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Mary Robinson and Mary Wollstonecraft: constructing reputation during the revolutionary decade

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Introduction

Man is a despot by nature; he can bear no equal; he dreads the power of woman.¹

Mary Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England*

When I figured I wanted to study the life and work of Mary Wollstonecraft at the beginning of my master's degree, I remember being properly stunned to realize that she was in fact Mary Shelley's mother. I had studied *Frankenstein* the previous year and I had found Mary Shelley's life absolutely fascinating. My teacher had mentioned that her mother was an important feminist figure who had died giving birth to her daughter, but I had not remembered her name. It seems foolish to me that I did not make the connection immediately, now that I have studied Mary Wollstonecraft's life for almost a year. On the other hand, it is Mrs. Kimberley Page-Jones, my research supervisor who introduced me to Mary Robinson as being an interesting but under-studied eighteenth-century figure, especially in France where she remains almost unknown. As I read about her, it appeared to me that her life had many similar aspects to that of Mary Wollstonecraft: both had lived what were highly unconventional lives for the time, voicing their opinion on subjects from which women were traditionally excluded. And even though they had lived very different lives, both had suffered from entering and participating in the public realm, as writers and as women. During the summer preceding my master's degree I had decided that I would work on the British romantic period, although I had no particular idea of a subject of research. What I knew, however, was that I wanted to work on feminine figures – the traditional Romantic canon had been studied so much already and I made a point of putting the light on the works of women through my work. Hence, in this dissertation entitled “Mary Robinson and Mary Wollstonecraft: constructing reputation during the revolutionary decade”, I aim at exploring the various aspects of the construction of their reputation, in order to show that during the eighteenth century women had to deal with numerous ideals of femininity which dominated relations between genders, and that the

¹ Mary Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England*, 1799. Ed. Sharon M. Setzer (Broadview Press, 2003), p. 74.

participation of these two women to the revolutionary debate exposed them even more to criticisms and attacks from the society they lived in, directly impacting their reputations.

Although I will definitely put an emphasis on the revolutionary decade (1790-1800) in this paper, because this period is crucial in the understanding of how Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson's reputations were constructed, I will not focus only on this ten-year-period. In fact, I will start this paper as early as 1757, with the publication of Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, a treatise on aesthetics which gendered notions of power and had a long-lasting influence on the conception and representation of women. Then, we will work on a period of almost fifty years, until the end of the eighteenth century, with the publication of Mary Robinson's *Letter to the Women of England* in 1799 as the last focus of this dissertation. Mary Robinson's *Letter*, along with Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist pamphlet, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, form this dissertation's corpus: although they were written within different genres and seven years apart, together they form an interesting and revealing corpus of feminist writings, published in a rapidly evolving revolutionary context and increasingly anti-feminist atmosphere. Thanks to a close study in which I will point out the similarities and differences between these feminist texts, I will try to demonstrate that these two works were crucial in the construction of their reputations as unruly and threatening women.

In this dissertation organised in three chapters, I will be using many different types of sources. My corpus will consist in two feminist and radical political pamphlets, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Robinson's *Letter to the Women of England* (1799). In order to understand the political atmosphere through which these two authors lived and published, we will use many other primary sources, such as political pamphlets, letters, educational books and literary reviews.

In the first chapter, I aim at exploring the political, social and cultural context in which women had to live and publish in the second half of the eighteenth century. My approach in it will therefore be historical, as we will be studying writings published on women's education and condition from the 1750s to the late 1780s. I will try to show that strong ideals of femininity existed during the eighteenth century, perpetuated by conservative writings mostly written by men. Eventually, we will also see that the revolutionary debate which Edmund Burke launched in Britain was a driving force in the radicalisation of Mary Wollstonecraft's thought – as a

young writer, she did not yet hold such radical positions on society and on women's education and condition.

When we will know more about the political, social and cultural context in which Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson had to live, in a second chapter we will focus on their lives and writings, as to see how their modes of living and increasingly radical writings shaped their reputations. In a first part, we will study their biographical background, the scandalous aspects of their lives and their involvement in the Revolution. In order to do so, I will use recent studies on the lives of Mary Robinson and Mary Wollstonecraft, which also tell us much about their activities in France during the revolutionary decade, their involvement with radical figures and the radicalisation of their thought. Then, we will proceed to a close study of our corpus, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *A Letter to the Women of England*, in which we will focus on the themes, audiences and styles of their work, as well as on the radical and feminist implications of their works. At the end of the day, we will see that the fact that they lived highly scandalous lives in a growing conservative period, that they were involved in the politics of the Revolution when society would have preferred them to stick to the traditional feminine sphere and that they held feminist views in an increasingly anti-feminist atmosphere all participated to render their life controversial, and therefore make their reputations precarious.

Finally, in the last chapter, we will focus on the evolution of the reception of their works during the revolutionary decade, with the help of contemporary reviews dating from the beginning of the 1790s and then from the 1793s onwards. Indeed, the reception of their works was not the same at the beginning of the French Revolution and after 1793, when British opinion would progressively turn against the Revolution. Furthermore, by first using contemporary dictionaries and literary sources and then more recent references, we will try to theorize the notions of fame, celebrity and reputation, in order to understand which apply to the Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson and how they each experienced it. Eventually, in the last part, we will be studying contemporary reviews of their works, published in the late eighteenth century, both to see the reactions Wollstonecraft and Robinson's feminist writings triggered and to analyse the terms used by contemporary critics to refer to them in a growing conservative, counter-revolutionary and anti-feminist society.

I. Ideals of femininity and revolutionary context

In this first chapter, I wish to study the conservative context in which British women lived and published in the second half of the eighteenth century. At that time, strong ideals of femininity prevailed within society: they influenced the education and life of women. Both men and women writers published on the education they thought girls should receive, and interestingly writers of both genders contributed to perpetuate these ideals of feminine virtue. However, back then already more progressive writings on women's education were published. But if Mary Wollstonecraft would contribute to this tradition of educational writings and participate to the revolutionary debate launched by Edmund Burke in Britain at the beginning of the Revolution, neither her early writings nor Mary Robinson's could yet be considered radical and feminist.

1. Conservative writings on women in the second half of the eighteenth century

As to better understand the social and political context in which women lived and wrote in the second half of the eighteenth century, we must examine the most popular writings published on women's education and condition during that period. These educational writings, often best-sellers and influential throughout the whole of Europe, were mostly written by men and were strongly conservative.

a. Edmund Burke's gendered notions of powers

During the eighteenth-century, ideals of femininity were as strong as ever in Britain, inherited from previous centuries: women had to conform to feminine and traditional values such as chastity, modesty and delicacy in order to be considered virtuous. In the introduction of her book *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, Vivien Jones has identified this dominant ideology of femininity, which she restricts to the middle-class, as constructed upon two major elements. Firstly, "the natural association between women and the

private sphere, domesticity and leisure”, and secondly, “the identification of women with feeling and sensibility rather than reason”². According to Jones, Edmund Burke, an Irish statesman and philosopher, contributed largely to construct and perpetuate this powerful and dominant ideology of femininity, especially through his influential work on aesthetic theory, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Indeed, although *Enquiry* is not directly about women, we find many cultural assumptions about gender difference at work in it.³ To illustrate her argument, Jones cites a passage from his work in which Burke wrote:

Those virtues which cause admiration, and are of the sublimer kind, produce terror rather than love. Such as fortitude, justice, wisdom, and the like. [...] Those which engage our hearts, which impress us with a sense of loveliness, are the softer virtues; easiness of temper, compassion, kindness and liberality; though certainly those latter are of less immediate and momentous concern to society, and of less dignity. [...] Those persons who creep into the hearts of most people, who are chosen as the companions of their softer hours, [...] are never persons of shining qualities, nor strong virtues.⁴

Here, Burke categorized mental attributes and made a comparison between the ‘softer virtues’ and the virtues of the ‘sublimer kind’. Doing so, what he actually did was to make a distinction between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ qualities.⁵ Indeed, when he explained which objects can be experienced as ‘beautiful’, the features he gave are typical of the traditional feminine virtues of the time: “smoothness”, “delicacy”, “grace”, “elegance”⁶. Similarly, the objects said to induce sublimity are relatively ‘masculine’ ones: “power”, “vastness”, “infinity”, “magnificence”⁷. Moreover, he associated the emotion of love with the experience of the beautiful – and therefore with femininity –, and he claimed that love is the response for weakness. He wrote that “beauty, where it is highest in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection.”⁸ The sublime, in contrast, causes not love but admiration. He wrote that “we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits us.”⁹ Thus, according to Burke, sublimity is to be found in “the authority of a father”, which “hinders us from having that entire love for him that we have for our mothers, where the parental authority

² Vivien Jones, *Women in the eighteenth-century: Constructions of Femininity* (Routledge, 1990), pp. 5-6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ Edmund Burke, Section X: “How far the idea of Beauty may be applied to the qualities of the Mind”, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757. (London, 1764), pp. 205-206.

⁵ Vivien Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁶ Edmund Burke, *op. cit.*, sections XIV, XVI, XXII, XXIII.

⁷ *Ibid.*, sections V, VII, VIII, XIII.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

is almost melted down into the mother's fondness and indulgence."¹⁰ However, what is striking is that although Burke gave this distinction between feminine and masculine virtues as complementary in his text, he actually made visible the existing social inequalities between men and women at that time. It is no longer about complementarity but about hierarchy: in Burke's conception of gender relations, the 'softer' virtues are also the subordinate virtues, and are associated with domesticity, with the private sphere.¹¹ Therefore, although the issue of gender roles is not central in Burke's *Enquiry*, "his basic categories of sublimity and beauty ultimately reproduce dominant cultural representations of sexual difference"¹² – idea which is pushed home in his *Reflections in the Revolution in France* (1790), as we will see later.

b. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his model of ideal womanhood

Another major eighteenth-century figure who definitely contributed to perpetuate this dominant ideology of femininity is Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). He was a Genevan philosopher and writer, whose political philosophy influenced the progress of Enlightenment and the development of educational thought throughout Europe, as well as aspects of the French Revolution. Among his most famous works is *Emile, or On Education* (1762), which served as the inspiration to build a new national system of education during the Revolution.

Rousseau's thoughts on education were very influential, and Wollstonecraft is known to have been strongly influenced by it: she admired his political and educational doctrines. From the late 1786 through the summer of 1787, she worked as governess to the daughters of Lords in Ireland, and during the same period she read Rousseau's *Emile*, a treatise on the nature of education and on the nature of man. She was very enthusiastic about her reading, and it is known that *Original Stories from real life* (1788), her book for children, was greatly inspired by the Rousseauian educational project. Yet Wollstonecraft despised Sophie, the model of ideal womanhood Rousseau depicted in book V of *Emile*; and she deeply disagreed with the education he recommended for girls. It is perhaps because she admired him so much that she was so disappointed in him when he wrote: "The first and most important quality of a woman is gentleness. As she is made to obey a being who is so imperfect, often so full of vices, and always so full of defects as man, she ought to learn early to endure even injustice and to bear a

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹¹ Vivien Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

husband's wrongs without complaining."¹³ According to Elizabeth Frazer, "Rousseau's account of sex and gender, and his educational philosophy which centres on withholding the faculty of reason from girls, can only be understood if his expressed understanding of and normative strictures regarding femininity are put in the context of the mundane [...] popular manners of the day."¹⁴ Indeed, Rousseau's sexist claims on the education of women in his influential educational treatise echoed the prevailing attitudes and beliefs of the time. He wrote:

Men's morals, their passions, their tastes, their pleasures, their very happiness [...] depend on women. Thus, the whole education of women ought to relate to men. To please men, to be useful to them, [...] to raise them when young, to care for them when grown, [...] to make their lives agreeable and sweet – these are the duties of women at all times, and they ought to be taught them from childhood.¹⁵

In Rousseau's point-of-view, girls' instruction had to be centred on what he thought was their ultimate role as women – to be wives and mothers. He reproduced standards of femininity in claiming for instance that "in the use of speech girls should be trained to be discreet and pleasing"¹⁶. Most importantly, he perpetuated the idea that there is an inherent sexual difference in minds, writing that "girls prefer what appeals to the sight and serves for ornament – mirrors, trinkets, rags, and especially dolls" or even that "all little girls learn to read and write with repugnance; but as to holding the needle, they always learn this willingly."¹⁷ Hence, Rousseau's conception of the nature of woman, like Burke's, shaped the educational treatises which were published after it with his conviction that girls' minds were not capable to go deeply into things like boys',¹⁸ thus perpetuating old clichés and stereotypes about women's mental capacities.

It has been argued that Rousseau's depiction of female nature and of the role of women was influenced by Protestantism. Indeed, Marie-Madeleine Martinet has argued that Protestantism has contributed to denying a proper education to women. According to her, Protestantism encourages matrimony and the family, and its principles include that

[...] women's mission becomes that of procreation and looking after their children's education, their husband's well-being and the care of the home. With such a distribution

¹³ Jean Jacques Rousseau, Book V of *Emile, or On Education*, 1762. Trans. and ed. Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom (UP of New England, 2010), p. 370.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Frazer, "Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay on education", *Oxford Review of Education* 37. 5 (2011), pp. 603-617, p. 608.

¹⁵ Jean Jacques Rousseau, Book V of *Emile, or On Education*, 1762. Trans. and ed. Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom (UP of New England, 2010), p. 540.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 265-266.

¹⁸ Michèle Cohen, "'A Little Learning?' The Curriculum and the Construction of Gender Difference in the Long Eighteenth-Century", *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29 (2006), pp. 321-335, p. 327.

of roles, women's intelligence becomes superfluous, if not dangerous, which eventually led to hostility, if not a mockery of women's learning.¹⁹

And indeed, the issue of the education of women was central to the eighteenth century, during which the tradition of conduct writing developed intensely.

c. James Fordyce and the tradition of conduct writing

In the eighteenth century, conduct books for women represented a significant sub-genre among all the books which offered instruction. They were very popular, and powerful instruments to define an ideological identity for the emergent middle class. According to Vivien Jones, the main concern of all these conduct manuals was to make women the objects of male desire, but still contain this desire within the rightful form of marriage.²⁰

James Fordyce (1720-1796), a Scottish Presbyterian minister and poet, contributed to this tradition of conduct books for young women, just as many other male moralists did throughout the century. In 1776 he wrote a set of sermons entitled *Sermons to Young Women*, which found a large audience among the English clergy. According to Katarzyna Bronk, *Sermons* are worthy of study, not only because it contributes to the tradition of conduct writing, but mostly because Fordyce "records and disseminates opinions on female perfection both as a man of the church as well as the representative of his sex, thus presenting a broad scope of the official gender ideology of the eighteenth-century."²¹ In *Sermons*, Fordyce went over a certain number of points as to allure his female readers to adopt a proper behaviour. In the fourth section, 'On Female Virtue', Fordyce warned the young girls reading him about the dangers of the novel, making clear that a virtuous woman ought not to read any. According to him, there were only few novels which deserved to be read – many novels, especially those containing romantic fiction like chivalrous novels were considered dangerous for women to read, because they could over-excite girls' imaginations and flatter their vanity. Thus, Fordyce wrote that most novels "are in their nature so shameful, [...] and contain such rank treason against the royalty of Virtue, [...] that she who can bear to peruse them must in her soul be a prostitute, let her reputation in life be what it will."²² Fordyce's violent warning is evidence of

¹⁹ Marie-Madelaine Martinet, "Eighteenth-century Women's Education in Britain", p. 2.

²⁰ Vivien Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²¹ Katarzyna Bronk, "'Much, I am sure, depends on you': James Fordyce's Lessons on Female Happiness and Perfection", *Studia Anglicana Posnaniensia* 48. 4 (2013), pp. 49-62, p. 49.

²² James Fordyce, Sermon IV: "On Female Virtue", *Sermons to Young Women*, 1766. (London, 1814), p. 113.

the eighteenth-century strong conservatism when it came to women's education and virtues. Later in this section, Fordyce continued to warn his readers against the dangers of novels on 'the fairer sex':

[...] such books lead to a false taste of life and happiness; [...] they represent vices as frailties, and frailties as virtues; [...] they engender notions of love unspeakably perverting and inflammatory [...]. Is this kind of reading calculated to improve the principles, or preserve the Sobriety, of female minds?²³

If he warned his readership of the danger novels represented, throughout his book Fordyce also displayed the qualities which must be found in virtuous women. Among those virtues was meekness, which Fordyce preached as "the most attractive [of graces] in a woman"²⁴. Meekness was an extremely important feminine value at the time: Samuel Johnson defined the term "meek" in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) as "mild of temper; not proud; not rough; soft; gentle."²⁵ Bronk analyses this urge for meekness in women not only as the testimony of their love of God, but also as their acceptance of the position they are assigned in society.²⁶

There are several reasons for which *Sermons* were so effective in convincing its readers when it was published. As Bronk highlights, Fordyce positioned himself as a friend, taking as his duty to inform girls of the reality of the world and of their positioning within it; praising and flattering them in order to build a trustful relationship. But he also placed himself as a representative of his own sex, and in this respect, he guaranteed his readers that he could teach them how to "captivate most, and please longest."²⁷ Doing so, he established his authority as knowing what men want, but also as being willing to reveal the secrets of his sex to young girls probably longing to enter society.²⁸ Fordyce's efficient techniques of persuasion must explain in part why *Sermons* became a staple at the time of its publication. Finally, one point on which Fordyce insisted repeatedly in his conduct book is the loss of good reputation, as a consequence of misbehaviour and transgression against the rules of propriety. He wrote: "Remember how tender a thing a woman's reputation is; how hard to preserve, and when lost how impossible to recover"²⁹. With this statement, Fordyce seemed to imply that a woman losing her reputation

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

²⁴ James Fordyce, Sermon III: "On Female Reserve", *Sermons to Young Women*, 1766. (London, 1814), p. 68.

²⁵ See "meek" and "meekness" in the second volume of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1756).

²⁶ Katarzyna Bronk, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

²⁷ James Fordyce, Sermon II: "On Modesty of Apparel", *Sermons to Young Women*, 1766. (London, 1814), pp. 53-54.

²⁸ Katarzyna Bronk, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57.

²⁹ James Fordyce, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

would be entirely her fault; suggesting, as Bronk puts it, that “feminine virtue is innate”, hence it would take “effort to ruin such God/nature-given gift”³⁰.

d. Dr. John Gregory and the tradition of conduct writing

Fordyce’s work has many common points with another popular conservative figure of the time, Dr John Gregory (1724-1773), a Scottish Enlightenment physician, medical writer and moralist. His most famous publication is *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters*, which he originally meant only to give to his daughters when he died, but his son had it published in 1774. It became a best-seller at the time of its publication, going through many editions.

In the introduction to his book, Gregory addressed his daughters and wrote: “I shall [...] only observe, that from the view I have given of your natural character and place in society, there arises a certain propriety of conduct peculiar to your sex. It is on this peculiar propriety of female manner of which I intend to give you my sentiments”³¹. With this statement, Gregory made it clear that this propriety of conduct was inner to the female sex and naturally resulted from women’s character – an idea that we find in Fordyce’s book as well. Gregory continued by saying that, as a man and a representative of his own sex, he knew better than anyone what his daughters would need in order to be happy in life and to please the other sex: “While I explain to you that system of conduct which I think will tend most to your honour and happiness, I shall at the same time, endeavour to point out those virtues and accomplishments which render you most respectable and most amiable in the eyes of my own sex.”³² Therefore, we find in Gregory’s conduct book the same techniques of persuasion as in Fordyce’s, placing himself as a benevolent giver of advice to his readership. We also find the same virtues as the ones highlighted in *Sermons* and in most conduct books of the eighteenth century. For instance, Gregory praised women’s modesty: “One of the chief beauties in a female character, is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration.”³³ He also pointed out to women’s “extreme sensibility”³⁴, which was, according to him, a great quality to be found in a woman but which tended to be a weakness if

³⁰ Katarzyna Bronk, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

³¹ John Gregory, *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters*, 1774. (London, 1789), p. 7.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

found in a man. He insisted on the importance of a severe education, which “preserve [women], in a great measure, from any temptation to those vices to which we are most subjected”³⁵. Furthermore, just like Fordyce, Gregory pointed out to the vices that his daughters, and women in general, ought to protect themselves from, and like Fordyce he insisted on the fragility of a woman’s reputation. He talked about “the natural vanity of [the female] sex” which “under the appearance of innocent pleasure [...] often sullies [women’s] reputations.”³⁶ He also warned his daughters to be cautious about “displaying [their] good sense”. Indeed, he wrote:

It will be thought you assume a superiority over the rest of the company. – But if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding.³⁷

This excerpt is only another statement that women must not display their knowledge too much at the time and that they should stay within the domestic sphere. Any women who dared display ‘male’ learning would be severely judged by society. This notion also harks back to meekness as a female virtue within the public sphere. Wollstonecraft would later attack the feminine principles stated in Dr Gregory’s book in her own *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), denouncing Gregory’s advice as providing nothing but deceit on the part of women – and indeed, her reputation would suffer from it. Wollstonecraft considered that, far from helping girls reach happiness, Gregory, among other male educationists, actually restrained them. She would write:

I may be accused of arrogance; still I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society.³⁸

Elizabeth Frazer writes that “gendered distinctions such as Burke’s sublime versus the beautiful, the distinction between reason and emotion, or sense and sensibility, mind and body, are central to 18th-century systems of thinking.”³⁹ Indeed, just like Burke, conservative male writers such as Rousseau, Fordyce and Gregory have perpetuated such gendered distinctions

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

³⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792. Ed. Janet Todd (Oxford UP, 1999), p. 87.

