solitude differently than men—they were stepping in from the peripheries, not out from the bustling center of academic discourse. Their familiarity with exclusion had a remarkable impact on their perspective and their reflections on the solitary experience itself. Katherine Turner notes that many women writers turned to the travel-writing genre as a vehicle for their written expression on a variety of topics, including solitude. She writes, "Writing a travelogue gave women the freedom (relatively speaking) to enter into discourses otherwise unavailable to them, because of the genre's remarkable permeability to other kinds of writing." Travel writing could encompass a vast variety of topics such as trade, religion, foreign affairs, humanitarianism, sensibility, aesthetics, and more (52). But, most importantly, the mere logistics of traveling gave women the unique opportunity to physically, emotionally, and intellectually remove themselves from

a society that undervalued their intellect and overemphasized their domesticity and fragility. The act of being physically removed from the comforts of home allowed women writers to access the depths of their intellect and resilience. The male wanderer could experience the freedom of aesthetics only when embracing a quiet, introspective, elected solitude. However, women writers, as they began venturing out into their own elected solitude, started to contemplate and experiment with their own experience of the sublime, and they did so with fresh perspective. Bohls notes, “Women writing the language of landscape aesthetics work through their exclusion from the political, social, and cultural privileges of the gentleman. As their travels put distance between them and the gentleman’s home turf, they seem emboldened to experiment with aesthetics’ symbolic encoding of a social world viewed from top down” (“Women Travel Writers . . .” 18). Women were able to contemplate aesthetic nature of travel as people whose chosen solitude was deeply connected to their involuntary social and intellectual isolation. In *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* Wollstonecraft employs this organized, intentional epistolary form in order to transform some of her emotional pain into philosophy.

Wollstonecraft’s letter to Johnson nearly a decade before her travels suggests that the subject of aesthetics is something Wollstonecraft has long been contemplating:

My dear sir,

Since I saw you, I have, literally speaking, *enjoyed* solitude. My sister could not accompany me in my rambles; I therefore wandered alone, by the side of the Thames, and in the neighbouring beautiful fields and pleasure grounds: the prospects were of such a placid kind, I *caught* tranquility while I surveyed them—my mind was *still*, though active. Were I to give you an account how I spent my time, you would smile . . . I would listen to the falling leaves, or observe the various tints the autumn gave to them—At other times, the singing of a robin, or the noise of a water-mill, engaged my attention—partial attention—, for I was, at

the same time perhaps discussing some knotty point, or straying from this *tiny* world, to new systems. (133)

Nature in combination with solitude provides Wollstonecraft's mind the productive quiet she so desperately needs. She describes solitude giving her the opportunity to work through the more "knotty point[s]" in her mind. Nature not only inspires her as she mentions in "On Poetry," it also allows her to knead through the chaos in her mind in order to reach the hub of her most transcendent ideas. Solitude and aesthetics are the gateway from the "stale, flat, and unprofitable" world in which Wollstonecraft feels trapped to the sublime world where great ideological, philosophical, and intellectual strides—the creation of true art—become possible.

Wollstonecraft finds a deep connection to humanity when she is in solitude, the kind she earlier told Everina causes her "tenderness and misery." Against the uncultivated natural backdrop, her overwhelming response to aesthetics makes her think about her own existence in relation to others. She is not in control; rather, she is an equally participating, and deeply feeling, cog in the human experience. In the following passage, Wollstonecraft reflects upon the intense effect solitary contemplation of nature has on her senses:

Nature is the nurse of sentiment,—the true source of taste;—yet what misery, as well as rapture, is produced by a quick perception of the beautiful and sublime, when it is exercised in observing animated nature, when every beauteous feeling and emotion excites responsive sympathy, and the harmonized soul sinks into melancholy, or rises to ecstasy . . . But how dangerous is it to foster these sentiments in such an imperfect state of existence; and how difficult to eradicate them when an affection for mankind, a passion for an individual, is but the unfolding of that love that embraces all that is great and beautiful. (39)

Wollstonecraft has a powerful and conflicted emotional response to her solitary experience of the natural sublime. She experiences the clashing emotions of "misery" and "rapture," "ecstasy" and "melancholy." Her feelings are "beauteous" and "excite responsive sympathy," yet they are also

“dangerous.” Her “quick perception” of the beautiful and sublime is like a jolt to her senses that brings to life the “animated nature” of the scene as well as her many sentiments. Wollstonecraft adjusts the Burkean notion of the sublime, giving it a feminine energy (“nature is the nurse of sentiment”) and integrating the transcendent experience with feminine sensibility.

What is remarkable about this scene is the sublime’s ability to bring about in Wollstonecraft all her emotions all at once—nothing is suppressed, and she is allowed to feel her many sides simultaneously and without distress. Yousef accurately describes Wollstonecraft as a multidimensional—and sometimes contradictory—woman, writing, “[Wollstonecraft] herself displays an inconsistent character: sociological observer and tour guide, prim provincial in response to foreign habits of food and drink, poet of rocks and waterfalls and pines, critic of lives structured by the pursuit of profit, woman acutely aware of her own mortality, rugged traveler, insomniac” (543). Wollstonecraft’s response to the sublime explains how she can be many people at the same time: she is capable of deeply and thoughtfully experiencing variable emotions simultaneously. The floodgates to Wollstonecraft’s inner self are opened, and she is her whole, complex, contradictory self all at once. Although she recognizes the intensity of her feelings, her emotions do not confuse her; rather, they appear to bring her a level of clarity. The solitary sublime brings Wollstonecraft’s understanding of herself and her world into sharp focus. In practice, writing about her travels help Wollstonecraft filter and reshape her inner turmoil.

Solitary aesthetic contemplation makes Wollstonecraft consider her relationship with the world from a more empowered, and less victimized, perspective. Wollstonecraft has struggled with the loneliness of the difficult hand she has been dealt; yet, when filtered through the aesthetic lens, there is a sense of camaraderie and randomness in both human suffering and beauty. As Cynthia Richards notes, “the sublime functioned not simply as a category of aesthetics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, but as a way of imagining oneself in the world. By privileging a

relationship between the lone individual and a stark natural landscape, it imposed a self-elevating solitude. Within this carefully contrived isolation, the individual consciousness could claim its absolute sovereignty ‘without encountering . . . the pressures of competing consciousness’ (77). In *Letters* Wollstonecraft resists laying claim to either the inferior or superior position; rather, as Richards goes on to explain, “the sublime goals of transport and empowerment could be maintained but without the effacement of the other” (77). Wollstonecraft is, indeed, elevated in clarity by her sublime solitude, and she is able to engage with and recognize her “individual consciousness” without the pressures of conflicting societal expectations, but she is in harmony with her otherness, as well. The elevation of her own voice, or consciousness, more often than not causes her to think and feel more deeply about others. Her strong emotions bring about meaningful and complex reflections as she considers her own modest position within the world. For example, when Wollstonecraft arrives at Sleswick, the sight of soldiers training in the distance, among nature, brings about a deep contemplation about the specific role of the individual and the purposelessness she admits to in her letters to Reverend Dyson. She writes:

I viewed, with a mixture of pity and horror, these beings trained to be sold to slaughter, or be slaughtered, and fell into reflections, on an old opinion of mine, that it is the preservation of the species, not of individuals, which appears to be the design of the Deity throughout the whole of nature. Blossoms come forth only to be blighted; fish lay their spawn where it will be devoured: and what a large portion of the human race are born merely to be swept prematurely away. Does not this waste of budding life emphatically assert, that it is not men, but man, whose preservation is so necessary to the completion of the grand plan of the universe? (Wollstonecraft 120)