³⁹ Elizabeth Frazer, “Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay on education”, *Oxford Review of Education* 37. 5 (2011), pp. 603-617, p. 609.

through their writings. They have influenced the perception and conditioned the life and education of women in eighteenth-century Britain.

2. The debate on women's education and rights among British women writers before the French Revolution

In this part, I aim at demonstrating that women themselves held diverse positions concerning the education girls should receive. They were not a homogeneous group and disagreed with each other: some held conservative views, whereas others used genres allowed to them in order to voice their opinion on the subject. Wollstonecraft and Robinson were amongst them, and we will see that although we can find glimmers of their future feminist views in their early writings, the ideas they conveyed on women's education were not groundbreaking for the time. This part will enable us to appreciate the change in nature of the writings on women's education published after the Revolution, which would mark a turning point in matters of re-thinking women's civil and political rights.

a. Conservative women reformers

It is interesting that some women also held conservative positions at the time. Indeed, Claire Grogan writes that

[...] views among women writers ranged from the traditional conservative acceptance that 'there is a different bent of understanding in the sexes'⁴⁰ to the revolutionary English Jacobin assertion which 'denies the existence of sexual virtues' because there is no sex in the soul.⁴¹ Those women who most vehemently opposed Wollstonecraft and her views were known as conservative reformers.⁴²

These conservative reformers wrote extensively on female education, but they limited their claims to moderate reforms. Indeed, most were very religious women, and their propositions about the education of girls came within the scope of this religious system. That is why they

⁴⁰ Hannah More, *Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Ladies*, 1777. (London, 1778), p. 11.

⁴¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792. Ed. D. L. Macdonald and K. Scherf (Broadview, 1997), p. 165.

⁴² Claire Grogan, "Conservative Reformers", *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*, ed. Nancy E. Johnson and Paul Keen (Cambridge UP, 2020), pp. 127-135, p. 127.

were not judged radical, even though they held some feminist positions for the time. Some of them wanted to be part of the revolutionary debate and improve the role of women; hence, the difficulty was to participate “without overstepping by claiming political or legal rights currently designated male and masculine.” They found out a way of justifying a possibly inappropriate behaviour by “claiming a Christian duty to act.”⁴³

Besides, these conservative reformers were not a homogeneous group: they disagreed among themselves and held a wide range of opinions about female rights.⁴⁴ Claire Grogan first takes the example of Hannah More (1745-1833) to make her point. More wrote extensively on moral and religious subjects. Although as a young poet she became an influential member of the Blue-Stockings – a group of highly educated and intellectual women which held progressist positions on the topic of women’s rights –, her views were conservative by the late eighteenth-century. She was strictly against revolutionary principles; and she voiced her opposition in her writings, *Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Ladies* (1777) and later in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799). In her essays, More reiterated some of the same conservative claims as her contemporary male conservatives, such as the idea that nature had made woman’s mind different to man’s. For More, since it was natural that woman’s mind should be inferior to man’s, she should not question or try to subvert it. She wrote: “Nature, propriety, and custom have prescribed certain bounds to each sex; bounds which the prudent and the candid will never attempt to break down.” She used the same lexical field used by her contemporary male conservatives, citing a “greater delicacy” and a “greater fragility” as feminine qualities. She also wrote that “this weakness [in woman], natural and moral, clearly points out the necessity of a superior degree of caution, retirement, and reserve.”⁴⁵ Therefore, More contributed to perpetuate the idea that women were weaker than men, and that their ‘natural’ role was to remain modest and discreet. She also depicted women as household creatures, assigning them to the domestic sphere in *Strictures* and confining them inside their house: “domestic life is for women the proper sphere.”⁴⁶ Likewise, in her system of education, Karen Prior explains that More, in adhering to the dominant ideology that there is a sexual difference in mind, wanted to preserve that difference between men and women that she considered natural. Prior writes that “she sought to advance female education in order to

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁴⁵ Hannah More, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 1799. (London: 1834), p. 241.

fulfil women as women, not to make them like men”⁴⁷ – implying once more that the differences between the sexes must not be crossed or questioned.

More had a considerable influence over her fellow conservative reformer, Jane West, an English moralist and novelist. West would voice an even stronger conservative position than More in her educational letters, *Letters Addressed to a Young Man* (1801) and *Letters to a Young Lady* (1806). She would praise *Essays* and *Strictures* and argue that “since a female’s duties are domestic she has no need to develop or explore her intellectual potential.”⁴⁸ Both More and West would disapprove the reading of novels: like many of their contemporaries, they blamed novels for rendering girls foolish. The heroines of their own novels would always only represent model and exemplary women.⁴⁹ Thus, many women had reservations about girls becoming too educated, even when they were educated themselves.

b. Progressive writings by British women writers

During the eighteenth century, women had little to no education and the education women of the noblest classes would receive was conducted by their father. They were not allowed to learn science, history or philosophy, which were considered improper studies for women: they were taught dancing, music and needlework instead. Men globally did not want girls to have a proper education – they wanted women to stay submissive and obedient and giving them knowledge would definitely have not worked in that sense. Therefore, although there was a consensus in Britain over the fact that boys should be sent to school, there seems to have been a consensus over the fact that girls should be educated at home, and not in boarding-schools for girls, which were developing.⁵⁰ Yet, we must keep in mind that most boarding-schools for girls had a bad reputation at the time, while a domestic education was not necessarily seen as a bad thing. Even Wollstonecraft called for a private education: “If a mother has leisure and good sense, [...] I think she could best educate [her children] herself”⁵¹. Concerning boarding-schools, she wrote that in those schools “the temper is neglected, [...]

⁴⁷ Karen Swallow Prior, *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More – Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist* (Nelson Books, 2014), p. 36.

⁴⁸ Claire Grogan, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁵⁰ Mónica Bolufer Peruga, Introduction to Section 4: “Gender and the reasoning mind”, *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. Knott, Sarah and Barbara Taylor (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 192.

⁵¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (London: J. Johnson, 1787), p. 57.

few things are learnt thoroughly, but many follies contracted”⁵². Therefore, women would mostly stay in the home, where their main occupations would be household duties, and when they were wealthy enough to have domestics they would just occupy their day playing cards or anything that was considered a suitable activity for noble women.

Yet, at the beginning of the eighteenth-century already, a few women were sufficiently literate and brave to propose change. Mary Astell (1666-1731) was one of them. She advocated for an improvement of the education given to women in two essays in particular. As early as 1694, she published *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their true and greatest interest*, in which she proposed that women could establish a religious community where they would live and learn together. Even though her proposal was not taken very seriously by English leaders, it helped disseminate the idea that women’s education, when rightly done, would help women to better serve God and their family.⁵³ A few years later, in 1697, she had renewed her proposal, suggesting that women could retreat to a nunnery to learn about religion and the classics.⁵⁴ In her second essay, *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, published in 1700, her arguments were that marriages would be easier to preserve if women were better educated. But, as Jeannine Dobbs puts it, Astell also implied in her essay that marriage was not necessarily the ultimate purpose of a woman’s life.⁵⁵ Although Astell’s idea of a college for girls and women never came to life, she established a charity school for girls in Chelsea in 1709.

Another influential woman, perhaps even more radical for her time than Mary Astell, was known under the name Sophia; and it is under that name that she published in 1739 *Woman Not Inferior to Man; or, A short and modest Vindication of the natural Rights of the Fair-Sex to a Perfect Equality of Power, Dignity, and Esteem with the Men*. Just like Astell, Sophia claimed in her essay that women ought to get a better education so as to be better companions for men – an argument which would be used by numerous women reformers and radicals during the century, such as Wollstonecraft, in order to plead for a better education for women. But Sophia went further than Astell in promoting a broad, extended social change. For instance, she argued that if women were better educated they could teach science; and that if women were not given this kind of responsibility, it was only because they did not receive a proper

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

⁵³ Karen Swallow Prior, *op cit.*, p. 32.

⁵⁴ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New-York: Routledge, 1993), p. 39.

⁵⁵ Jeannine Dobbs, “The Blue-Stockings: Getting It Together”, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 1. 3 (1976), pp. 81-93, p. 83.

education in the first place.⁵⁶ Although these writings were clearly ahead of their time, they do not seem to have made any lasting change at the time. It is later, in the middle of the eighteenth century that noticeable progress was made, with the creation of the Blue-Stockings Circle.⁵⁷

c. The Blue-Stocking circle

The Blue-Stockings were a group of highly educated women who, tired of being excluded from ‘real’ and interesting subjects of discussion, decided to form salons in which they could discuss literature, along with men friendly to the cause and with whom they could talk as equals. Jeannine Dobbs explains that these women were generally more educated than their contemporaries and many of them had a literary career.⁵⁸ Since they were dependent upon male approval regarding how they spent their leisure time, they managed not to alienate themselves from the society in which they lived thanks to the experiences that were allowed to them, and in this case the salons and correspondence. Because men enjoyed their company at the salons and their husbands did not pay much attention to their correspondence, these activities gradually became areas of activism and allowed their feminist ideas to remain alive.⁵⁹

An influential member of the Blue-Stocking Circle was Hester Chapone (1727-1801), an English poet and writer of conduct books for women. She had been educated more thoroughly than most girls in the period and started writing at a very early age despite her mother’s discouragement. When she came to London, she entered the Circle and became close to members such as Samuel Johnson, who admired her poetry. Her works were highly regarded and were printed in many editions. As Bethany Mannon explains, Chapone worked within literary genres traditionally accessible to women, such as letters and conduct books, but used them to oppose eighteenth-century ideals of virtue and education.⁶⁰ It was the case for *Letters Written on the Improvement of the Mind*, a conduct book published in 1773 and pleading for women’s right to a proper education. On the very front page, it is written that “education, [...] when it works upon a noble mind, draws out to view every latent virtue and perfection, which

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁶⁰ Bethany Mannon, “The Life of the Female Mind: Hester Mulso Chapone and the Gendered Rhetoric of Experience”, *Peitho Journal* 21. 1 (2018), pp. 43-60, p. 43.

without such helps are never able to make their appearance.”⁶¹ In *Letters* Chapone was also critical of the difference in accomplishments between men and women. She wrote: “Whilst men are proud of power, of wealth, dignity, learning, or abilities, young women are usually ambitious of nothing more than to be admired for their persons, their dress, or their most trivial accomplishments.”⁶² The women of the Blue-Stocking Circle wrote and promoted women’s education, and were also critical regarding certain issues such as marriage. Many of them remained single during their life, considering that marriage ought to be based not on love, which would not last, nor on sexual attraction or financial matters, but on friendship. They also generally had less children than their contemporaries. They claimed that the person one married must have been both chosen and a friend, because in friendship one is equal to the other. Hence, Chapone wrote that

[...] if a young woman could have the same opportunities of examining into the real character of her lover, as into that of a female candidate for her friendship, the same rules might direct you in the choice of both; for, marriage being the highest state of friendship, the qualities requisite in a friend are still more important in a husband.⁶³

Although Chapone married, she wrote to her niece in *Letters* that she must “not be afraid of a single life [...]. The calamities of an unhappy marriage are so much greater than can befall a single person, that the unmarried woman may find abundant agreement to be contented with her condition.”⁶⁴

Wollstonecraft was greatly inspired by Chapone’s writings. She claimed that her works were one of few examples of the self-improvement genre that deserved praise. Although she lived and wrote at the same time as the Blue-Stocking women, she is not considered a Blue-Stocking properly. She was greatly inspired by them and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* takes on some of their ideas. Like the Blue-Stockings, for instance, on women’s education Wollstonecraft argued that the traditional education women received could not lead to anything meaningful, since they were not allowed to train their mind. On marriage as well she agreed with them, arguing that it should be based on friendship. But although the Blue-Stockings were already quite radical for the time and were caricatured as mad women for their feminist ideas,⁶⁵

⁶¹ Hester Chapone, front page of *Letters Written on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady* (London, 1773).

⁶² Hester Chapone, *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

⁶³ Hester Chapone, *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

⁶⁴ Jeannine Dobbs, “The Blue-Stockings: Getting It Together”, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 1. 3 (1976), pp. 81-93, p. 86.

⁶⁵ See Thomas Rowlandson’s caricature of the Blue-Stockings, “Breaking Up of the Blue Stocking Club” (March 1815), representing them fighting one another.

Wollstonecraft held more radical positions than the Blue-Stockings on several subjects. During their meetings, for instance, the Blue-Stockings mainly talked about art and literature and refused to discuss politics, while Wollstonecraft was already becoming engaged politically as an advocate for women's rights. Moreover, as highlighted by Jeannine Dobbs, Wollstonecraft denied men any superiority except physical,⁶⁶ whereas Chapone admittedly conceded in her essay *Matrimonial Creed* that husbands had the right to command. In comparison to Wollstonecraft's future radical writings on women's condition and education, Chapone remained rather conventional. For instance, she wrote in *Letters* that "the principal virtues or vices of a woman must be of a private and domestic kind. Within the circle of her own family and dependants lies her sphere of action – the scene of almost all those talks and trials, which must determine her character, her fate, and hereafter."⁶⁷ Therefore Wollstonecraft both used the work of the Blue-Stockings and went beyond them when she wrote her *Vindication*.

At the end of the day, their correspondence, the meetings they organised during which they could discuss art and literature in a meaningful way, but also their writing – among which Elizabeth Montagu's *Essay on Shakespeare*, through which she demonstrated that a woman was as capable to write and reflect on Shakespeare as a man; Hannah More's poem *Bas Bleu*, commemorating her Blue-Stocking friends; but also Hester Chapone's *Matrimonial Creed* – are not only relevant of how conscious these writers were of the low status of women, but they also show how they reacted to it, using traditional feminine genres to express their ideas and their self-worth.⁶⁸ Even though their writings were not as radical or politically engaged as Wollstonecraft and Robinson's writings would be after the Revolution, they definitely had an influence on Wollstonecraft's thought and writing. We will now see that Wollstonecraft and Robinson's writings were not so radical either before they began to support the revolutionary ideals.

⁶⁶ Jeannine Dobbs, "The Blue-Stockings: Getting It Together", *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 1. 3 (1976), pp. 81-93, p. 89.

⁶⁷ Hester Chapone, *Letters Written on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady* (London, 1773), pp. 114-115.

⁶⁸ Jeannine Dobbs, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-93, p. 86.

d. Wollstonecraft and Robinson's early writings

Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, published by Joseph Johnson in 1787, is the book that established Wollstonecraft as an author. Yet, according to Alan Richardson, “if Wollstonecraft had not gone on to write the two *Vindications*, it is doubtful that anyone now would find *Thoughts* a ‘radical’ text.”⁶⁹ *Thoughts*, written in the tradition of the conduct book, is informed by Wollstonecraft's previous work experiences as a domestic companion, a governess and a school mistress. She spent two years teaching and managing her own school in Newington Green and this experience undoubtedly left a lasting mark on her educational book. *Thoughts* is also largely inspired by the educational treatises that Wollstonecraft had been reading, such as Locke's *Some Thoughts on Education* (1693) and Rousseau's *Emile* (1762). Yet, “for the most part, the book reads like the work of a young author wishing to appeal to mainstream taste by reiterating received ideas, more interested [...] in ‘selling the book’ than in developing original views.”⁷⁰ In the same manner, in its review of *Thoughts*, the critic of the *European Magazine* wrote that “her ‘Thoughts’ are seldom new” and “not always perfectly just”. Still, he wrote that Wollstonecraft “knows how to communicate them with a perspicuity and judgment”⁷¹. Several of Wollstonecraft's most important ideas in *Thoughts* were indeed not new and came from the Lockean tradition. For instance, she advised a domestic education supervised by the parents; an “inflexible adherence”⁷² to rules on the part of the parents once they have set them; and considered that “improbable tales, and superstitious accounts”⁷³ ought to be banished from the children's education. She also encouraged “fixed principles”⁷⁴ and habits – all in all, she “wish[ed] them to be taught to think”⁷⁵, rather than to concentrate on less fulfilling accomplishments like drawing and music.⁷⁶ Besides, in *Thoughts* Wollstonecraft argued that “to prepare a woman to fulfil the important duties of a wife and mother, are certainly the objects that should be in view during the early period of life”⁷⁷.

⁶⁹ Alan Richardson, “Mary Wollstonecraft on education”, *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 24-41, p. 25.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷¹ *The European Magazine, and London Review* (London: 1787), p. 407.

⁷² Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (London: J. Johnson, 1787), p. 6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷⁶ Alan Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁷⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

However, Richardson insists that the importance given by Wollstonecraft to domestic duties does not mean that we do not find some glimmers of her future feminist views in *Thoughts*.⁷⁸

As for Mary Robinson, she started out as a poet: she began writing poetry at eighteenth years old, when she was imprisoned with her husband because of his debts. He was arrested and committed to the Fleet, a debtors' prison, in May 1775, and she accompanied him – it was common that wives accompanied their husbands to debtors' prisons, although it was not obligatory. There, wrote poetry as a way of making money to pay off her husband's debt.⁷⁹ According to Paula Byrne, Robinson's early verse was artificial and overblown in comparison to the poetry she would write in the late 1790s, when she would be at the peak of her literary career. Hence, when Robinson's first poems were published in 1775, they were poorly reviewed by the *Monthly Review*: "Though Mrs. Robinson is by no means an AIKIN or a More, she sometimes expresses herself decently enough on her subject"⁸⁰ (Anna Aikin, later Barbauld, and Hannah More were two celebrated Blue-Stocking poets at the time). Moreover, Paula Byrne argues that Robinson's poems "are typical of later eighteenth-century poetry at its most routine." Thus, she points out to the fact that Robinson took on Anna Aikin – Barbauld –'s work to write several poems, including her "Linnet's Petition" which can be seen as an imitation of Barbauld's "Mouse's Petition".⁸¹ All in all, at the beginning of her writing career, Robinson did not hold the feminist positions she would hold a few decades later, after the French Revolution.

Therefore, neither Wollstonecraft nor Robinson's writings were really ground-breaking before the Revolution, even though some glimmerings of her more radical and feminist views can be glimpsed already in Wollstonecraft's early writings. I will now try to demonstrate that the Revolution of 1789 had tremendous consequences in England, and on our two writers as well. There was an intense controversy over the legitimacy of the Revolution among British intellectuals, a debate to which Wollstonecraft contributed from very early on by responding to Burke in 1790. Robinson would participate to the revolutionary debate later, therefore both women would be involved in the politics of the Revolution, one way or the other. In the first

⁷⁸ Alan Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁷⁹ Paula Byrne, *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), pp. 63-64.

⁸⁰ *The Monthly Review or, Literary Journal*, vol. LIII (London, 1776), p. 262.