Again, the solitary experience brings about something surprising in Wollstonecraft. She does not view herself as the explorer or conqueror; she is merely an individual—granted she is well aware she is a deeply contemplative and philosophical one—in the midst of countless other individuals,

making up the whole. Through her experience of the sublime, Wollstonecraft's individual consciousness may be elevated, but she does not experience an inflated sense of individual self-importance. Wollstonecraft focuses not on individual men, but mankind. There are no conquerors and subordinates; there are just many small pieces to the "grand plan of the universe," and the random, fortunate individuals who survive to carry on the responsibility of humanity. Yet again, solitude allows Wollstonecraft to unlock the depths of her intellectual thought, but she does not transcend like in Burke's masculine sublime; rather, she harmonizes with her fellow human beings and recognizes that she is one with, not apart from, the whole of humanity. It is within the isolation of solitude that she finds the connections she felt she was without. Here, Wollstonecraft experiences serenity.

Solitude, while providing the space for intellectual expression, was still deeply associated with isolation, exclusion, and rejection. Solitude could be simultaneously associated with both freedom and oppression, strikingly similar to the knowledge acquisition dilemma Wollstonecraft describes in her unpublished letters. Wollstonecraft's writing depicts solitude as both liberating and stifling, just as acquiring knowledge was both empowering and painful. Wollstonecraft acknowledges yet another layer of the complexity of the human experience. The following passage provides an example of this paradox:

I enquired for a walk, and mounted near two hundred steps made round a rock . . . The ocean, and these tremendous bulwarks, enclosed me on every side. I felt the confinement, and wished for wings to reach still loftier cliffs, whose slippery sides no foot was so hardy as to tread . . . I felt my breath oppressed, though nothing could be clearer than the atmosphere. Wandering there alone, I found the solitude desirable; my mind was stored with ideas, which this new scene associated with astonishing rapidity. But I shuddered at the thought of receiving existence, and remained here, in the solitude of ignorance. (69)

The ocean, typically associated with freedom and expanse, represents confinement to Wollstonecraft. The ocean does not present opportunity and adventure; rather, it acts as a border that restricts and suffocates. In this moment, solitude is all too familiar. It is the type of isolation that smothers and alienates. She cannot breathe, see, or move freely. Wollstonecraft's solitude in this moment seems representative of the same stifling solitude she feels as a person on the margins, both in her mental health and as a woman. She describes her desire to fly to greater heights, but the path is tumultuous, steep, and slippery, much like the path to women's liberation or out of the "unweeded" garden of her complex mind.

Wollstonecraft needs a "hardy" foot to tread this path, perhaps suggesting that she needs to abandon some of her feminine sensitivity for a more pragmatic, masculine strength. Christine Skolnik argues, "The performance of manly rhetoric by a professional female writer begins to distance gender from sex; and this dislocation can be seen as an integral element of Wollstonecraft's feminist polemic" (208). Wollstonecraft could be using this kind of masculine imagery for the purpose of integrating reason and sensibility—she is overwhelmed with emotion, but she will not allow her sensibility to overcome her. Here she seems resolute in her attempt to distance herself from the intensity of her emotions. The image of Wollstonecraft "mounting" and climbing with "hardy" foot while simultaneously wishing for "wings to reach still loftier cliffs" certainly evokes a sense of both physical strength and emotional detachment. Perhaps, as Skolnik suggests, part of her detachment is a desire to debunk the perceived weakness of her sex. Or, perhaps, her language in the description of her climb follows in the same stubbornly independent footsteps of her letter to Joseph Johnson concerning the burden of family attachments. In the physical sense, Wollstonecraft feels trapped by the ocean and "tremendous bulwarks," but she still endeavors to forge onwards. In her personal world, Wollstonecraft clammers on against emotionally painful and restrictive shackles, as well.