⁸¹ Paula Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

part, we will study the pamphlet war that was raging in Britain after the Fall of the Bastille, and which began with the publication of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

3. The revolutionary debate in Britain

The French Revolution produced a strong conservative movement in Britain, although at the time of the Fall of the Bastille, the British did not greet it with hostility. Even Edmund Burke, although he would soon condemn the Revolution, wrote in a 1789 letter that he did not know whether to applaud or denounce the events unfolding across the Channel, gazing at France in astonishment.⁸² Therefore, in 1789, at the beginning of the Revolution, Tories and Whigs were not yet condemning the overthrow of the ancient monarchy, although they were concerned about what might replace it, especially as they feared anarchy would take over.⁸³ However, Iain Hampsher-Monk recalls that several events, which took place through the autumn of 1789, decisively made Burke more and more concerned with the turn of events in France. Thus, he cites “the growing boldness of the Paris mob”, but also “the abolition of feudal privileges (4 August), the rejection of an upper house in the new legislature (1 Sept.)” and finally “the attack on the royal bedroom in the Palace of Versailles (5-6 Oct.)” as the elements which have shaped Burke's increasingly critical view of the Revolution.⁸⁴ Moreover, on the fourth of November 1789, an eminent English Protestant Dissenting and radical figure, Richard Price, pronounced a political discourse in favour of the French Revolution – and it is this speech, later published as *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, which seems to have determined Burke to publish in 1790 his treatise against the Revolution, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The publication of *Reflections* would provoke an enormous controversy in England and in the whole of Europe, many British intellectuals answering with proposals of Parliamentary reform for Britain.

⁸² David Bromwich, “The Context of Burke's “Reflections””, *Social Research* 58. 2 (1991), pp. 313-354, p. 331.

⁸³ Thomas Philip Schofield, “Conservative Political Thought in Britain in Response to the French Revolution”, *The Historical Journal* 29. 3 (1986), pp. 601-622, p. 602.

⁸⁴ Iain Hampsher-Monk, *Revolutionary Writings: Reflections on the Revolution in France and the first Letter on a Regicide Peace* (Cambridge UP, 2014), Introduction, p. xv.

a. A turning point: Richard Price's discourse in favour of the French Revolution

Richard Price was a respected figure within the English radical political landscape. He delivered his sermon in front of the Revolution Society, a group of fellow radical Protestant Dissenters formed in 1788 to commemorate the centennial of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. As Frank Turner explains, the English Dissenters had for many years been pleading the cause of parliamentary reform, which they saw as a mean of neutralizing religious discrimination. Price, who had been looking for more religious and political liberty in England for a long time, saw the French Revolution as an opportunity “to voice political complaints and aspirations for radical reform in Britain, much as he and other Dissenters had viewed the American Revolution.”⁸⁵ In his speech, he claimed:

After sharing in the benefits of one Revolution, I have been spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious. – And now, methinks, I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.⁸⁶

Citing first the English Revolution of 1688, then the American Revolution and finally the French Revolution, which was currently taking place, Frank Turner argues that Price drew a direct lineage between these revolutions. Turner then highlights that only a few days before Price gave his speech, the Parisian crowd had marched on Versailles and forced the King Louis XVI, the Queen Marie Antoinette and their children to return to Paris – an event Burke believed Price had praised in his discourse when he had said: “their king led in triumph, and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects.”⁸⁷ We can only imagine that Price's depiction of the King as an “arbitrary monarch” upset Burke, who would vigorously defend the King and the Queen and the existing monarchic institutions in his pamphlet. And indeed, Burke would attack Price's speech in the first pages of *Reflections*, referring to it as “a very extraordinary miscellaneous sermon”⁸⁸. Therefore, Price's discourse, supporting the Revolution, largely

⁸⁵ Frank M. Turner, ed. *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Yale UP, 2003), Introduction, p. xvii.

⁸⁶ Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country, Delivered on 4 November 1789 at the Meeting House in the Old Jewry, to the Society for Commemorating the Revolution in Great Britain*, 1789. (London, 1790), pp. 49-50.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁸⁸ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790. Ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 10.

contributed to the publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which launched the British debate over the legitimacy of the Revolution.

b. Edmund Burke's condemnation of the Revolution

According to Frank Turner, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* “changed the direction not only of the English debate but also of the wider European debate.”⁸⁹ The pamphlet was indeed quickly translated on the continent and soon became a best-seller; and from the moment it was published, it caused tremendous controversy.

Burke could not accept the proceedings of the Revolution Society and the suggestion that the Revolution should be imitated in Britain. In *Reflections*, he condemned the Revolution and warned the British people of the danger it represented. He saw the Revolution as a violent “destroying [of] all the social and cultural values of France that had been the model for the whole of Europe”⁹⁰. He predicted that it would only result in tyranny and feared that it would spread to Britain. Turner explains that Burke wanted to preserve the existing political and social institutions: from his point of view, even though these institutions were not perfect, there was some good in them, and it was wrong to destroy and to radically transform them only on the basis of theory. Therefore, in *Reflections* Burke addressed “radical utopians” such as Richard Price, and tried to convince his readers that, with the events unfolding in France, they were “confronting a dark, dangerous and ultimately deadly radicalism.”⁹¹ Through his pamphlet, he advocated prudence, restraint and moderation, in opposition to the dangerous and destructive politics advocated by radicals.⁹²

Burke's pamphlet shocked many in Britain: indeed, he had been part of the liberal Whig Party and a supporter of the American revolutionaries, therefore the British people expected him to support the French Revolution as well. Its publication triggered many reactions, not only among radicals such as Thomas Paine (whose response to Burke we will study in the next part of this paper), but also among fellow moderately liberal Whigs that Burke had long been

⁸⁹ Frank M. Turner, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

⁹⁰ Tom Furniss, “Mary Wollstonecraft's French Revolution”, *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 59-81, p. 60.

⁹¹ Frank M. Turner, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

allied with.⁹³ Indeed, “in his advocacy of a political philosophy vigorously defending existing institutions, Burke did not retreat from breaking longstanding friendships, splitting his own party, and deserting former political allies.” Frank Turner recalls that he had abandoned so many of his former political convictions that old friends became concerned with his sanity.⁹⁴ Therefore, the publication of *Reflections* caused a rupture in the Whig party.

Another very polemical element of *Reflections* was Burke’s dreadful depiction of the working women marching on Versailles, which he opposed to the French Queen, depicting her as a martyr. His account of the October Days caused much controversy because he claimed that a revolutionary mob had broken into Marie Antoinette’s bedchamber and barely murdered her,⁹⁵ although several contemporary commentators have contested Burke’s assertion that a revolutionary mob actually invaded the bedchamber and threatened the Queen’s life.⁹⁶ Burke’s representation of the Queen in *Reflections* is very sympathetic: he depicted Marie Antoinette as innocent and pure,⁹⁷ forced to flee, in October 1789, “almost naked” from her bed, pursued by “a band of cruel ruffians and assassins”⁹⁸. He described Marie Antoinette as a “persecuted woman”, who had to suffer “the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances [...] and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women.”⁹⁹ Burke’s rhetorical conception of the good versus the bad woman harks back to traditional stereotypes of the hysterical woman, who has to be tamed through medicine or confinement.¹⁰⁰

Among the firsts to answer Burke’s pamphlet at the time of its publication were Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, both radical dissidents who supported the revolutionary principles and advocated Parliamentary reform in Britain. We shall see in the next part Paine’s response to Burke.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁹⁵ Steven Blakemore and Fred Hembree, “Edmund Burke, Marie Antoinette, and the Procédure Criminelle”, *The Historian* 63. 3 (2001), pp. 505-520, p. 505.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 506.

⁹⁷ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender* (New-York: Routledge, 1993), p. 32.

⁹⁸ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790. Ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 60.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ See notably Natalie Zemon Davis’ chapter “Women on Top” in James B. Collins and Karen L. Taylor’s *Early Modern Europe: Issues and Interpretations* (Blackwell Publishing, 2006) for more details on how the female sex has forever been considered physiologically ‘disorderly’.

c. The response of a radical figure: Thomas Paine

“If we distinguish the Revolution from the Constitution, we may say that the first is compleat, and the second is in a fair prospect of being so.”¹⁰¹ Those were the words of Thomas Paine (1737-1809), a political activist, philosopher and political theorist, in a friendly letter he sent to Edmund Burke on 17 January 1790. Indeed, although the purpose of Paine’s *Rights of Man* – or at least its first part, published in 1791 – was to refute Burke’s arguments in *Reflections*, they had previously been in contact, discussing the American Revolution, and they agreed on its legitimacy. Thus, when *Reflections* was published, Paine was prompt to answer Burke because he considered his views on the French Revolution as a sort of betrayal. In his pamphlet, he included what he called a “Miscellaneous chapter”, in which he wrote: “Mr Burke is *all* Miscellany. His intention was to make an attack on the French Revolution; but instead of proceeding with an orderly arrangement, he has stormed it with a mob of ideas tumbling over and destroying one another.”¹⁰² Paine was an important figure of the pamphlet war. His response to Burke was an immediate success, a best-seller which made him a major figure of the French Revolution debate. Paine believed strongly in the revolution principles; yet we must keep in mind the fact that he changed his views about the French Revolution between the publication of the first and the second part of *Rights of Man*. Part One was published in February 1791: it meant to be a response to Burke’s *Reflections*, published four months earlier, and to refute it. Part Two was published in February of 1792 and was announced as the continuation of the first part.¹⁰³

In Part One, Gary Kates writes that Paine’s ideology was that of Liberalism, “which argued for a constitutional monarchy based upon political freedom but an unequal electoral system”¹⁰⁴; whereas in Part Two, Paine’s ideology was clearly radical. In Part Two, he denounced monarchy as “the master-fraud, which shelters all others”¹⁰⁵, and he conceived a programme, in order to give Britain, not a new constitution, but a constitution for the first time,¹⁰⁶ for he believed that until then all Britain had had was “merely a form of Government

¹⁰¹ Gary Kates, “From Liberalism to Radicalism: Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man*”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50. 4 (1989), pp. 569-587, p. 574. Cited from the *Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, p. 68.

¹⁰² Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, 1791-92. Ed. Mark Philp (Oxford UP, 1995), p. 166.

¹⁰³ Gary Kates, *op. cit.*, p. 570.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 571.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, part II, 1792. Ed. Mark Philp (Oxford UP, 1995), p. 257.

¹⁰⁶ William Doyle, ed., “Thomas Paine and the Girondins”, *Officers, Nobles and Revolutionaries: Essays on Eighteenth-Century France* (Hambledon Press, 1995), pp. 209-219, p. 209.

without a Constitution”¹⁰⁷. As William Doyle recalls, his prescriptions in Part Two were indeed radical: “redistributive taxation”, “old age pensions”, “subsidised education”, but first and foremost, “a written constitution ensuring fair representation of the sovereign people and strict constraints on the abuse of power.”¹⁰⁸ Gary Kates argues that Paine’s radicalism was not innate, but emerged from the time he spent in France during the first years of the Revolution and his participation to it.¹⁰⁹ In the same manner, Carine Lounissi writes that “a few months after the publication of the first part of *Rights of Man*, Paine shifted from the position of an observer of the French Revolution to that of an active participant or agent in the events”¹¹⁰. Indeed, it seems that between the publication of the first and the second part of *Rights of Man* Paine had become a radical. During his stay in Paris, he met with the Girondins and became closely associated to them. He resided with the Marquis of Condorcet, a French philosopher; he became acquainted to Brissot, a journalist and leading member of the Girondins; and was involved in the *Cercle Social*, one of the leading intellectual places of early revolutionary Paris.¹¹¹ He also visited Helen Maria Williams’ salon, which Wollstonecraft would also visit during her time in revolutionary France. As William Doyle explains, the members of the *Cercle Social* were proudly committed to the Enlightenment ideas, therefore it is no wonder that Paine, who was deeply devoted to the ideas of the Enlightenment as well,¹¹² was drawn into the circle. Moreover, Paine took an active part in the journalistic activities of the Girondins. When *The Republican* was launched, a journal aiming to diffuse their cause, Paine was asked to write its leading articles.¹¹³

Thus, his stay in France during the revolutionary period has definitely made Paine a radical. And if Part One of *Rights of Man* is really only about refuting *Reflections* and not so much about wanting existing institutions to change, the second part of *Rights of Man* clearly advocates for a democratic republic in France. We find in it the principles that pertains to a republican government, and for which Paine is today so famous: a plead for a universal manhood suffrage, the need for a social and economic struggle to improve the living conditions of lower classes, and the importance of representation in a democratic society. This is why, according to Gary Kates, Part Two of *Rights of Man* can be referred to as a radical pamphlet,

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, part I, 1791. Ed. Mark Philp (Oxford UP, 1995), p. 182.

¹⁰⁸ William Doyle, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

¹⁰⁹ Gary Kates, *op. cit.*, p. 570.

¹¹⁰ Carine Lounissi, *Thomas Paine and the French Revolution* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 17.

¹¹¹ William Doyle, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

in opposition to part one which only promoted a shift from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy.¹¹⁴ Among the radicals that Paine met during the time he spent in France was Mary Wollstonecraft, with whom he shared many ideas concerning the Revolution, as we will see in this part, and whose time in France also made more radical.

d. Mary Wollstonecraft's participation to the revolutionary debate

According to Anne Mellor, "The Enlightenment ideals of the French *philosophes* [...] opened up a discourse of equality in which women could participate."¹¹⁵ At the time of the fall of the Bastille, Wollstonecraft was working as a staff writer for *The Analytical Review*, a pro-Jacobin journal published by Joseph Johnson. There, she met daily with the leading intellectuals of the time, such as Thomas Paine and Richard Price, with whom she discussed the evolution of the revolutionary events. As Mellor explains, Wollstonecraft saw in these men's call for freedom and equality "against the claims of inherited wealth and aristocratic privilege" the mean of women's emancipation as well, and she therefore began writing her own response to Burke, in the defence of Price and Paine, adding her own voice to the debate.¹¹⁶

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published in 1790, shortly after the publication of *Reflections*, Wollstonecraft, just like Paine, argued that liberty had not yet been established in Britain. Addressing Burke at the beginning of her essay, she gave him a definition of what she thought was 'liberty': "The birthright of man, [...] Sir, [...] is such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom is united in a social compact, and the continued existence of that compact." She then wrote: "Liberty, [...] I acknowledge, is a fair idea that has never yet received a form in the various governments that have been established in our beauteous globe; the demon of property has ever been at hand to encroach on the sacred rights of men"¹¹⁷. According to Anne Mellor, in her response to Burke, Wollstonecraft denounced three of his arguments in particular. First, she refused "that all legal and political authority is derived from the past, through a process of succession and inheritance". Then, "that religion is the basis of civil society and an alliance between the established church and the civil government is necessary for the maintenance of social order";

¹¹⁴ Gary Kates, *op. cit.*, p. 571.

¹¹⁵ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender* (New-York: Routledge, 1993), p. 31.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

¹¹⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 1790. Ed. Janet Todd (Oxford UP, 1999), p. 7.

and finally “that the class system is ‘natural’ and requires that positions of civil authority should be held only by men who have earned or inherited significant property.”¹¹⁸ On the contrary, Wollstonecraft insisted that “all political authority should rest on the grounds of reason and justice alone”, that “every person be entitled to enjoy the fruits of his or her own labors”, and that “inequality of rank be eliminated.”¹¹⁹ Finally, she believed that social progress could only result from freedom and equality.¹²⁰ She also rejected Burke’s outrageous depiction of revolutionary France as a female prostitute and of Marie-Antoinette as a martyr. To counter his image of the French nation as a woman needing masculine protection, Wollstonecraft depicted the nation as a caring family, instructing its children for independence and whose duty was to secure the well-being of all its members.¹²¹

As we have seen, in *Rights of Men* Wollstonecraft’s purpose was to refute Burke’s arguments by voicing her own opinion on the main issues in his essay and to show that she equally mastered them.¹²² But she also used Burke’s own theory of the sublime and beautiful against him. I have tried to demonstrate earlier in this dissertation that Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry* gendered beauty with femininity and sublimity with masculinity. And even though her pamphlet’s primary purpose was to refute *Reflections*, Wollstonecraft used Burke’s own book on aesthetics to attack him. To do so, she allied “herself with the sublimity Burke was, by implication, associating with himself.”¹²³ Therefore, she used the term ‘sublime’ many times through her text, associating it with “truth, in morals”¹²⁴ and with “the character that acts from principle”¹²⁵. She also talked about “a sublime system of morality”¹²⁶, therefore turning against him his well-known treatise which separated moral, intellectual and aesthetic categories into the masculine and the feminine.¹²⁷ In the same manner, she associated herself with another masculine subject: the use of Reason. Although, she acknowledged that she was writing from her feelings, she also claimed that, unlike Burke, she successfully tempered these feelings with reason.¹²⁸ As Janet Todd puts it, Wollstonecraft “displayed herself as the provoked and

¹¹⁸ Anne K. Mellor, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹²² Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Macmillan Press, 1992), p. 88.

¹²³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 1790. Ed. Janet Todd (Oxford UP, 1999), p. xiii.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹²⁷ Gary Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

impartial rationalist exasperated by the maudlin sentimentality and confusion of an emotional and flawed man.”¹²⁹ Her strategy was therefore to discredit him by showing him as effeminate, while she was manly in the way she reasoned and argued.¹³⁰ However, according to Todd, it can sometimes seem that Wollstonecraft was “more obsessed with attacking sentimental writing and habit of mind than with refuting Burke's overt argument”¹³¹.

Wollstonecraft had rushed into print after reading *Reflections*, and her pamphlet can sometimes seem ill organized. Yet, “it could be argued that the apparent disorganization was part of the message”: indeed, Todd argues that her style is common for a polemicist in desire “to make their work appear gut reaction and to present themselves as moved by honest indignation and forced into print by absolute conviction and exasperation.”¹³²

At the end of the day, the French Revolution greatly inspired British radicals such as Paine and Wollstonecraft, who wanted to reform their own country. But we must remember that a few years after the beginning of the Revolution, the British would grow increasingly against the Revolution, notably with the establishment of the Terror in France (September 1793-July 1794), during which many horrifying massacres would happen and some British citizens residing in France would be imprisoned. The Terror would definitely shock the British people, who were at first generally enthusiastic over the events unfolding in France, and help turn British opinion against the Revolution.

¹²⁹ Janet Todd, ed. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 1790. (Oxford UP, 1999), Introduction, p. xiii.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

II. Controversial lives, thoughts and writings

In this second chapter, I aim at demonstrating that three elements in particular have played a role in the construction of Mary Wollstonecraft's and Mary Robinson's reputations as lost and fallen women at the end of the eighteenth century. In the first part, we will focus on their biographical backgrounds, to try and understand where their feminist views may have come from. Then, we will see that they both lived highly controversial lives: none of them corresponded to the standards of femininity which prevailed in the eighteenth century. Robinson, because of her celebrity, was attacked by the press from an early age for her scandalous life; but from the moment both women stated their revolutionary affiliations, and especially from the moment the Terror was established in France, Wollstonecraft as well as Robinson suffered from vile attacks on their private life. In the second part, we will see that the French Revolution was a turning point in the evolution of their radical and feminist thought. Both contributed to the revolutionary debate, one way or the other, and spent time in France during the Revolution as to make up their own mind about the events unfolding in Paris. We will study Wollstonecraft's Parisian stay and see how it changed her early views and radicalized her. Then we will examine Robinson's own contribution to the revolutionary debate and her views about the Revolution. Eventually, I will try to show in the last part that their two feminist pamphlets, inspired by the ideals of liberty and equality of the Revolution, clearly had an impact on their reputation as well: it was considered inappropriate that two women shall write on such subjects at the time, especially given their (already well settled) reputation. We will compare these two writers' positions on the rights of women: did they share some feminist ideas and did they agree on every subject? This chapter will enable us to understand better the elements at the origin of the construction of these two writers' reputations.

1. Love lives and controversial lives

As to understand the impact their revolutionary affiliations had over their reputation, we must see why and how Wollstonecraft and Robinson were to become radical and feminist writers in the first place; and therefore we must study their biographical backgrounds.

a. Biographical backgrounds

Mary Wollstonecraft was born in 1759, the second of seven children of a middle-class family. Her childhood was difficult. Her mother was unloving and unfair, demonstrating a clear preference for the eldest son. Her home was unstable, headed by a father who was unpredictable and who wasted his money in gambling, which caused the family to fall down the social scale. What really bothered Wollstonecraft was not so much the social embarrassment, but how unjust it was that the few resources her family had should be concentrated on the eldest son, although she was the eldest daughter.¹ She felt outraged that her brother should learn history, mathematics, philosophy, French and Latin (among many other subjects) at school, while the local school for girls' curriculum consisted of needlework and simple addition.² At home, Wollstonecraft was also marked by the understanding of her own mother's condition – her father brutalized his wife and children, and her mother did little to protect them since she was so browbeaten.³

Wollstonecraft left her home at nineteen years old to become a paid companion, and then returned in 1781 to care for her mother who was very ill. After the death of her mother, she moved in with a close friend of her, Fanny Blood. In 1782, her sister Eliza married a man with whom she would have a child a year later. After giving birth, Eliza developed post-partum depression and a revulsion towards her husband, the cause being probably that he sexually assaulted her. Wollstonecraft could not bear seeing her sister in this distressing state and helped her flee in 1784, although it was illegal for wives to leave their husbands. Indeed, husbands had complete legal rights over their wives at the time,⁴ which made Wollstonecraft's aversion for marriage even stronger than her parents had. In making all the arrangements necessary for Eliza to flee, she already demonstrated her willingness and bravery to challenge social norms, caring more about her sister's well-being than about what people would say. Then, together with her two sisters and Fanny Blood, Wollstonecraft opened a school in Newington Green. She was soon to witness another example of the unfairness and cruelty of conjugal relations within her own class: Fanny married in 1785 and, although she was in poor health, she became pregnant. Wollstonecraft resented Fanny's pregnancy against her husband – she thought that

¹ Janet Todd, ed. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792. (Oxford UP, 1999), Introduction, p. viii.

² Charlotte Gordon, *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Her Daughter Mary Shelley* (Penguin Random House, 2015), p. 26.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴ Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Macmillan Press, 1992), p. 26.

pressing his wife to bear a child in her state was dangerous and selfish. And indeed, Fanny and her infant died during childbirth. According to Gary Kelly, “Fanny’s fate dramatized again the injustice, inequality and physical vulnerability that was the lot of women in marriage”⁵.

In Newington Green, where the residents “were among the most radical in eighteenth-century England, drawn there by the town’s revolutionary tradition and by the current minister of the Newington Green Unitarian Church, Dr. Richard Price”⁶, Wollstonecraft would continue, in the mid-1780s, to self-construct as a social critic by enlarging her social sphere and contacts, especially with her encounter with Price. His political, social and moral philosophy, based on the Enlightenment ideals, was to become the foundation of Wollstonecraft’s own philosophy, which would then lead to her revolutionary feminism.⁷ She found a job as governess for the daughters of Lords in Ireland, but before she departed she finished writing *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, in 1786, and one of her friends sent the manuscript to Joseph Johnson, who was one of the most famous publishers in London at the time. Johnson was the chief publisher of the Nonconformist Enlightenment,⁸ was devoted to the enterprise of reform, and the authors he published were among the most radicals of the period, such as William Blake.⁹ Johnson played a crucial role in the rest of Wollstonecraft’s career, being for her a caring and paternal figure.¹⁰

During her time as governess, Wollstonecraft widened both her intellectual perspectives and her thorough study of society. She became increasingly confident in the power of her own mind,¹¹ especially as she was reading Rousseau and found this reading to be particularly stimulating. She also became increasingly critical to the upper class: she started to define her own social position against the upper-class women she observed, especially Lady Kingsborough, for whom she worked. According to Gary Kelly, Wollstonecraft “felt conscious moral and intellectual superiority to this merely courtly woman”, devoid of sensibility and full of vanity. She felt a profound aversion against the upper-class society in general, which she thought was corrupted and perverted by its courtly and spurious manners. As Kelly recalls, she wrote in her *Letters*: “My spirit rises and assumes its native dignity and feels itself superior to

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁶ Charlotte Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁷ Gary Kelly, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹ Charlotte Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

¹⁰ Janet Todd, ed. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792. (Oxford UP, 1999), Introduction, p. ix.

¹¹ Gary Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

the *little souls* clothed with adventitious' qualities such as rank and wealth"¹². She did not like the imitative middle and lower ranks either.¹³ When she was dismissed by Lady Kingsborough, she returned to London and began to work for Joseph Johnson, writing reviews for the *Analytical Review*, which he launched in 1788. Although she was not a Dissenter herself, in central London she moved in dissenting circles – there was a large Dissenting population in Newington Green – as well as in Joseph Johnson's radical circles.¹⁴ Through Johnson she met many of the intellectual figures of the time: Richard Price, but also Thomas Paine and Henry Fuseli, a painter and critic with whom she would have an affair. She also met John Bonnycastle, a mathematician who would try to make math and science accessible to all readers through his books; and Erasmus Darwin, a physician and poet and grandfather to Charles Darwin. Despite the fact that they did not all work within the same fields, all these men shared Wollstonecraft's conviction that educating everyone, including women, would improve society; and they all had a major influence on the construction of her radical thought. It is in this intellectually stimulating environment that Wollstonecraft learned about the Fall of the Bastille, on 14 July 1789. All in all, through all of her experiences of conflicts of gender and class, Wollstonecraft increasingly saw her life as "a general social critique"¹⁵, which was to be reflected upon in all of her works, and reinforced to its highest degree with the Revolution and the time she would spend in Paris. As we will see later in this chapter, her radical and feminist reflection would culminate in her most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. We must now have a closer look to Mary Robinson's early life, in order to see why she was to become a feminist writer.

Mary Darby (later Robinson) was born in Bristol in 1756, in a prosperous merchant family. She had a privileged childhood: as Sharon Setzer recalls, she slept in a bed of the "richest crimson damask" and wore clothes of the "finest fabric"¹⁶. Yet, her privileged existence came to an end when her father got into debt and the family fortune collapsed, culminating with the separation of her parents. Later, she got enrolled in Meribah Lorrington's boarding school in London, a woman who would have a powerful positive influence on Robinson's thought. She would also spend some time at the boarding school of Hannah More's

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Frazer, "Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay on education", *Oxford Review of Education* 37. 5 (2011), pp. 603-617, p. 603.

¹⁵ Garry Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁶ Mary Robinson, *Memoirs*, cited by Sharon M. Setzer in *A Letter to the Women of England: on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, 1799. (Broadview Press, 2003), p. 11.

sisters, although her experience would leave a less powerful mark on her. When Mrs. Lorrington's school had to close, Robinson's mother established a school of her own in Chelsea, which her daughter enthusiastically helped managing, taking responsibilities such as the reading of the younger pupils.¹⁷ Robinson finished her education at Oxford House, where she was acquainted with influential members of London's theatrical world, who were impressed by her reciting and acting talents. That is when David Garrick, a famous actor, theatre manager and producer working at the Drury Lane Theatre, organized that she would make her first public appearance as an actress playing Cordelia to his King Lear.¹⁸ Robinson's celebrity as an actress would begin at this point.

Mary Darby married Thomas Robinson at only sixteen years old, in 1773. He had won Mrs. Darby's approval, and her mother had done everything in her power to convince her daughter of his sincerity. Robinson finally accepted to give her hand to Thomas in marriage, although she did not feel any sentiment of love towards him.¹⁹ But soon after their wedding, she discovered that her husband was not the wealthy heir he had pretended to be, and was actually deeply in debt because of his propensity for gambling and womanizing.²⁰ As we have seen earlier in this paper, Thomas Robinson was committed to debtor's prison, where Robinson followed him with their daughter of six months. During almost a year, Robinson both cared for their daughter and wrote poetry as to provide for her family, since her husband would not accept the work offered to him. When Thomas Robinson was finally released in 1776, she returned to her acting career, and became increasingly prosperous and acclaimed during the three years that followed – time during which her husband kept seeing other women and their marriage reached a point of non-return. As Sharon Setzer puts it, "their marriage was evidently beyond repair long before Robinson made her legendary appearance as Perdita in a command performance of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* on December 3, 1779."²¹ That performance would make her a celebrity throughout the whole of England. The nickname 'Perdita' would stick with her for the rest of her life, even when she would seek recognition for her literary talent and try to leave behind her celebrity as an actress.

Now that we have studied Wollstonecraft and Robinson's early lives and backgrounds, we can easily imagine why Wollstonecraft in particular would develop such radical and

¹⁷ Sharon M. Setzer, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁹ Mary Robinson, *Memoirs*, cited by Sharon M. Setzer, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²⁰ Sharon M. Setzer, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

feminist views from the late 1780s. It is not so evident for Robinson: coming from a more privileged social background than Wollstonecraft, she would become a successful actress and meet influential people. She would develop her feminist views later, probably thanks to her experience as an infamous celebrity.

b. Scandalous lives and amorous entanglements

We must now focus on the scandalous aspects of their lives, which have played a major role in the construction of their controversial reputations. Many aspects have contributed to render Robinson and Wollstonecraft's lives scandalous, the first one being that they both had numerous amorous entanglements during their life. Robinson's affairs were constantly published in the gossip press because she was so popular, whereas Wollstonecraft, though she did live a controversial life as well, was not nearly as famous and was not targeted by the press like Robinson. Indeed, being an actress made Robinson a public figure, subject to the scrutiny of the press. On the other hand, the most scandalous aspects of Wollstonecraft's life would be made public only after her death, in the *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1798 by her faithful husband.

As we have seen, Robinson's celebrity started with her successful acting career. Her reputation was not yet tarnished at that point. That would change with her glorious performance as Perdita in 1779, during which she would catch the attention of the seventeen-year-old Prince of Wales (later King George IV). Thus, at twenty-three Robinson left her husband to become the mistress of the Prince. The *Morning Post* broke the news in the midst of July of 1780: "the Theatrical *Perdita* of Drury-Lane is labouring night and day to insinuate to the world, that an *amour* has taken, or is to take place, between her and a certain young illustrious character."²² Since she was already a public figure, this affair caused her to be the target of the scandal mongering-press, which constantly wrote about their affair. She soon became the most talked about woman in London, and was vilified by the press for having seduced the young and innocent Prince, being older than him (although the Prince had already had affairs with older women before). The author of the *Morning Post* wrote: "you shall see the famous Perdita of Drury-Lane, sitting at the play-house in the side box opposite the P-of W-. Look how wantonly

²² *Morning Post*, 18 July, cited in Paula Byrne, *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* (Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 128.

she looks, thinking, Gracious Sir! please to bestow one—upon a poor woman! Ho! ho! fine rare show!”²³ Scandal mongers did not give her peace – the *Morning Post* was particularly hostile to her. A cruel letter signed by one ‘Dramaticus’ was published in the daily paper in September, criticizing her for her affair and for the fact that she had sat in the side-box at the theatre:

The audacity of Mrs R–, who was an actress last winter [she had given up her acting career to become the Prince’s mistress], and whose situation and character is certainly not *improved* since her resignation from the stage, is beyond excuse [...]. I know of no rank of prostitution that can either lessen the crime or disgrace of it; and, however profligate the age may be, I believe that the greatest libertine of our sex would revolt at the idea of handing a wife, sister, or daughter, in to a box where they were certain of being surrounded by public prostitutes. The managers owe it to the public, they owe it to themselves, to preserve the side-boxes for the modest and reputable part of the other sex.²⁴

The fact that an anonymous author could send such an aggressive letter – employing words such as ‘prostitute’, ‘disgrace’ or ‘libertine’ to qualify Robison – to a widely known and read paper is revealing of the extent of her celebrity (the *Morning Post* knowing that it would sell well thanks to her) and of the treatment she daily received. Eventually, about a year after it began, her affair with the Prince ended – he had left her for another woman. This condemned her to social disgrace: she was caricatured in cartoons but also in spurious letters and false memoirs as an abandoned royal mistress and lost woman.²⁵ However, even after the end of her affair with the Prince, reporters kept charting Robinson’s intrigues, which did certainly not stop. She was first seen with Lord Malden, a politician and boon companion to the young Prince; then with Charles James Fox, a prominent British Whig statesman; and finally with Banastre Tarleton, a handsome British colonel and politician, with whom she was to spend about fifteen years, despite some interruptions.²⁶ What was highly controversial, and therefore caused great scandal in the press, is that Robinson was having simultaneously affairs with these men. Indeed, Paula Byrne recalls that “Tarleton and Mary were observed together at several balls and masquerades in May [1782], but she was officially still living with Lord Malden.”²⁷ She would have abandoned one for the other several days later, as reported by the *Morning Herald*: “The *Perdita* was lately made *captive* by Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton”²⁸. This was not

²³ *Morning Post*, 9 August, cited in Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

²⁴ *Morning Post*, 27 September, cited in Byrne, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-135.

²⁵ Sharon M. Setzer, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁷ Paula Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

²⁸ *Morning Herald* 29 (30 May 1782), cited in Byrne, p. 193.

the only romantic threesome Robinson would form: “within a few months of abandoning the aristocrat [Lord Malden] for the war hero [Tarleton], Mary also became involved with the most prominent and controversial politician in the land”²⁹, that is to say Charles James Fox. Their affair began while she was still with Tarleton, in July of 1782. She would leave Fox only a few months later though, and return to Tarleton, with whom she would stay for most of her life.

Even though her affairs with Fox and the Prince were over, Robinson, who was more than ever the subject of public fascination, was still associated to them in the satirical press and was receiving so much bad publicity that it was alarming.³⁰ She was depicted in numerous salacious caricatures, such as in “The Thunderer”, in which she appears along with the Prince and Tarleton.



Illustration 1: "The Thunderer" by James Gillray (1782)

The caricature was one of the first works of James Gillray, who is now considered one of the most famous and scabrous caricaturists in English history,³¹ and was published in 1782. As

²⁹ Paula Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

Paula Byrne explains, it is Tarleton who is represented as ‘The Thunderer’, and the caricature is supposed to be a parody of a portrait of the colonel by Reynolds. In the caricature, Tarleton is represented as physically stronger than the Prince standing next to him, and his crotch has been significantly enlarged. The expression on his face has been changed from the bravery and attentiveness suggested by Reynolds into a disdainful smirk. Moreover, in his painting Reynolds had depicted the colonel as standing in a battlefield, whereas in Gillray’s print he stands in front of a tavern. In the background, Mary Robinson is impaled on a pole above the door of the tavern; her legs are spread wide apart and her breasts are completely exposed,³² while she says: ‘This is the Lad’ll Kiss most Sweet / Who’d not Love a Soldier?’

This was not the only caricature which would undermine Mary Robinson’s reputation. In 1783, she was yet again depicted as sexually deviant, as being involved in a sexual threesome with the Prince and Fox by several caricaturists.³³ And indeed, that same year Gillray published “Paridise Regain’d”, showing Fox making a speech to a meek and hence again sexualized ‘Perdita’.³⁴



Illustration 2: "Paridise Regain'd" by James Gillray (1783)

³² *Ibid.*, p. 197.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

The Prince, on the other hand, is represented as spying on them behind a tree, saying ‘Ha! Ha! Ha! Poor Charley’, probably hinting at the rumour that Robinson had a propensity to influence and manipulate the men around her. Indeed, Tarleton’s family had always been against their union, convinced that Robinson had a bad influence on him and that she was the reason he was in debt (although the real problem was his gambling addiction).³⁵ Caricatures were not the only source of bad publicity Robinson was receiving: for instance, in 1784, a false series of fictional accounts of her love affairs was published, written in pornographic terms. The *Memoirs of Perdita* recounted Robinson’s affair with Lord Malden in a complex pornographic scene involving herself, a young gardener and a nest of ants.³⁶

The fact that Robinson’s image circulated so widely and under so various modes is highly interesting and in that sense, Tom Mole has referred to Robinson’s celebrity as a “multimedia phenomenon”³⁷. Of course, caricatures like the ones we have just studied played a fundamental role in the construction of public opinion at the time: they developed intensely throughout the eighteenth century, and even more rapidly in England than in France. In *Figures publiques*, Antoine Lilti explains that a torrent of caricatures was published in London in the second half of the eighteenth century, which were for most of the time satirical and crude images such as the ones we have seen. Lilti writes: “Hommes politiques, aristocrates, célébrités de la vie culturelle sont ouvertement moqués, leurs défauts physiques tournés en ridicule, leurs frasques sexuelles, réelles ou supposées, font l’objet de plaisanteries plus ou moins graveleuses.”³⁸ Later in his book, Lilti explains that these satirical images only made sense with regards to other textual or visual representations which circulated about these celebrities and constructed the whole of their ‘*figure publique*’³⁹. Therefore, all the scandal mongering articles and satirical prints published about her romantic affairs definitely participated to making Mary Robinson “a woman of tarnished reputation”⁴⁰.

Mary Wollstonecraft, too, had a complicated love life. In 1790, after she became a professional writer for Joseph Johnson, she developed a passion for Henry Fuseli, who was part of Johnson’s radical circle. Fuseli was already married, and when Wollstonecraft

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

³⁶ Judith Pascoe, *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* (Broadview Press, 2000), p. 29.

³⁷ Tom Mole, “Mary Robinson’s conflicted celebrity”, *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture* (Cambridge UP, 2009), pp. 186-205, p. 200.

³⁸ Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques : l’invention de la célébrité, 1750-1850* (Fayard, 2014), p. 95.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Fay, “Mary Robinson: On Trial in the Public Court”, *Studies in Romanticism* 45. 3 (2006), pp. 397-423, p. 401.

suggested a ménage à trois with his wife, he refused and put an end to their relationship. After this rejection, feeling sad and humiliated, Wollstonecraft went to France to see the revolutionary events for herself.⁴¹ When she was there, she met and fell passionately in love with Gilbert Imlay, an American businessman and diplomat. The two began a sexual affair, although in Wollstonecraft's earlier writings (including *Rights of Woman* which had been published by the time she went to France), sexual proximity, even though it was a natural need, was for a woman incompatible with independence and self-respect when it became passionate. According to Janet Todd, Wollstonecraft's change of mind about sex could be linked to her long lasting obsession for Fuseli, which had frustrated her, and which could have taught her that "she was not content with platonic affection, nor with sharing a man in however high-minded way."⁴² Then, since life for foreigners was becoming increasingly difficult in revolutionary France with the Terror and the imprisonment of radical expatriates, Imlay registered Wollstonecraft as his wife at the American embassy. That way, even though they were not actually married, she would be protected from arrest. They had a daughter together, Fanny Imlay, born in France in May of 1794, which no one knew was illegitimate at the time, since most people assumed the couple was really married. After some time, it seems that Imlay grew tired of domestic life and of Wollstonecraft and left her for long periods of time, working abroad. In August 1794, he departed for London and promised to return soon. She continually wrote letters to him, yearning his return to Paris, and tried to convince herself that his irregular answers were due to the carelessness of the post rather than indifference from him.⁴³ However, she grew increasingly sad and depressed, being a new mother alone in a revolutionary country. In April 1795, she left France with her infant daughter and returned to London, looking forward to being reunited with Imlay. Once she was there, he rejected her, and she tried to commit suicide. Imlay intervened and saved her – although it is unclear how –, and once she was in better health, he sent her off to Scandinavia. Imlay had lost a ship in which he had invested, and he wanted Wollstonecraft there to plead for reparation. According to Mary Favret, "he, and perhaps Wollstonecraft herself [...] hoped the trip would pull her from the fatal depression into which his infidelity had cast her."⁴⁴ She departed for Scandinavia with her child and a maid, but she still felt terribly sad, writing deeply moving letters to Imlay during her journey. When

⁴¹ Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: a revolutionary life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), pp. 198-199.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 234-235.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-271.

⁴⁴ Mary A. Favret, "Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark: travelling with Mary Wollstonecraft", *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 209-227, p. 212.

she returned to England after this exhausting trip, she discovered with phenomenal pain that he was living with another woman. Out of despair, she attempted to commit suicide for the second time, jumping into the River Thames. Her suicide attempts were not publicly known at the time, but her husband, William Godwin, would write about them in her *Memoirs*, hence causing enormous controversy. Moreover, when Wollstonecraft and Godwin would decide to marry a few years later in order for their child to be legitimate, their marriage would reveal that she had never actually been married to Imlay, which would cause Godwin and her to lose many friends.

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft's complicated love life and her suicide attempts were not the only things that made her life so controversial. She had been raised in a family of inactive members of the Church of England. Yet she had attended church regularly for the first twenty-eight years of her life, and *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), her first published work, advocated that one should "associate with those who have fixed principles with respect to religion"⁴⁵. Not long after the publication of *Thoughts*, however, Wollstonecraft progressively stopped attending Church, to the point that she totally abandoned Christian orthodoxy.⁴⁶ At the time, "women's own involvement in religious controversy, particularly in nonconformist churches in Britain [...] was important in shaping attitudes to female intellectualism." It was important to take "religion seriously, as all enlightened minds did"⁴⁷. When her unorthodoxy was revealed by Godwin in the *Memoirs*, along with her sexual entanglements outside of marriage with both Imlay and himself, it definitely contributed to damage her reputation and posterity.