Yet, despite the treacherous terrain, Wollstonecraft acknowledges the potential of the isolation, which creates space for her many “stored” ideas. She “shudders at the thought of receiving existence,” and relishes the thought of staying in this hard-won independence. She calls her isolation the “solitude of ignorance,” and knows that she must return to her life despite some of its more troubling implications. As Yousef notes, “The imagination of human relationship to the world of other human beings as opposed to, or at least distinct from, imaginations of human relationship to the natural world is central to an understanding of *Letters*. Nature—silent, uninhabited, site of solitude—is consistently contrasted to actual, recollected, or anticipated human environments” (544). Wollstonecraft’s experience of solitude reminds her of her dependence upon and responsibility to other human beings. Her experience of the sublime in this scene is layered and complex. It mirrors her relationship with knowledge: pain and suffering are somehow necessary to the whole. She feels both freedom and confinement in her solitude, as well as desired detachment from and unrelenting obligation to humanity as she marvels at the awe-inspiring natural scene surrounding her. Wollstonecraft’s relationship with solitude is complicated—it is both imposed and voluntary, familiar and perilous. Her emotions are as destabilizing as the “slippery sides” of the cliffs she endeavors to climb, but they begin to work together to create harmony within Wollstonecraft’s understanding of her own narrative.

A common thread throughout the course of Wollstonecraft’s correspondences, both published and unpublished, is her sense of mental dissonance. She is acutely aware that the intellectual and emotional facets of her mind are often in conflict. However, the friction created from these clashing impulses sparks the incisive thought for which she has become renowned. “I cannot even in thought separate them,” she writes of her battling understanding and sensibility (Todd 120). And it is to the pleasure of the modern day reader that we are able to see moments within her epistolary expressions in which Wollstonecraft’s logic and emotions come together as the

catalyst for her influential ideas. In both Wollstonecraft's unpublished correspondences and travelogue meant for publication, she uses the genre to express important ideas of discontent, isolation, intellectual advancement, and human connectedness. While it may have taken nearly a century for Wollstonecraft's reputation to recover after Godwin released her private materials, this peek into Wollstonecraft's emotional vulnerability privileges a whole new layer of depth and understanding to the study of this remarkable writer's life and works.

Works Cited

- “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political Subjects.” Review. *The Critical Review, Or, Annals of Literature*, vol. 4, July 1792, pp. 389-398.
- "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects." Review. *The Literary Magazine and British Review*, vol. 8, February 1792, pp. 133-139.
- Bohls, Elizabeth A. *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- E. "ART. XXI. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With S Rictures on Political and Moral Subjects." *Monthly Review, Or, Literary Journal, 1752-1825*, vol. 8, 1792, pp. 198-209.
- Evans, John. "Remarks on the Religion of the Late Mrs. Wollstonecraft." *The Monthly Visitor, and Pocket Companion, July 1797-Dec.1800*, vol. 3, 1798, pp. 245-250.
- Felman, Shoshana. *What Does a Woman Want?: Reading and Sexual Difference*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.
- Godwin, William. *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Book Jungle, 2008.
- “Memoirs of Mrs. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, Author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, &c." *The Scots Magazine, 1739-1803*, vol. 60, 1798, pp. 295-301.
- Richards, Cynthia D. "Romancing the Sublime: Why Mary Wollstonecraft Fell in Love with 'That Cad, Gilbert Imlay. ('A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America' and 'Letters to Imlay') (Critical Essay)." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 25.1 (2006): 71-91.
- Skolnik, Christine. "Wollstonecraft's Dislocation of the Masculine Sublime: A Vindication." *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2003, pp. 205–223.
- Turner, Katherine. *British Travel Writers in Europe, 1750-1800: Authorship, Gender and National Identity*. Routledge, 2017.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary, et al. *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary; Godwin, William. *Posthumous Works of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. London, J. Johnson. Print.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary, and Janet M. Todd. *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Yousef, Nancy. "Wollstonecraft, Rousseau and the Revision of Romantic Subjectivity." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 38, no. 4, 1999, pp. 537–557.
- Y. S. "Account of a New Work, Entitled, "Memoirs of Mrs. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman." *Walker's Hibernian Magazine, Or Compendium of Entertaining Knowledge, may 1785-Dec.1811*, 1798, pp. 296.