Therefore, numerous aspects of these two women's lives were very controversial. In the case of Mary Robinson, the fact that she was a celebrity meant that her private life was always the target of the scandal-mongering press, and the numerous caricatures, false letters and memoirs which appeared even after her liaisons with the Prince and Fox were over did nothing but deteriorate her reputation. As for Mary Wollstonecraft, she was not a celebrity, even though she was a published author; and therefore her private life was not under scrutiny like Robinson's. However, in the third chapter of this dissertation, I will try to demonstrate that

⁴⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (London: J. Johnson, 1787), p. 129.

⁴⁶ Barbara Taylor, ed. "The religious foundations of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism", *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 99-118, p. 100.

⁴⁷ Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor, ed. *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), General introduction, p. xviii.

the publishing of her *Memoirs* made public every controversial aspect of her life and hence totally disrupted her reputation and celebrity, along with the posterity of her works. Meanwhile, in the next part, we shall see that another element contributed to tarnish these two women's reputations: it was their open support of the revolution in France. The fact that women could participate to such an event and voice their opinion about it was seen as dangerous and they were criticized for it, in a growing counter-revolutionary climate.

2. The French Revolution, shaping their radical thought

In order to understand why Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson's thought on women's condition and education grew increasingly feminist and radical after the Revolution, it is important to see that the time they spent in France during the revolutionary period had a powerful influence on their thought. The people they met during their stay, especially in the French salons, shaped their ideas and made them become radical figures. In these Parisian salons, Wollstonecraft was to debate the French *philosophes'* ideas: she had read Montaigne, Fenelon, Voltaire and Rousseau, among others; and, according to Sylvana Tomaselli, "her awareness of intellectual eighteenth-century France was evident [...], especially so in following her stay in the years of its Revolution."⁴⁸ Thus, in the first part of our analysis, we will see that in many ways Wollstonecraft's thought was shaped more radically following her stay in revolutionary France. We will study her circles and activity back in France, especially the time she spent at Helen Maria Williams' salon, and then see that she became close to the Girondins, with whom British pro-revolutionaries such as herself had much in common politically.

a. Mary Wollstonecraft in France during the revolutionary period

William Godwin, Wollstonecraft's husband, was convinced that the French Revolution had played a decisive role in the development of his wife's radical thought. In the *Memoirs* he wrote and published a year after her death in honour of her memory, he wrote:

⁴⁸ Sylvana Tomaselli, "French Philosophes", *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*, ed. Nancy E. Johnson and Paul Keen (Cambridge UP, 2020), pp. 139-145, p. 139.

The French revolution, while it gave a fundamental shock to the human intellect through every region of the globe, did not fail to produce a conspicuous effect in the progress of Mary's reflections. The prejudices of her early years suffered a vehement concussion. Her respect for establishments was undermined.⁴⁹

Indeed, her time in Paris and the revolutionary events to which she assisted definitely changed her early views and her esteem for the established powers.

Wollstonecraft arrived in Paris in December 1792 and would remain in France until 1795. She had departed from London to witness the events unfolding in France by herself, in hope of joining circles of British and American expatriates.⁵⁰ When she arrived in Paris, she was received by Helen Maria Williams, a British novelist and poet, who had been in France since 1790 and held a well-known salon in the capital. Williams was, just like Wollstonecraft, a strong supporter of the ideals of the French Revolution. She was making a reputation for herself in Paris as a politician as she was writing her *Letters Written in France, in the Summer, 1790*⁵¹: indeed, she was relating to a British audience the progress of events in France and her *Letters* were very popular at the time. Wollstonecraft had read Williams's *Letters* and the anecdotes on the French Revolution accompanying it, and she is thought to have written the positive anonymous review published in Johnson's *Analytical Review*: "The interesting unaffected letters which this pleasing writer has now presented to the public [...] confir[m] the very favourable opinion we have entertained of the goodness of the writer's heart."⁵² Through Williams, Wollstonecraft was to meet many British, American and French supporters of the Revolution. According to Isabelle Bour, she was delighted with this opportunity, since Williams and she belonged to the same radical and Dissenting circles in London.⁵³ Williams's salon was the most important expatriate salon in Paris: it was "attended by liberals, philosophers, writers, savants, politicians and intellectual-political tourists."⁵⁴ Meeting such people as the Girondins Pierre Vergniaud (a French lawyer and statesman), Jacques-Pierre Brissot (a leading member of the group), and Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne⁵⁵ (a leader of the French Protestants), enabled Wollstonecraft to have a direct access to the current revolutionary

⁴⁹ William Godwin, *Memoirs and Posthumous Works of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Dublin, 1798), pp. 44-45.

⁵⁰ Isabelle Bour, "A New Wollstonecraft: The Reception of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and of *The Wrongs of Woman* in Revolutionary France", *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36. 4 (2013), pp. 575-587, p. 575.

⁵¹ Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Macmillan Press, 1992), p. 143.

⁵² *The Analytical Review*, vol VIII (London: J. Johnson, 1790), pp. 431-435, p. 431.

⁵³ Isabelle Bour, *op. cit.*, p. 575.

⁵⁴ Gary Kelly. *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁵⁵ Isabelle Bour, *op. cit.*, pp. 575-576.

ideas. Williams' salon was also visited by Joseph Chénier and Bertrand Barère, both politicians and members of the Montagnard group which was even more radical. Bour records that she also met Pierre-Louis Roederer, a lawyer and journalist belonging to the Girondins, at Thomas Christie's house, a similar salon as Williams', where ideas about the Revolution were exchanged between foreign visitors, sympathetic to the early stages of the Revolution, and moderate Republicans or French constitutional monarchists.⁵⁶ Therefore, the people Wollstonecraft met during her stay in France, some being key figures of the Revolution, must have had an impact on her interpretation of the events and contributed to her growing radical discourse.

During her stay, Wollstonecraft began writing *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has Produced in Europe*, which would be published in London in 1794. By the time she had arrived in 1792, the situation had seriously degenerated in France: the September massacres (2-6 September 1792) had made radicalism no longer fashionable or safe. She witnessed the Terror (September 1793 to July 1794), established by the (short-lived) Jacobin Republic, and resided in Paris at a time when being English was becoming increasingly uncomfortable: many British citizens, like Paine, were imprisoned during the Terror because they were suspected of espionage⁵⁷ – Williams herself was jailed for some time. Wollstonecraft witnessed terrible violence during her stay, as Robespierre and the Jacobins were gaining control over the Revolution, and that is also why British radicals would associate more with moderate Girondins than radical Jacobins.⁵⁸ The letters she wrote to Imlay during her stay disclose how afraid she was to be a mother alone in Paris with her infant child and how she felt abandoned by her lover travelling abroad:

This has been such a period of barbarity and misery, I ought not to complain of having my share. I wish one moment that I had never heard of the cruelties that have been practised here, and the next, envy the mothers who have been killed with their children. [...] You will think me mad: I would I were so, that I could forget my misery – so that my head or heart would be still.⁵⁹

In Paris, she witnessed the execution of the king of France (21 January 1793) from the window of her hotel, which definitely shocked the expatriates. Moreover, war was declared between

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 576.

⁵⁷ Adriana Craciun, *British Women Writers and the French Revolution: Citizens of the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 49.

⁵⁸ Tom Furniss, "Mary Wollstonecraft's French Revolution", *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 59-81, p. 65.

⁵⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters to Imlay, 1793-1795*. (London, 1879), p. 103.

France and Britain on 1 February 1793.⁶⁰ Witnessing all this violence, Wollstonecraft almost lost faith in the republican ideals. But even though she lived difficult periods in France, she remained convinced that a better and fairer society would emerge from the Revolution. In a letter she sent to Imlay in October 1794, she wrote: “I have been interrupted – and must send off my letter. The liberty of the press will produce a great effect here – the *cry of blood will not be vain!* Some more monsters will perish – and the Jacobins are conquered. Yet I almost fear the last flap of the tail of the beast.”⁶¹ Therefore, despite everything, she remained certain that the Revolution would necessarily induce radical changes in the fields of education and domesticity: in *An Historical and Moral View*, she wrote that “a change [...] of the system of education and domestic manners will be a natural consequence of the revolution”⁶².

The Revolution played a fundamental role in the development of Wollstonecraft’s feminist thought. And women’s rights seemed to be an important objective of the Revolution at first: according to Laura Kirkley, “in the early years of the Revolution the French attempt to enshrine ideas of universal freedom and equality in their constitution seemed to offer women new opportunities for political recognition.”⁶³ Condorcet had published *Sur l’admission des femmes au droit de cite* in 1790, advocating the right for women to full citizenship.⁶⁴ Moreover, women played a major role in the Revolution: they were present in the streets, active in riots (the most momentous one being The Women’s March on Versailles in October 1789) as well as in salons, such as Williams’ or Madame Roland’s, another major figure of the Revolution. According to Kirkley, the condition of women was at first improved with the changes brought by the fall of the Bastille, notably with the French laws on divorce, as we will see later; and thanks to these changes, women could add their voice to the public debate.⁶⁵ It is in this climate of hope for women’s civil, civic and economic rights to progress that Wollstonecraft published her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in 1792; and it is no wonder that a French translation of her book was quick to be released. When Robespierre’s Terror was established, however, the participation of women in the debate on the Revolution was severely restricted: major Jacobin figures opposed female suffrage and “public voices stemmed from a deeply ingrained fear, articulated by Rousseau, of women using sexual wiles to wield covert political

⁶⁰ Tom Furniss, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁶¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁶² Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, 1794. Ed. Janet Todd (Oxford UP, 1999), p. 366.

⁶³ Laura Kirkley, “*Maria, ou Le Malheur d’être femme*: Translating Mary Wollstonecraft in Revolutionary France”, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38. 2 (2015), pp. 239-255, p. 240.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

influence.”⁶⁶ We will study this threat that ‘*républicaines révolutionnaires*’ represented for the Jacobins and for those opposed to the Revolution in the last chapter of this dissertation, with both Wollstonecraft and Robinson as case studies.

Christine Hivet has argued that the evolution of Wollstonecraft’s feminist thought, between the time the Revolution had not yet started and her stay in Paris from 1792 to 1795, can be seen notably in the differences between her first novel, *Mary: A Fiction*, written before the Revolution (1787) and the unfinished text she wrote after the Revolution, *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria*, published by Godwin after her death (1798). As Hivet points out, even though the protagonists of her two novels look like one another as much in intelligence and independence as in the fact that they are both married to a man against whom they rebel, they do not rebel the same way: Mary manages to live away from the husband that was imposed to her but only temporarily; while Maria defies society and its institutions and pleads divorce. Hivet argues that the French Revolution must have been a driving force for Wollstonecraft, notably thanks to the legalisation of divorce in 1792, proving that the condition of women could get better.⁶⁷ The influence of the Revolution on Wollstonecraft’s thought can also be seen through the revolutionary language she uses in *Maria*. For instance, her heroine writes that “marriage had bastilled me for life”⁶⁸, comparing her life as a married woman to this of the victims imprisoned in the Bastille. Later, Maria writes that “I execrated the institutions of society, which thus enable men to tyrannize over women”⁶⁹, and in this sentence we can sense the revolutionary language which Wollstonecraft took on the Revolution.⁷⁰ This revolutionary language intentionally shocked British readers who, according to Hivet, were for most of them not ready to welcome a similar revolution in their country.⁷¹ Furthermore, Janet Todd has argued that *Maria* can be considered “an answer to the sentimental but sexually frightened *Mary*”, and that “since Maria is already married, her sexually fulfilled love for the hero becomes a plea for greater sexual freedom for women and greater control over their own lives.”⁷² Similarly, Laura Kirkley has written that Wollstonecraft’s unfinished text actually

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁶⁷ Christine Hivet, « Mary Wollstonecraft, la Révolution française et *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* », *XVII-XVIII. Revue de la Société d’études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* 49 (1999), pp. 269-281, pp. 274-275.

⁶⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman*, 1798. Ed. Michelle Faubert (Broadview Editions, 2012), p. 243.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁷⁰ Christine Hivet, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁷² Janet Todd, *Mary, Maria, Mathilda* (Penguin Books, 1991), p. xiii.

radicalise the feminism of *Vindication*, “arguing not only for social and legal equality but also for women’s rights to the experience and expression of sexual desire.”⁷³ Wollstonecraft’s treatment of marriage and divorce can be linked to the fact that being in France during the Revolution enabled her to assist to a social and sexual, although short-lived revolution: divorce was to become easier to arrange and many relationships in Wollstonecraft’s surrounding fell into pieces.⁷⁴ Wollstonecraft herself was to experience this sexual revolution. Indeed, although in her early writings she preached pure love and sexless marriage, we have seen that she entered a sexual liaison outside of marriage with Gilbert Imlay during her time in France, and this sexual affair definitely changed her views on sex.⁷⁵

Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, although it does not refer to the Revolution, made her a major figure of the French Revolution debate; and the French translation of her essay made her famous in France as well. Although the name of the French translator of *Vindication* remains unknown, it was François Buisson, a radical printer and bookseller who ordered a quick translation of Wollstonecraft’s book⁷⁶; and the translation was published the same year as the original, in 1792. The first French review of *Vindication* was written by the *Chronique de Paris* and was brief but flattering. According to Isabelle Bour, it is not surprising that this journal, which was published between 1789 and 1793, should have expressed a favourable opinion of her work. At the time, its editors were Condorcet, a French philosopher and extremely influential figure of the Revolution, but also Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne and Jean-François Ducos, all of them deputies at the Convention who sat with the Girondins.⁷⁷ And indeed, the review, although anonymous, was very sympathetic to Wollstonecraft, which implies that it must have been written by a Girondin or by someone friendly to the cause. The review said:

L'Auteur de cet Ouvrage, qui est une femme, y défend son sexe avec beaucoup de chaleur, & souvent avec beaucoup de raison. Elle fait dériver tous les défauts des femmes de la tyrannie des hommes; & il est vrai de dire que l'esclavage est ennemi de toutes les vertus. Une réforme importante dans l'éducation est un des moyens qu'elle propose pour ramener les femmes au sentiment de leur dignité, & pour en faire des épouses & des mères, des citoyennes. Elle invite la France, entr'autres, à essayer quel effet la raison auroit pour les ramener à la nature & à leurs devoirs.⁷⁸

⁷³ Laura Kirkley, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

⁷⁴ Tom Furniss, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁷⁵ Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: a revolutionary life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), p. 235.

⁷⁶ Laura Kirkley, “*Maria, ou Le Malheur d’être femme*: Translating Mary Wollstonecraft in Revolutionary France”, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38. 2 (2015), pp. 239-255, p. 240.

⁷⁷ Isabelle Bour, *op. cit.*, pp. 577-578.

⁷⁸ *Chronique de Paris*, T5 (1792), pp. 623-624, p. 623.

Therefore, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* quickly became a best-seller and made Wollstonecraft as much famous as infamous in the whole of Europe.⁷⁹

b. Mary Robinson's involvement in the Revolution

At only twenty-five years old, in 1783, Mary Robinson suffered from an accident and her legs became progressively paralyzed. What happened to her is not fully known, although it was documented by her daughter, Maria Elizabeth Robinson, who carried on writing her mother's memoirs after her death. Robinson is said to have taken a post-chaise in the middle of the night to follow her lover of the time, the Colonel Tarleton, who had suddenly disappeared. She was pregnant back then; and "the most likely explanation of events", according to Paula Byrne, "is that she had a miscarriage in the post-chaise and an infection resulting from it was what led to the acute rheumatic fever" which was to prevent her from walking or even standing ever again.⁸⁰ From the moment her legs stopped working, she was to be always carried by someone in order to go somewhere. Her health did not improve much in the following years, because of her debilitating rheumatism: in the summer of 1783, she went to Brighton, which was a recommended destination for convalescents⁸¹; and then went to Aix-la-Chappelle, a favoured spa town in Germany, in 1785.⁸² She remained in poor health; but despite her disability and a depression, she kept writing and remained informed about the events happening in France during the revolutionary period.⁸³

Robinson was part of the Della Cruscan, a circle of European sentimental poets founded in the late eighteenth-century. The group was constituted of liberal and cosmopolitan members, who welcomed the French Revolution very early on. The English Della Cruscan's leader, Robert Merry, had published a poem in 1790, "The Laurel of Liberty", which he had dedicated to the French National Assembly, which he considered "the true and Zealous representatives of a Free People"⁸⁴. After reading Merry's poem, Robinson immediately decided to write a response, and in less than twelve hours she had produced a poem of some 350 lines, entitled "Ainsi va le Monde". The poem was Robinson's first concrete contribution

⁷⁹ Tom Furniss, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁸⁰ Paula Byrne, *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), pp. 228-229.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁸⁴ Robert Merry, cited by Byrne, p. 271.

to the British debate over the Revolution. She dedicated it to Merry, and openly stated her revolutionary sympathies as well as attacked the ancient regime, and wrote an account of the storming of the Bastille.⁸⁵ “Ainsi va le Monde” was published in June 1790 in *The World*, founded by John Bell. The poem went into a second edition and was then translated into French, which was not surprising, since the English original had become very popular in Paris.⁸⁶ The poem was very well received in London as well – published in the summer of 1790, British opinion was still mainly supportive of the Revolution. Therefore, the *Critical Review* wrote that “[Robinson’s] poetical talents are no way inferior to [Merry’s]; and her *patriotism*, or rather political sentiments, more just and rational”⁸⁷.

A year later, after she had read Paine’s *Rights of Man* and Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Robinson brought another contribution to the British revolutionary debate with a pamphlet published anonymously in 1791, *Impartial Reflections on the Present Situation of the Queen of France by a Friend of Humanity*. As Paula Byrne explains, Robinson was torn politically. She felt a strong sympathy for the Queen – she had met her in person in Versailles in 1781 and never forgot their encounter – but was also very attached to the defence of the Revolution.⁸⁸ Thus, she defended the Queen and professed her intellectual and spiritual qualities but, unlike Burke, her defence of Marie Antoinette was not a pretext in order to attack the Revolution.⁸⁹ Indeed, when referring to the overthrow of the ancient regime, she talked about “the most glorious achievement in the annals of Europe”⁹⁰. The fact that Robinson was torn politically can be sensed in the review of her *Impartial Reflections* written by the *Monthly Review*. It described Robinson’s pamphlet as “a flaming encomium on the transcendent beauty and virtues of her Majesty of France”⁹¹, which also “bestows the warmest applause on that great event [the French Revolution]”. It concluded by saying that “there is an appearance of inconsistency in this *apology for the Queen of France*, [...] which leaves us at some loss to determine its real character, or to say what may have been the ultimate view and purpose of the writer.”⁹² Marie Antoinette had been depicted as a martyr by Burke in his *Reflections*, and had become the symbol of the bloody turn of the Revolution. Although Robinson did not agree

⁸⁵ Paula Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁸⁷ *The Critical Review*, vol. 1 (London, 1791), pp. 73-75, p. 74.

⁸⁸ Paula Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁹⁰ Mary Robinson, *Impartial Reflections*, cited by Byrne, p. 292.

⁹¹ *The Monthly Review, or Literary Journal*, vol. VI (London, 1791), pp. 356-357, p. 356.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 357.

with Burke's condemnation of the Revolution, she felt a strong sympathy for the Queen, who was, like her, diabolized in the press: Marie Antoinette had been the subject of many scandalous caricatures and pamphlets, sometimes pornographic and accusing her of incest with her son.⁹³ Robinson wrote several poems devoted to revolutionary France and to Marie Antoinette. In March 1793 she published a poem entitled "Marie Antoinette's Lamentation, in Her Prison of the Temple". The Queen had been imprisoned since August of 1792 with her two children, and was to stay there until her execution in October of 1793. We can feel through the poem how upset Robinson was when thinking about Marie Antoinette and her children's faith. The notion of sympathy for the feelings of others was an essential value of Enlightenment: Adam Smith, who was a Scottish moral philosopher and key figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, explored the notion in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). He wrote that

[...] we often struggle to keep down our sympathy with the feelings of others. Whenever we are not under the observation of the sufferer, we endeavour, for our own sake, to suppress it as much as we can, and we are not always successful. The opposition which we make to it, and the reluctance with which we yield to it, necessarily oblige us to take more particular notice of it.⁹⁴

Mary Robinson definitely experienced a powerful sentiment of sympathy for the lot of the Queen, and put herself in Marie Antoinette's shoes when she wrote:

When I behold my darling INFANTS sleep,
 Fair spotless blossoms, deck'd in op'ning charms,
 Why do I start aghast, and wildly weep,
 And madly snatch them to my eager arms?
 Ah me! because my sense, o'erwhelm'd with dread,
 Views the sweet CHERUBS ON THEIR FUNERAL BED!⁹⁵

She also emphasised the Queen's role as loving mother and wronged woman⁹⁶:

Why do MATERNAL SORROWS drench my face?
 Alas! Because inhuman hands unite,
 To tear from my fond soul ITS LAST DELIGHT!⁹⁷

Later in the poem, she went:

Yet shall I from my FRIENDLESS CHILDREN part?
 Oh! all the MOTHER RUSHES TO MY HEART!⁹⁸

⁹³ Paula Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

⁹⁴ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759. (London, 1761), pp. 72-73.

⁹⁵ Mary Robinson, "Marie Antoinette's Lamentation, in Her Prison of the Temple", 1793. *Selected Poems*, ed. Judith Pascoe (Broadview Press, 2000), pp. 135-137, p. 135.

⁹⁶ Paula Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

⁹⁷ Mary Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

As Adriana Craciun puts it, “for Robinson, the treason trial of the French Queen came to represent the public persecution of all women who dared enter the public sphere”⁹⁹, and more particularly it reflected her own experience of the public realm.

As we know, Robinson was part of the Della Cruscans. When British opinion turned increasingly against the Revolution, she, like the rest of the group (which had also welcomed the Revolution very enthusiastically) experienced harsh criticisms. Several elements have turned British opinion against the Revolution in the 1790s: first, the British people was shocked by the bloody turn of events in Paris with the establishment of the Jacobin Terror (1793-1794). Moreover, France had declared war on Great-Britain in February 1793, and patriotism had become the order of the day. British radicals like the Della Cruscans, who still supported the Revolution at that time, became the target of malevolent political attacks disguised as literary ones. British radicals as a whole experienced a harsh repression in Britain beginning from 1793: many treason trials were organised, but they represented only one aspect of the authorities’ efforts in prosecuting radical dissidents. Spies were sent to infiltrate suspected dissident societies, for instance, but Christopher Roberts explains that the government also “supported groups which disrupted radical events” and “writers who would attack radicals in the press”. Moreover, the government “threatened to revoke the licenses of those who hosted political debates or printed or distributed reformist literature.”¹⁰⁰ This repression grew increasingly hostile throughout the years, especially with two new laws known as the ‘Gagging Acts’, passed by Pitt’s government in 1795, which extended the scope of treason considerably.¹⁰¹ For all of these reasons, the British opinion progressively turned against the Revolution from 1793 onwards, and therefore against the Della Cruscans. William Gifford, who was the editor of the *Quarterly Review*, an influential right-wing periodical, attacked the Della Cruscans in satirical poems such as in “Baviad, and Maeviad”, in which he was particularly harsh to Robinson, mocking her disability:

See Robinson forget her state, and move,
On crutches tow’rds the grave to ‘Light o’ Love’ ...¹⁰²

Later, he wrote:

⁹⁹ Adriana Craciun, ed., “‘The aristocracy of genius’: Mary Robinson and Marie Antoinette”, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge UP, 2003), pp. 76-109, p. 91.

¹⁰⁰ Christopher M. Roberts, “Experiments with Suppression: The Evolution of Repressive Legality in Britain in the Revolutionary Period”, *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review* 43. 2 (2020), pp. 125-181, pp. 168-169.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁰² William Gifford, *Baviad and Maeviad*, 1791. (London, 1797), p. 8.

Some love the verse that like Maria's flows,
No rubs to stagger, and no sense to pose;
Which read, and read, you raise your eyes in doubt,
And gravely wonder – what it is about.¹⁰³

Gifford's cruel jibe, then, was also an implicit hint at that rumours that Robinson's illness was due to "a sexually transmitted disease or somehow the result of her sexual promiscuity."¹⁰⁴ Thus, Mary Robinson faced, like the rest of the Della Cruscan poets, the conservative backlash that grew increasingly virulent in Britain from 1793 onwards.

As we have seen, both Wollstonecraft and Robinson spent time in France during the revolutionary period and were involved in the debate over the Revolution. Yet, they had different social and political positions concerning the French Revolution. Wollstonecraft came from a more modest social background than Robinson, which could explain that she would become involved sooner in the revolutionary debate, and perhaps more radically than her fellow writer. Robinson, coming from a higher social background, and probably because of her circles and her high-ranking, powerful connexions, was more ambiguous than Wollstonecraft on her position towards the French Revolution, although she stated her revolutionary sympathies very clearly and always remained supportive of the Revolution. Now, both writers would be criticized and attacked for holding such positions on the events unfolding in France, especially with the government's repression and the conservative backlash which grew increasingly hostile in Britain. We will see in the next part that their two radical and feminist pamphlets have also greatly participated to the shaping of their reputation. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was written in response to Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord's *Rapport sur l'instruction publique, fait au nom du comité de Constitution* (1791), a proposition of educational reform excluding women. Although it was generally well-received at the time of its publication, *Rights of Woman* included many changes in favour of more civic and civil rights for women – changes which were rejected or simply ignored by reviewers. Mary Robinson published *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* in 1799, in a fierce anti-feminist atmosphere – the context had changed between the publication of Wollstonecraft's pamphlet

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁰⁴ Paula Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

and hers. We shall see what they advocated in their writing, in order to understand the reactions it provoked afterwards.

3. Radical and feminist writings

Before considering Wollstonecraft and Robinson's pamphlets, I must begin by arguing that these two radical writings can be referred to as feminist. Karen Offen has defined feminism as "the campaign to end women's subordination to men", which is, according to her, "an ongoing, recurring, enduring political project, with deep roots in the European past."¹⁰⁵ Offen acknowledges that the term 'feminism' did not yet exist in the eighteenth century. She traces back its origin to the 1870s at the earliest, and recalls that "the first self-proclaimed *féministe*" was Hubertine Auclert, a French advocate for women's suffrage, who used the term to describe herself in her periodical *La Citoyenne*. The term became increasingly used in France, especially after the first 'feminist' congress had taken place in Paris and was discussed in the press; then crossing the Channel to Great Britain by 1894-95.¹⁰⁶ Yet, Offen argues that it is possible to "appropriate this term anachronistically to speak about women's emancipation" before that period. In order to use it properly prior its invention, she gives another definition of the term: she refers to feminism as "the name given to a comprehensive critical response to the deliberate and systematic subordination of women as a group by men as a group within a given cultural setting."¹⁰⁷ In this part, I will therefore argue that Wollstonecraft and Robinson's pamphlets, published in the 1790s, constitute indeed a 'comprehensive critical response' to both the condition of women at that time but also to the changes, either intrinsic to the Revolution or induced by 'feminists' of the time, who saw in the Revolution the opportunity for women to gain equal education, but also equal civil and civic rights.

a. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

According to Janet Todd, although Wollstonecraft was not the first nor the only one to advance feminist views, she definitely brought the issue of women's rights into the debate

¹⁰⁵ Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford UP, 2000), p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

about civil rights which took place in the 1790s,¹⁰⁸ especially with the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In 1791, Wollstonecraft had read that the French minister of education for the new Constituent Assembly, Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, had submitted the idea of a state-supported system of public education including only men in his *Rapport sur l'instruction publique, fait au nom du comité de Constitution* (1791). For she so deeply believed in the ability of the French Revolution to establish an enlightened republic, one in which the natural rights of every person would be respected,¹⁰⁹ she was horrified by his exclusion of women from his educational proposal and from the political sphere. Indeed, he had written:

Il nous semble incontestable que le bonheur commun, surtout celui des femmes, demande qu'elles n'aspirent point à l'exercice des droits et des fonctions politiques. Qu'on cherche ici leur intérêt dans le vœu de la nature. N'est-il pas sensible que leur constitution délicate, leurs inclinaisons paisibles, les devoirs nombreux de la maternité, les éloignent constamment des habitudes fortes, des devoirs pénibles, et les appellent à des occupations douces, à des soins intérieurs ?¹¹⁰

Later in his work, he had claimed:

On a dit encore que quelques-unes avaient porté le sceptre avec gloire ; mais que sont un petit nombre d'exceptions brillantes ? Autorisent-elles à déranger le plan général de la nature ? [...] Elles doivent [...] se montrer au-dessus de leur sexe en le jugeant [...] et ne pas demander qu'en livrant les femmes aux mêmes études que nous, on les sacrifie toutes pour avoir peut-être dans un siècle quelques hommes de plus¹¹¹.

Therefore, Wollstonecraft dedicated her *Vindication* to him, in hope that he would consider instituting a system of public education in which both sexes, this time, would be instructed to become full citizens.¹¹² She wrote:

Sir, [...] I dedicate this volume to you; to induce you to reconsider the subject, and maturely weigh what I advanced respecting the rights of woman and national education: and I call with the firm tone of humanity; for my arguments, Sir, are dictated by a disinterested spirit – I plead for my sex – not for myself. Independence I have long considered as the grand blessing of life, [...] and independence I will ever secure by contracting my wants, though I were to live on a barren health.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Janet Todd, ed., *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft (Oxford UP, 1999), Introduction, p. xv.

¹⁰⁹ Anne K. Mellor, "English Women Writers and the French Revolution", *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, ed. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine (Oxford UP, 1992), pp. 255-272, p. 256.

¹¹⁰ Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, *Rapport sur l'instruction publique, fait au nom du comité de Constitution* (Archives parlementaires de l'Assemblée nationale, 10 Sept. 1791), p. 478.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 478-479.

¹¹² Tom Furniss, "Mary Wollstonecraft's French Revolution", *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (Cambridge UP, 2002), p. 63.

¹¹³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792. Ed. Janet Todd (Oxford UP, 1999), p. 65.

Just before she began writing *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft had read Catharine Macaulay's *Letters on Education*, published in 1790. It would be an understatement to say that Wollstonecraft was influenced by Macaulay's work. *Letters* argued that there was no inherent intellectual difference between men and women, and that both sexes could be educated equally.¹¹⁴ After her reading, Wollstonecraft was convinced that women would not have become weaker and less rational beings than men if male writers and educators had not schemed the history of female education to such a purpose.¹¹⁵ In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft thus argued that women ought to be as much educated as men:

The more understanding women acquire, the more they will be attached to their duty – comprehending it – for unless they comprehend it, unless their morals be fixed on the same immutable principle as those of man, no authority can make them discharge it in a virtuous manner. They may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent.¹¹⁶

She argued that a society in which women were denied a proper education could not work efficiently. How could women learn to behave properly and in a civilized way if they were denied education in the first place? Implying that denying women the same instruction as men would make them everything but obedient and gentle, she continued: “women cannot, by force, be confined to domestic concerns; for they will, however ignorant, [...] neglect[t] private duties only to disturb, by cunning tricks, the orderly plans of reason which rise above their comprehension.” Later, she added: “such ignorant beings, indeed, will be very excusable when, not taught to respect public good, not allowed any civic rights, they attempt to do themselves justice by retaliation.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, Wollstonecraft implied that men could not hold women accountable for their actions if women were not taught how to think and behave to begin with.

Moreover, since she believed that women have the same rational and intellectual capacities as men, Wollstonecraft attacked her society's gendered belief that women are born emotional and capable of moral sentiment but not of logical or rational understanding.¹¹⁸ She wrote: “My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone.”¹¹⁹ As to make a strong case for her argument, she proceeded

¹¹⁴ Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: a revolutionary life* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), p. 179.

¹¹⁵ Alan Richardson, “Mary Wollstonecraft on education”, *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 24-41, p. 25.

¹¹⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792. Ed. Janet Todd (Oxford UP, 1999), p. 67.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

¹¹⁸ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender* (Routledge, 1993), p. 33.

¹¹⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

logically, and began by explaining that since women were held responsible for their crimes and sins (as it was the case in England), then they must have the mental capacity to think accurately and morally. This enabled her to affirm that women, since they were capable to think, had a rational faculty. Now that she had proven that women were rational beings, able to reflect on and improve their actions and character, she declared that there was no reason for their rational faculty not to be refined and sharpened like men's. From that point, she constructed an argument in favour of the education of women, for only if they were instructed as fully as men would they be able to make into practise their natural abilities for reason and moral virtue.¹²⁰ In order to make her defence more appealing to her male readership, she hinted at their self-interest by suggesting that learned women would not only be more virtuous, but they would also be better in their role as mothers, wives and citizens:

Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers – in a word, better citizens.¹²¹

She therefore argued that men would gain from educating their wife. Furthermore, she advocated for a new and radical form of marriage, between two equally rational individuals respecting each other¹²²:

If marriage be the cement of society, mankind should all be educated after the same model, or the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship, nor will women ever fulfil the peculiar duties of their sex, till they become enlightened citizens, till they become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men.¹²³

Among the radical changes she argued for were the right to vote for all, including working-class men and women; and the right for women to work in the most highly regarded professions, such as medicine or politics. Above all, Anne Mellor recalls that she wanted “a state-supported, coeducational public school system” for all children between five and nine that would teach “reading, writing, mathematics, history, botany, mechanics, astronomy, and general science.”¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender* (Routledge, 1993), p. 33.

¹²¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792. Ed. Janet Todd (Oxford UP, 1999), p. 231.

¹²² Anne K. Mellor, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹²³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

¹²⁴ Anne K. Mellor, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

We have seen earlier in this dissertation that Wollstonecraft, although she admired Rousseau's thought on education, profoundly disagreed with his depiction of the ideal female in the figure of Sophia, Emile's wife. In *Rights of Woman*, not only did she argue in favour of more rights for women, but she also attacked both Rousseau and Dr Gregory:

I may be accused of arrogance; still I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society.¹²⁵

Later, she claimed: "But Rousseau, and most of the male writers who have followed his steps, have warmly inculcated that the whole tendency of female education ought to be directed to one point: – to render them pleasing."¹²⁶

At the end of the day, Wollstonecraft repeatedly stated in *Rights of Woman* the equal faculty of women to think and reason, constructing a rigorous logical and philosophical plea in favour of the equality of women. Doing so, she definitely tried to initiate what she herself called "a REVOLUTION in female manners"¹²⁷. We will see in the next chapter that *Rights of Woman* provoked many conservative responses.

b. Mary Robinson's *Letter to the Women of England* (1799)

O! my unenlightened country-women! read, and profit, by the admonition of Reason. Shake off the trifling, glittering shackles, which debase you. Resist those fascinating spells, which, like the petrifying torpedo, fasten on your mental faculties. Be less the slaves of vanity, and more the converts of Reflection. [...] Let your daughters be liberally, classically, philosophically, and usefully educated; let them speak and write their opinions freely; let them read and think like rational creatures [...].¹²⁸

Mary Robinson published *A Letter to the Women of England* under the pseudonym of Ann Frances Randall in 1799, seven years after Wollstonecraft's pamphlet, in a strong anti-feminist atmosphere. As Sharon Setzer explains, "by writing under the signature of a fictitious woman who had no past, Robinson no doubt hoped to shield her argument from vicious *ad feminam* attacks."¹²⁹ Like Wollstonecraft, she hoped that a society in which women would no

¹²⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

¹²⁸ Mary Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, 1799. Ed. Sharon M. Setzer (Broadview Press, 2003), p. 83.

¹²⁹ Sharon M. Setzer, ed., *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* by Mary Robinson, 1799. (Broadview Press, 2003), Introduction, p. 20.

longer be simply objects of desire could be established – a society in which women would be educated enough to realize their worth as individual and responsible subjects. Yet, according to Felicia Gordon, “it is significant that Robinson, a famous beauty, well accustomed to the lures of admiration, should articulate [these ideas] in what was a darkening political climate for liberal ideas.”¹³⁰ And indeed, Robinson, who was a celebrity, knew that her work would probably be met with controversy when it would be published:

Should this Letter be the means of influencing the minds of those to whom it is addressed, so far as to benefit the rising generation, my end and aim will be accomplished. I am well assured, that it will meet with little serious attention from the MALE disciples of MODERN PHILOSOPHY. The critics, though they have liberally patronized the works of British women, will perhaps condemn that doctrine which inculcates mental equality [...].¹³¹

Although critics often undermined the works of women writers or did not take them as seriously as they would have for men’s, she argued that the works produced by British women writers were just as worthy and qualitative as those of British men, and even better:

The best novels that have been written, since those of Smollet, Richardson, and Fielding, have been produced by women: and their pages have not only been embellished by the interesting events of domestic life, [...] and all the refinement of sentiment, but with forcible and eloquent, political, theological, and philosophical reasoning.¹³²

In *Letter*, Robinson advocated for the improvement of the condition of women who, according to her, had always been kept as inferior by men. She wrote:

WOMAN has ever been considered as a lovely and fascinating part of the creation, but her claims to mental equality have not only been questioned, by envious and interested sceptics; but, by a barbarous policy in the other sex, considerably depressed, for want of liberal and classical cultivation.¹³³

Later, she argued eloquently that

[...] there are but three classes of women desirable associates in the eyes of men: handsome women; licentious women; and good sort of women. – The first for his vanity; the second for his amusement; and the last for his domestic drudgery. A thinking woman does not entertain him; a learned woman does not flatter his self-love, by confessing inferiority; and a woman of real genius, eclipses him by her brilliancy.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Felicia Gordon, “*Filles publiques* or Public Women: The Actress as Citizen: Marie Madeleine Jodin (1741-90) and Mary Darby Robinson (1758-1800)”, *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 610-629, p. 613.

¹³¹ Mary Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Robinson, in her feminist reasoning, definitely agreed with many of the arguments Wollstonecraft had written in *Rights of Woman*. Still, she announced at the beginning of her letter that she would not continue the work of her fellow feminist writer in denouncing “the doctrines of certain philosophical sensualists, who have aided in [the] destructive oppression”¹³⁵ of women. Indeed, Sharon Setzer has argued that Robinson wrote her pamphlet more from her own experience, translating her own sense of estrangement from society.¹³⁶ Therefore, although Robinson argued for a number of innovations in her *Letter*, such as a “UNIVERSITY FOR WOMEN”¹³⁷, her work “is finally not so much a polite call for educational reform as it is a polemical attack on the sexual double standard.”¹³⁸ This can be sensed several times in her pamphlet, for instance when she wrote with emotion that women would be damned by society for doing something men would be forgiven for:

Such partial discriminations seem to violate all laws, divine and human! [...] Supposing that a WOMAN has experienced every insult, every injury, that her vain-boasting, high-bearing associate, man, can inflict: imagine her, driven from society; deserted by her kindred; scoffed at by the world; exposed to poverty; assailed by malice; and consigned by scorn; with no companion but sorrow, no prospect but disgrace; she has no remedy.¹³⁹

Hence, whilst Wollstonecraft’s pamphlet really advocated deep changes – and particularly educational reform – to improve the condition of English women, I tend to agree with the idea that Robinson was referring more to her own experience of life as a famous woman when she spoke of the injustice of mental subordination in her work.¹⁴⁰

c. Different audiences and purposes

According to Sharon Setzer, what distinguishes *Letter to the Women of England* from *Rights of Woman* is also the audience targeted. As Robinson’s pamphlet title suggests, she meant to address directly her fellow contemporary women, whereas Wollstonecraft’s “moderate tone and general mode of philosophical reasoning were undoubtedly calculated to make a particularly favorable impression upon men”¹⁴¹, as we will see later in this part.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹³⁶ Sharon M. Setzer, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹³⁷ Mary Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹³⁸ Felicia Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹³⁹ Mary Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

¹⁴⁰ Felicia Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁴¹ Sharon M. Setzer, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

Therefore, right from the beginning of her letter, Robinson addressed English women and firmly stated her conviction that women are equal to men:

I shall remind my enlightened country-women that they are not the mere appendages of domestic life, but the partners, the equal associates of man; and, where they excel in intellectual powers, they are no less capable of all that prejudice and custom have united in attributing, exclusively, to the thinking faculties of man.¹⁴²

This direct address to women is reinforced by the “List of British FEMALE LITERARY CHARACTERS Living in the Eighteenth Century” that Robinson appended to her letter. Indeed, she listed what she thought were important female figures from antiquity to her day, including Mary Wollstonecraft, but also famous literary women such as Catharine Macaulay and Anna Barbauld. The list ranged from essayists to translators, scholars, historians, biographers, translators,... And Robinson included all of them within the same category of illustrious women, even though all of these feminine figures did not all have a good reputation at the time. Hence, while the *Biographium Faemineum*, for instance, excluded many worthy women because they came from the lower ranks of society or were infamous in the eyes of public opinion, Robinson represented them in her list with respect and admiration.¹⁴³ She went even further in acknowledging that these women, who were known simply for being “mistresses, lunatics, transvestites, or murderers” had a heroic spirit. The fact that she referred admiringly to such women, and especially the fact that she mixed virtuous women and those with a bad reputation¹⁴⁴ was threatening and no doubt contributed to make her *Letter* unacceptable in the opinion of her contemporary critics.

Another thing which definitely caused controversy in Mary Robison’s pamphlet was that, right from the beginning, she paid tribute to Mary Wollstonecraft, referring to her as “an illustrious British female, (whose name has not been sufficiently lamented, but to whose genius posterity will render justice)”¹⁴⁵. By the time *Letter to the Women of England* was written, the *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft had been published, revealing all the scandalous aspects of Wollstonecraft’s life. Thus, by overtly stating her admiration for her fellow writer, Robinson knew that she exposed herself to scandal as well. All in all, by creating a list of heroic women and associating herself with Wollstonecraft, she constructed through her text a sort of imagined community of women – women who did not correspond to ‘good’ women and could therefore be seen as dangerous. Therefore, several elements in Robinson’s feminist work have played a

¹⁴² Mary Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁴³ Sharon M. Setzer, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

role in shaping her reputation, the most controversial being certainly that she referred to herself as ‘of the school of Wollstonecraft’, only a year after Wollstonecraft’s *Memoirs* were published. In the next chapter, I will try to demonstrate that because she openly stated her association to her fellow writer in a period of fierce anti-feminist sentiment, but also because of her own scandalous past and because of her list of heroines “who not only violated the laws of chastity but also spoke out against the forces that contributed to their undoing”¹⁴⁶, Robinson was the target of violent and pernicious attacks when she reissued her *Letter* under her own name later in 1799.

On the other hand, I argue that the audience Wollstonecraft targeted in *Rights of Woman* was both masculine and feminine. Wollstonecraft addressed men frequently in her essay, in a way that can seem flattering at times: “reasonable men”¹⁴⁷, “O ye men of understanding!”¹⁴⁸ Wollstonecraft, just like so many female writers at the time, had to adopt this strategy of cajoling her male readers in order to make herself worthy of being heard. Knowing that some of her propositions, including her very ‘REVOLUTION in female manners’ would probably make men feel threatened, she used various weapons of flattery in her text, such as those we have seen, flattering their intellect. She also insisted on the fact that she acknowledged men’s physical superiority over women, asserting that “the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male”, it being “the law of nature”¹⁴⁹. She knew perfectly that without those men who had welcomed the Revolution and were fighting for more rights (but not necessarily for women’s rights), a similar revolution, in favour of the rights of women this time, could not take place.

In her text Wollstonecraft also addressed her fellow contemporary women. In fact, she made sure that women would feel concerned by her subject as well. In a passionate plea, she urged her female readers to realise their condition and aimed at inspiring them to educate themselves:

I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁴⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792. Ed. Janet Todd (Oxford UP, 1999), p. 193.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

At times, it can seem that Wollstonecraft allied herself with her fellow contemporary women, calling them her ‘sisters’: “Would ye, O my sisters, really possess modesty, ye must remember that the possession of virtue [...] is incompatible with ignorance and vanity! ye must acquire that soberness of mind, which the exercise of duties, and the pursuit of knowledge, alone inspire”¹⁵¹. Yet, at other times, she seemed to try to establish a distance between herself and other members of her sex. Amy Elizabeth Smith highlights that her introduction offers a telling example of how inconsistent her use of pronouns ‘we’ and ‘they’ are:

[...] men endeavour to sink us still lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment; and women, intoxicated by the adoration which men, under the influence of their senses, pay them, do not seek to obtain a durable interest in their hearts, or to become the friends of the fellow creatures who find amusement in their society.¹⁵²

According to Smith, Wollstonecraft switching from ‘us’ to ‘their’ reveals that she considered that she, too, was a victim of men’s oppression, but that she did not identify with women who could not resist to such men, thus distancing herself from what was seen at the time as a form of feminine weakness. Smith summarises it when she writes that Wollstonecraft “must establish herself as above the present ignorant condition of women if she is to be their champion.”¹⁵³ Anca Vlasopolos has argued convincingly that although Wollstonecraft indeed saw herself as different from most women of her age because she was educated and dared voicing her opinion, this strategy of dissociating herself from her sex was unfortunately a tactic that many women writers were forced to use in order to make themselves worthy of being heard.¹⁵⁴ Besides, Wollstonecraft wrote that she wished that her fellow contemporary women “may every day grow more and more masculine”, not to become “masculine women”, which was very badly seen at the time, but by imitating “manly virtues”¹⁵⁵ in order for them to be raised as equals to men in terms of reason and intellect.

Wollstonecraft was aware that there was a difference in the education given to women depending on their class at the time. Thus she decided to address all classes of women in her text, explaining that “the instruction which has hitherto been addressed to women, has rather been applicable to *ladies*”, referring here to upper-class women. As a consequence, she assured that she would “pay particular attention to those in the middle class, because they appear to be

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁵³ Amy Elizabeth Smith, “Roles for Readers in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 32. 3 (1992), pp. 555-570, pp. 559-560.

¹⁵⁴ Anca Vlasopolos, “Mary Wollstonecraft’s Mask of Reason in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*”, *Dalhousie Review* 60. 3 (1980), pp. 462-471, p. 463.

¹⁵⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

in the most natural state”¹⁵⁶. This address to a middle-class audience can be seen in the language she adopted a few paragraphs later, avoiding a courtier language¹⁵⁷:

Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish so shew that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex”¹⁵⁸.

Thus, although the audience Wollstonecraft targeted in the first place was masculine, because at the time it was men who were empowered socially and legally, *Rights of Woman* shows how she considered that the revolution could not be performed by one sex alone. Women as well had to be convinced of the benefits the revolution would bring into their lives, so that they would take an active role within it.¹⁵⁹ Hence, Wollstonecraft considered that both genders needed to be addressed in her essay in order for her ‘REVOLUTION in female manners’ to take place.

d. Different methods and styles

The methods and styles in which both *Rights of Woman* and *Letter to the Women of England* were written present some differences and some similarities, but both reveal the difficulties which women writers had to face when they wrote about issues which concerned them directly, such as the rights of women, in a society where the public debate was mostly reserved to and occupied by men.

Harriet Guest has significantly pointed out that Wollstonecraft, and Macaulay before her, distinguish themselves from other women writers of their time – and more particularly from the Blue-Stockings – in the way that their writing is not gendered as feminine. Guest writes that “the character in which the first-generation Bluestockings gain access to the public ‘world of letters’ is unambiguously feminine, its gendered character reinforced by their support for the work of women and their distance from political involvement.” The Blue-Stockings’ feminine writing is not only due to their deliberate lack of involvement in politics but also to

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

¹⁵⁷ Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Macmillan Press, 1992), p. 119.

¹⁵⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

¹⁵⁹ Amy Elizabeth Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 556.

the fact that they wrote within traditional genres associated to female writing, such as conduct books, epistolary letters or sentiment novels. On the other hand, both Macaulay and Wollstonecraft were involved in politics and participated to the debate over the French Revolution in the 1790s; and, according to Guest, “their intervention is perceived to be unsexing.”¹⁶⁰ Indeed, Wollstonecraft wrote admiringly that

[...] Catharine Macaulay was an example of intellectual acquirements supposed to be incompatible with the weakness of her sex. In her style of writing, indeed, no sex appears, for it is like the sense it conveys, strong and clear. I will not call hers a masculine understanding, because I admit not of such an arrogant assumption of reason; but I contend that it was a sound one.¹⁶¹

In the eighteenth century, there was no such thing as a neutral and ungendered style, genre or discourse. Every form of writing was necessarily associated with a ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ style. According to Gary Kelly, in order not to be categorized in any of these two categories, in *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft avoided “an objective, detached, learned, syllogistic or sarcastic and sharply polemical style that could be considered as that which a man would use”, and which could ‘unsex’ her, make her appear too masculine. She also avoided a more ‘feminine’ style, that is to say a more “domestic, personal style and relative lack of formal argument”, which could undermine her authority as a writer and therefore disrupt the purpose of her book.¹⁶² These gendered notions in writing are unquestionably linked to Burke’s theoretical treaty on the beautiful and the sublime that we studied earlier and which gendered notions of power. Hence, Wollstonecraft’s strategy in avoiding a gendered rhetorical style was defined notably in relation to Macaulay’s *Letters*, in which she “writes in a fairly detached and ‘philosophical’ style but feminizes men’s intellectual discourse by treating it in terms of [...] female education.”¹⁶³

Robinson’s *Letter* also illustrates how closely the author’s style was linked with gender and political respectability at the time. Jane Hodson has explored this difficulty eighteenth-century women writers faced to find a proper authority when they published. The revolutionary decade was a great period of public debate about the rights of men, and reviewers (who were mostly men) automatically assumed that the participants in the debate were male as well. Hence, Hodson recalls that when Wollstonecraft published *Rights of Men* (1790) and Robinson

¹⁶⁰ Harriet Guest, “Bluestocking Feminism”, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65. 1 (2002), pp. 59-80, p. 78.

¹⁶¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

¹⁶² Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Macmillan Press, 1992), p. 108.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

her *Impartial Reflections* (1791), both anonymously at first, they were assumed to be male writers. This is significant of how difficult it was for women to write on issues relating to their own gender: they had to find a proper voice in which to write in order to have sufficient authority whilst placing themselves in the subject position. Thus, the question for a woman writer was whether she should “write to women, about women, or on behalf of women” and if she should “adopt a style deemed appropriate to her gender” or “attempt to subvert gender expectations”¹⁶⁴. Besides, Hodson explains that the most highly esteemed qualities to define an author’s writing style were such as ‘plain’ and ‘undecorated’, on comparison to a style which would be ‘artificial’ or ‘ornate’. The style in which Mary Robinson wrote as a Della Cruscan poet and as a novelist of sensibility definitely incarnated this ‘decorated’ and elegant language, far from being ‘plain’ or ‘strong’ like men’s philosophical or political treatises were described by reviewers. Jane Hudson has therefore argued that Robinson wrote *A Letter to the Women of England* in part as a reaction against her own *Impartial Reflections*, which style, although it was her first attempt at political polemic, was also charged in sentimentalism.¹⁶⁵ Hence, Robinson wrote at the beginning of her letter that “in order that this letter may be clearly understood, I shall proceed to prove my assertion in the strongest, but most undecorated language.” After addressing her “enlightened country-women” and reminding them of the equal capability of their intellectual powers, she wrote: “I argue thus, and my assertions are incontrovertible.”¹⁶⁶

Therefore, it seems that Mary Robinson’s main purpose in writing her political letter was to assert a clear authority. This can be seen in her limited use of the first-person singular pronoun, in comparison to her fellow writer. If Wollstonecraft used the pronoun “I” numerous times in her pamphlet as to remind her readers of the authorial voice and of the fact that she was stating her own opinion, we could consider that she was also creating the possibility for readers to agree or not with that voice. For instance, in *Rights of Woman*, she wrote:

Let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things; I have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seemed to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue. [...] but I see not the shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues should differ in respect to their nature. [...] I must therefore, if I reason

¹⁶⁴ Jane Hodson, ““The strongest but must undecorated language”: Mary Robinson’s rhetorical strategy in *Letter to the Women of England*”, *Women’s Writing* 9. 1 (2002), pp. 87-105, p. 90.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁶⁶ Mary Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, 1799. Ed. Sharon M. Setzer (Broadview Press, 2003), p. 41.

consequentially, as strenuously maintain that they have the same simple direction, as that there is a God.¹⁶⁷

On the contrary, Robinson's limited use of first-person pronouns could be interpreted as a desire to affirm only facts in her text and leave less space for readers to agree or disagree with her opinion, such as in this excerpt in which she asked herself in what aspects woman is inferior to man and referred to woman as 'she' and not 'I': "In some instances, but not always, in corporeal strength: in an activity of mind, she is equal."¹⁶⁸ Robinson proceeded this way throughout all of her text, presenting her arguments as matters of facts rather than as her own opinions. Similarly, by using only limited and impersonal "I"s in her text readers would be reminded less often of who is behind the text's beliefs and opinions.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, the strategy that Wollstonecraft had adopted in her pamphlet of distancing herself from the members of her sex can also be observed in Robinson's letter. Although she presented herself as a woman whose purpose was to address her contemporary women, she never included herself with these other women.¹⁷⁰ Both texts prove how difficult it was for women writers at the time to find a proper writing authority as a woman writing about and to women.

Now that we have studied Wollstonecraft and Robinson's feminist writings, it is easier to understand the role it has played in making them progressively appear like bad and threatening women. In the last chapter of this dissertation, we will see the different aspects of the construction of their reputations.

¹⁶⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

¹⁶⁸ Mary Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

¹⁶⁹ Jane Hodson, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

III. Constructing reputation during the revolutionary decade

1. Theorizing celebrity, fame and reputation

In order to understand how the reputations of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson were constructed, we must try to define and distinguish between the notions of celebrity, fame and reputation: although they are closely related, they do not imply the same characteristics and the same value. We will begin by trying to define celebrity, which, I believe, only Robinson truly experienced. Then, we will examine the notion of fame, which our authors both sought during their life, and we will see if and how they experienced it. Eventually, we will focus on the notion of reputation, to try to understand how their reputations were shaped during the revolutionary decade, and especially how their reputations were tarnished by the conservative press as they took increasingly radical stances on the Revolution and the rights of women.

a. Celebrity

The phenomenon of celebrity appeared during the eighteenth century, at a time when the public space experienced a deep transformation and the commercialisation of leisure developed intensely.¹ In her study of the life of Mary Robinson, Paula Byrne explains this emergence of celebrities by writing that

[...] the proliferation of newspapers, journals and periodicals, combined with the dissemination of prints and satirical caricatures, fuelled an insatiable public curiosity about the lives of the rich and famous. Then, as now, press gossip concerned itself with salacious details of the private lives of stars.²

The term ‘celebrity’ already existed during the eighteenth century. It comes from the Latin *celebritas* which means “multitude” or “fame”, and from *celeber* which means “frequented”, “populous”, “famous”³. As early as 1708, celebrity is defined in John Kersey’s *Dictionarium*

¹ Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques : l’invention de la célébrité, 1750-1850* (Fayard, 2014), p. 15.

² Paula Byrne, “About the Book”, *Perdita, The Life of Mary Robinson*. E-book (Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 432.

³ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 1961. (Vintage Books, 1992), p. 57.

Anglo-Britannicum as “famousness, publick repute.”⁴ We find the exact same definition in the 1730 version of the *Dictionarium*.⁵ Over twenty years later, in 1755, celebrity was defined as “celebration; fame” and given as a synonym for famousness, glory and fame in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*,⁶ which shows how closely related these terms are and why it is important to try and give a proper definition for each of them. Celebrity hence had a good connotation in the first half of the eighteenth century, referring to a desirable attribute, something that people would seek – the notion would start to be negatively connoted only in the second half of the century.

More contemporary definitions of celebrity show that the meaning of the term has evolved. In 1962, Daniel J. Boorstin defined the celebrity as “a person who is known for his well-knownness”⁷ – a definition which shows a major evolution in the meaning of the term: in Boorstin’s definition, celebrity is no longer something an individual *has*, it is something that the individual *is*. As Tom Mole explains, the cultural history of celebrity has recently emerged as a whole new area of enquiry, which could lead us to think differently of Romantic fame as well.⁸ Indeed, recent studies of eighteenth-century celebrity tend to consider it as something less valuable than other forms of famousness (like fame or glory) which would actually be earned and deserved by the individual, thanks to their works or skills. In the same manner, in *Figures publiques* (2014) Antoine Lilti describes celebrity as follows:

La célébrité [...] se traduit, à première vue, par une réputation très étendue. L’individu célèbre n’est pas seulement connu de sa famille, de ses collègues, de ses voisins, de ses pairs ou de ses clients, mais d’un vaste ensemble de gens avec lesquels il n’a aucun contact direct, qui ne l’ont jamais rencontré et ne le rencontreront jamais, mais qui sont fréquemment confrontés à sa figure publique, c’est-à-dire à l’ensemble des images et discours associés à son nom.⁹

Lilti then explains that, in a contradictory way, a celebrity is known by people who have absolutely no reason to know them or to have an opinion on them – they have no interest in particular in the celebrity’s personality or competences but they do know their name anyway.¹⁰ Therefore, nowadays celebrity seems to be understood as something that may still be desirable,

⁴ See “celebrity” in John Kersey’s *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum: Or, A General English Dictionary* (London, 1708).

⁵ *Dictionarium Britannicum, Or a more Compleat Universal Etymological English Dictionary Than any Extant* (London, 1730).

⁶ See “celebrity” but also “famousness”, “glory” and “fame” in the first volume of Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755).

⁷ Daniel J. Boorstin, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁸ Tom Mole, ed., *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture* (Cambridge UP, 2009), Introduction, p. 2.

⁹ Antoine Lilti, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

but which is not necessarily earned or deserved by the famous person – they have done nothing to make them worthy of such a status. Later in his book, Antoine Lilti writes that the curiosity provoked by the celebrity does not always imply admiration, and that it is rarely unanimous – there are celebrated criminals and controversial and scandalous celebrities.¹¹

Mary Robinson was obviously a controversial celebrity, but she was a celebrity nonetheless, and this long before she began writing professionally. Her literary career is only one facet of her tumultuous life: as we have seen, before she started writing poetry she was an actress, a mistress, a sex symbol (she was painted by the most famous painters of her day: Gainsborough, Reynolds and Romney), a fashion icon (popular prints depicted her fashionable dresses and expensive carriages), and always the subject of fascinating gossip. Like celebrities nowadays, she was famous for being famous. It is interesting that the very way through which Mary Robinson accessed celebrity – acting – was also one of the reasons why she was so frequently criticized in the press. Indeed, Tom Mole explains that being an actress in the eighteenth century was not always well seen, and actresses were sometimes not better regarded than the prostitutes operating from the London theatres. Therefore, Mole writes that

[...] the theatrical star system [...] offered its female aspirants the promise of fame and wealth, but only at the risk of compromising their reputations. While celebrities of both genders experienced gender-specific constraints, the assumption that women of virtue did not draw attention to themselves meant that a female celebrity could seem like a contradiction in terms. Women who became stars were therefore forced into complex negotiations between their society's expectations of feminine modesty and reticence and celebrity culture's operations of marketing and display.¹²

This could explain in part why Robinson's celebrity was so conflicted – not only did she live a controversial life that exposed her to criticisms, but being an actress already made her the prey of society's judgment since virtuous women could fundamentally not be actresses. Hence, she lived difficult times being famous: the articles of the scandalmongers, the gossip columns, the caricatures about her love and sexual life definitely had an impact on her. In her *Memoirs*, written by herself and continued and published by her daughter in 1801, she wrote: "Tales of the most infamous and glaring falsehood were invented, and I was again assailed by pamphlets, by paragraphs, and caricatures, and all the artillery of slander"¹³.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹² Tom Mole, "Mary Robinson's conflicted celebrity", *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture* (Cambridge UP, 2009), pp. 186-205, p. 187.

¹³ Mary Robinson, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself*, vol. 2, 1801. (London, 1803), p. 78.

Yet, and somehow paradoxically since she was eager to criticize the mechanisms of celebrity culture, Mary Robinson also enjoyed being a celebrity, and sometimes played with her famousness – or rather manipulated it. She excelled in the art of self-promotion: in the appendix of her *Letter to the Women of England* (which she first published anonymously), she included her own name in the list of British women she admired. The fact that she was connected to the editor of the *Morning Post* was also extremely valuable – her works were promoted in its pages, as well as reports on her health and activities were published in it.¹⁴ It allowed people to have access to her private life, fed their curiosity and made them feel connected to her. In the same manner, when her death was erroneously announced in the papers in 1786, Robinson was quick to respond with a witty letter, making the most of this publicity to remind readers of who she was and of her current activities.¹⁵ Paula Byrne recalls that it is the *Morning Post* which broke the story of her death: “Mrs. Robinson, the once famous Perdita, died a few days ago at Paris.”¹⁶ Then the obituary narrated her rise from her uncertain origins as an illegitimate child to her celebrity as mistress of the Prince of Wales and renowned actress.¹⁷ A few weeks later the *Morning Post* published Robinson’s response to the obituary:

With astonishment I read in a *Morning Post* [...] a long account of my death, and a variety of circumstances respecting my life, equally void of the smallest foundation. I have the satisfaction of informing you, that so far from being dead, I am in the most perfect state of health; except a trifling lameness, of which, by the use of baths at this place [she was in Aix-la-Chappelle, at the Bains de la Rose], I have every reason to hope I shall recover in a month [...]. I propose passing my winter in London, having been near two years upon the continent, though not at Paris half the time.¹⁸

Therefore, it seems that throughout her life Robinson has tried to make the most of the publicity that being a celebrity gave her, capitalizing on it even when it was scandalous. However, Tom Mole notes that it is because her identity was so often appropriated by others – in ways she could not control – rather than because she was good at self-promotion that Robinson’s identity circulated so extensively within the public sphere. Indeed, not only caricatures and articles but also false letters and biographies were published about her life, like the provocative *Memoirs of Perdita; Interspersed with Anecdotes of the Hon. Charles F---x; Lord M---; Col. T---; P---e of W---s; Col. St L—R; Mr S—n, & Many Other Well Known Characters*. Published

¹⁴ Tom Mole, *op. cit.*, pp. 189-190.

¹⁵ Claire Brock, ed., “Mary Robinson and the ‘splendour of a name’”, *The Feminization of Fame, 1750-1830* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 77-108, p. 87.

¹⁶ *Morning Post*, 14 July 1786. Cited by Byrne in *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* (Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 255.

¹⁷ Paula Byrne, *Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson* (Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 255.

¹⁸ *Morning Post*, 4 Aug. 1786. Cited by Byrne, p. 256.

anonymously in 1784, the *Memoirs of Perdita* consisted in dubious accounts of Robinson's sexual affairs. As Mole explains, "Robinson's celebrity identity was appropriated to provide commercial profit or cultural currency every time a newspaper (including her own *Morning Post*) published a story about her, a caricature of her, or a poem addressed to her."¹⁹ That it also why she was so often associated to men in the articles and caricatures published about her, each newspaper or periodical trying to make profit on her celebrity.

We have seen earlier that celebrity does not seem as worthy as fame or glory, since the famous person is only known for their famousness. In her own *Memoirs*, Robinson described her celebrity as a "national absurdity":

I am well assured, that were a being possessed of more than human endowments to visit this country, it would experience indifference, if not total neglect, while a less worthy mortal might be worshipped as the idol of the day, if whispered into notoriety by the comments of the multitude.²⁰

Since she thought that celebrity was not always legitimate, Robinson sought fame and literary recognition rather than celebrity when she began her literary career. She mentions celebrity several times in her *Letter*, such as in this excerpt:

Since the sex have been condemned for exercising the powers of speech, [women] have successfully taken up the pen: and their writings exemplify both energy of mind, and capability of acquiring the most extensive knowledge. The press will be the monuments from which the genius of British women will rise to immortal celebrity: their works will, in proportion as their educations are liberal, from year to year, challenge an equal portion of fame, with the labours of their classical *male* contemporaries.²¹

We can see here that she added 'immortal' to the term 'celebrity', as if she was referring to something more lasting and valuable than just celebrity. Moreover, she expressed the wish that her British female contemporary writers would one day reach fame the way male writers had, which harks back to the fact that she herself ardently sought fame as a recognition for her literary work. She wanted to be remembered for her talents as a poet and writer, not just for her scandalous life, or for her well-known beauty – all in all, she wanted to be known and remembered for something more genuine than for being famous.

¹⁹ Tom Mole, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

²⁰ Mary Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

b. Fame

This idea of celebrity as not being legitimate, as being superficial and temporary whereas fame is earned by the individual and lasts for eternity has been developed by Julia Fawcett when she wrote that “fame implies futurity and earns its possessor a place in history, but celebrity belongs only to the present”²². We will try to see what strategies Mary Robinson put into place in order to reach fame and leave behind her celebrity.

As we have seen, in the middle of the eighteenth century, this separation between celebrity and fame was not so obvious: in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), Samuel Johnson gave ‘fame’ as a synonym for glory, which he defined as “praise paid in adoration; the felicity of heaven; honour; praise; fame; renown; celebrity”²³. Within the same period, William Hazlitt (1778-1830), an English essayist, critic and philosopher, wrote about fame that it was the highest rank of recognition one could get. In his *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818), he gave a definition of fame in opposition to popularity:

Fame is the recompense not of the living, but of the dead. [...] For fame is not popularity, the shout of the multitude, the idle buzz of fashion, the venal puff, the soothing flattery of favour or of friendship; but it is the spirit of a man surviving himself in the minds and thoughts of other men, undying and imperishable.²⁴

More recently, in *Figures publiques* Antoine Lilti defines glory in terms that tend to concur with Hazlitt’s definition:

La gloire désigne la notoriété acquise par un être jugé hors du commun pour les exploits qu’il a accomplis, qu’il s’agisse d’actes de bravoure, d’œuvres artistiques ou littéraires. Elle est essentiellement posthume et s’épanouit à travers la commémoration du héros dans la mémoire collective.²⁵

Through all of these definitions, we understand that celebrity is often defined as ephemeral and superficial, in opposition to fame, or glory, which are earned by the individual for their talents and skills, and which last eternally.

Tired of her celebrity, Mary Robinson sought fame by the late 1780s. Sharon Setzer recalls that her infamy as former mistress of the Prince was almost eclipsed by her growing

²² Julia H. Fawcett, “Literature and Celebrity: Eighteenth Century and Beyond”, *Oxford Handbooks Online*, Aug. 2015, <<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935338-e-43>>.

²³ See “glory” in the 1828 edition of Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1828).

²⁴ William Hazlitt, Lecture VIII: “On the Living Poets”, *Lectures on the English Poets, Delivered at the Surren Institution* (London, 1818) pp. 283-331, p. 283.

²⁵ Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques : l’invention de la célébrité, 1750-1850* (Fayard, 2014), p. 12.

fame as a poet: she wrote prolifically, and published under various pseudonyms such as “Laura” and “Laura Maria” – these false signatures helped her to reinvent her identity and leave behind the nickname ‘Perdita’ which still stuck to her. The poems she published under the name “Laura” induced particularly praising responses, including one from Robert Merry, who was an extraordinarily popular poet at the time.²⁶ Then, when she distanced herself from the Della Cruscan school, Robinson tried to establish a reputation for herself as a novelist. She wrote several novels, but she encountered less success than for her poetry. In fact, many critics reproached Robinson for not sticking to poetry and criticized her writing in prose. In a review of her last novel, *The Natural Daughter* (1799), the *European Magazine* wrote that “we regret that the author will not confine her labours to Poetry, in which she superiorly excels, and has given fresh proofs of in this Novel”²⁷. Within two years she had published three novels, *The Widow* (1794), *Angelina* and *Hubert de Sevrac* (1796), but none had received the success she had imagined. To ensure that her next novel, *Walsingham* (1797), would be met with more success, she once more capitalized on her celebrity and manipulated her audience: during the three months preceding the publication of *Walsingham*, more than eighty puffs were published in *The Oracle* and *The Morning Post* in various forms (notes, advertisements, extracts, health reports ...).²⁸ Robinson thus used her celebrity to promote her upcoming novel. In that sense, Ashley Cross has argued that Robinson’s notoriety as a poet and novelist was not primarily due to her literary talents, but really to the insatiable curiosity that being a celebrity induced in her readers. Therefore, according to Cross, her authority as a poet and writer would be founded on the fact that she was a public figure rather than on an authentic ‘genius’.²⁹ However, my opinion is that Robinson achieved a genuine form of fame as a poet, establishing herself as a successful and deserving one.

On the other hand, Mary Wollstonecraft cannot be considered a celebrity, or at least not to the same degree as Robinson – her image was not as extensively displayed within the public sphere as her fellow Romantic writer and her daily activities were not thoroughly followed by the papers. Unlike Robinson, Wollstonecraft was not famous for being famous. Nonetheless, she did experience notoriety: she was well-known for her literary productions, and especially

²⁶ Sharon M. Setzer, ed., *A Letter to the Women of England* by Mary Robinson (Broadview Press, 2003), Introduction, pp. 16-17.

²⁷ *The European Magazine, and London Review* 37 (1800), pp. 138-139, p. 139.

²⁸ Leigh Bonds, “The power of the Puff: Mary Robinson’s Celebrity and the Success of *Walsingham*”, *CEA Critic* 75. 1 (2013), pp. 44-50, p. 44.

²⁹ Ashley J. Cross, “‘Lyrical Ballads’ to ‘Lyrical Tales’: Mary Robinson’s Reputation and the Problem of Literary Debt”, *Studies in Romanticism* 40. 4 (2001), pp. 571-605, p. 578.

for her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (although *Rights of Men* already established her as an pamphleteer). The fact that *Rights of Woman* was translated and published not only in France but also in Italy, Spain, Germany, Holland and the United States is significant of how widely her work (and her name) travelled throughout the world.³⁰ Another example which allows us to measure the extent of Wollstonecraft's fame is the fact that Godwin referred to her as 'the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*' in the title of her *Memoirs*, rather than as Mary Wollstonecraft – it could signify that she was famous enough at the time for people to know that *Vindication* had been written by her. Caroline Franklin highlights the fact that the controversy Wollstonecraft's unorthodox life produced and the satires which were published about her show how popular and disseminated her ideas were throughout society. Indeed, her works and thoughts were not simply known by a learned elite: workers (most of them lower-class men but sometimes a few women participated as well) debated on her ideas in public debating societies in London during the 1790s. According to Franklin, "Wollstonecraft's ideas were amongst the first topics chosen for debate, and continued popular throughout the 1790s."³¹ Moreover, Wollstonecraft's notoriety attracted offers of marriage, but also new and influential acquaintances such as Godwin, and a growing respect in Johnson's intellectual circle. Therefore, we can affirm that Wollstonecraft achieved a form of fame during her life, although she did not experience celebrity like Robinson did.

At the end of the day, both authors were active in the public realm during their life, but not in the same manner. Wollstonecraft intervened on political matters and voiced her opinion on topics such as liberty, democracy, education; and doing so she was quite pioneering. Robinson also intervened on the political stage, for instance through her poems on the French Revolution, such as "Marie Antoinette's Lamentation, in Her Prison of the Temple" that we have studied, but also through her "Fragment, Supposed to be Written Near the Temple, at Paris, on the Night Before the Execution of Louis XVI" (1793), in which she also seems to be desperate about the fate of the King:

Round the deep entrenchments stand
Bold AMBITION's giant band;
Beneath, insidious MALICE creeps;
And keen REVENGE, that never sleeps;
While dark SUSPICION hovers near,
Stung by the dastard scorpion, FEAR!
REASON, shrinking from her gaze,

³⁰ Eileen Hunt Botting, "Crossing Borders and Bridging Generations: Wollstonecraft's 'Rights of Woman' as the 'Traveling Feminist' Classic", *Women's Studies Quarterly* 35. 3 (2007), pp. 296-301, p. 297.

³¹ Caroline Franklin, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Literary Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 207.

Flies the scene in wild amaze;
While trembling PITY dies to see
The Barb'rous Sons of ANARCHY
Drench their unnatural hands in regal blood,
While patriot Virtue sinks beneath the whelming flood!³²

All in all, Wollstonecraft and Robinson's fame cannot be compared: indeed, Robinson was an actress and a celebrity, and as such she was associated with a privileged social circle in the first place. In a third part, we will focus on the concept of reputation, which was for both Wollstonecraft and Robinson a fragile notion during their lives; and we will try to see how reputation differs from celebrity and fame.

c. Reputation

The term 'reputation' is defined in the second volume of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1756, as "credit; honour; character of good."³³ To have a reputation would thus mean to be known as a good and honourable person, or to have earned some merit; and the difference with celebrity would be that a reputation does not extend beyond the individual's family, their circle of friends or acquaintances. However, another definition, quite opposed to this one, was given by William Hazlitt. In *The Round Table* (1817), he theorized the different sorts of fame and described living reputation as null and worthless. According to him, living reputation is "the good or bad opinion which my next door neighbour may entertain of me", which "is nothing more than his conviction that such and such person having certain good or bad qualities, is possessed of them". Later, he wrote that "the figure, which a Lord Mayor elect, a prating demagogue, or popular preacher, makes in the eyes of the admiring multitude [is not] *himself*, but an image of him reflected in the minds of others, in connection with certain feelings of respect and wonder."³⁴ He therefore implied that the celebrated, famous person is not necessarily the person that people think they are, and that they

³² Mary Robinson, "A Fragment, Supposed to be Written Near the Temple, at Paris, on the Night Before the Execution of Louis XVI", *Poems*, 1793. From *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* (Broadview Press, 2000), ed. Judith Pascoe, pp. 127-130.

³³ See "reputation" in the second volume of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1756).

³⁴ William Hazlitt, XXXIII: "On Different Sorts of Fame", *The Round Table, A Collection of Essays on Literature, Men, and Manners*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1817), pp. 56-66, p. 57.

do not necessarily deserve the admiration and curiosity they entertain. In that sense, neither reputation nor celebrity seemed to be legitimate or worthy from Hazlitt's point of view.

More recently, Antoine Lilti has given a definition of reputation that is more neutral than Hazlitt's but which still highlights the fact that reputation is not representative of the true character of the individual:

La réputation [...] correspond au jugement que les membres d'un groupe, d'une communauté, portent collectivement sur l'un d'entre eux [...]. Elle résulte de la socialisation des opinions, par le biais des conversations et des rumeurs. Elle peut être totalement informelle ou plus formalisée.³⁵

Later in his book, Lilti differentiates fame from reputation by claiming that if fame, or glory, is reserved only for a few individuals, who are considered by most people as exceptional, every individual, because of the very fact that they live within a society, experiences judgment and therefore has a reputation.³⁶ Thus, according to Lilti, fame is essentially posthumous (although the individual can seek glory during their life); celebrity is intrinsically contemporary and concerns the current relationship between an individual and a public; and reputation, which is also contemporary, concerns every person living within a society.

William Hazlitt, when he theorized reputation, added that "all reputation is hazardous [...], hard to win, harder to keep"³⁷. This notion of a good reputation being hard to keep is highly interesting in the context of the eighteenth century, and William Godwin wrote about it in *The Enquirer* (1797):

reputation is valuable; and whatever is of value ought to enter into our estimates. A just and reasonable man will be anxious so to conduct himself as that he may not be misunderstood. He will be patient in explaining, where his motives have been misapprehended and misconstrued. It is a spirit of false bravado that will not descend to vindicate itself from misrepresentation.³⁸

Ashley Cross explains that during the eighteenth century, as the press developed quickly and the economy grew increasingly competitive (capitalizing notably on famous figures such as Robinson), reputation became increasingly important, even if it was also a highly tenuous notion. The representation of oneself in the eyes of others, although it was separate from the author's 'real' self, was something to be earned and protected, especially because it could be

³⁵ Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques : l'invention de la célébrité, 1750-1850* (Fayard, 2014), p. 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁷ William Hazlitt, *Table Talk*. Cited in Ashley J. Cross, "'Lyrical Ballads' to 'Lyrical Tales': Mary Robinson's Reputation and the Problem of Literary Debt", *Studies in Romanticism* 40. 4 (2001), pp. 571-605, p. 571.

³⁸ William Godwin, *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners and Literature* (London, 1797), p. 281.

“misapprehended and misconstrued” by others, in Godwin’s words. Hence, when Godwin wrote that a “just and reasonable” reputation was “valuable”, he referred to the fact that preserving a good reputation required perpetual explanation and vindication. Cross argues that

[...] in this light, reputation might be read as a form of dispossession, providing identity at the same time it points to the hollowness of that identity, a subjectivity that is necessarily other within itself, continually requiring elaboration, and always defined by forces outside itself. [The writing subject is] no longer self-possessed, but a copy of oneself, and a copy that must be defended in order to maintain one’s reputation as original [...].³⁹

Cross continues by explaining that if reputation was fragile for all writers during the eighteenth century, and if all experienced a sense of dispossession, it was especially fragile for women writers. Indeed, women faced a double danger: while they needed a good reputation in order to sell sufficiently to support themselves (and often their family as well), their reputations were already settled by their gender and by the fact that they had to perpetually vindicate their value. Cross writes that “reputation was always sexually coded, and verbal availability – participation in the public sphere of the literary marketplace – was linked to sexual promiscuity.” Hence, not only did women experience the dispossession intrinsic to the concept of reputation, but they also had to negotiate established notions of femininity which equally dispossessed them.⁴⁰ In this regard, we can only imagine how difficult it must have been for Wollstonecraft and Robinson to establish themselves as worthy authors with a good reputation when they already had to deal with oppressive diktats of femininity. And indeed, the fragility of women’s reputation is a subject that, we can feel through her works, was dear to Mary Robinson, as a woman and public figure. She wrote about it in her *Letter*, when she complained that

[...] If a man receive an insult, he is justified in seeking retribution. He may chastise, challenge, and even destroy his adversary. Such a proceeding in MAN is termed honourable [...]. But were a WOMAN to attempt such an expedient, however strong her sense of injury, [...] or important the preservation of character, she would be deemed a murderess. Thus, custom says, you must be free from error; you must possess an unsullied fame: yet, if a slanderer, or a libertine, even by the most unpardonable falsehoods, deprive you of either reputation or repose, you have no remedy.⁴¹

Mary Wollstonecraft as well experienced the fragility of reputation as a woman. She dedicated a chapter to it in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, titled “Morality undermined by sexual

³⁹ Ashley J. Cross, “‘Lyrical Ballads’ to ‘Lyrical Tales’: Mary Robinson’s Reputation and the Problem of Literary Debt”, *Studies in Romanticism* 40. 4 (2001), pp. 571-605, p. 572.

⁴⁰ Ashley J. Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 572-573.

⁴¹ Mary Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, 1799. Ed. Sharon M. Setzer (Broadview Press, 2003), p. 42.

notions of the importance of a good reputation”, and wrote: “It has long since occurred to me that advice respecting behaviour, and all the various modes of preserving a good reputation, which have been so strenuously inculcated on the female world, were specious poisons, that incrusting morality eat away the substance.”⁴² Therefore, both authors definitely experienced the fragility of reputation as women and public figures during their lives. We will now focus on the evolution of the reception of Wollstonecraft and Robinson’s works, in order to study the evolution of their reputations.

2. The evolution of the reception of their works

In this second chapter, I aim at exploring the evolution of the reception of both Wollstonecraft and Robinson’s works before and after public opinion had turned against the Revolution. Therefore, we will see that at the beginning of the 1790s, their works (*Rights of Woman* for Wollstonecraft and *Poems* for Robinson) were generally well-reviewed, but that was mostly due to the fact that the political sides of their publications were ignored by reviewers and public opinion was still friendly to the Revolution. However, we have seen earlier in this dissertation that several elements contributed to render the British people increasingly hostile towards the French Revolution and towards British radicals in the midst of the 1790s: first, the Jacobin Terror was established in France from 1793 to 1794, and its violence shocked the population back in Britain. Moreover, an intense propaganda was carried out by conservative journals such as the *British Critic* against the Revolution. Then, France declared war on Great-Britain in February 1793. And most importantly, a repression was established in Britain from 1793 onwards, which culminated with the Gagging Acts, laws which were passed in 1795 to counter potential English dissidents. Therefore, from 1793 onwards, there was a growing counter-revolutionary climate in Britain, and Wollstonecraft and Robinson, as radicals but also as women, were increasingly seen as dangerous and potential threats to the welfare of British society. From then on, *Rights of Woman* was seen as more revolutionary than it had before, and Wollstonecraft started to receive serious attacks from conservatives such as Burke, who saw in her not only the threat of radicalism but also of feminism. Robinson would publish *Letter to the Women of England* in 1799, in what was still an extremely conservative climate. Hence, they would both face a harsh conservative backlash,

⁴² Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792. Ed. Janet Todd (Oxford UP, 1999), p. 210.

which would culminate with the publication of Wollstonecraft's *Memoirs* by the anarchist William Godwin in 1797, and their reputations would greatly suffer from it.

a. Reception of their works at the beginning of the 1790s

At the beginning of the 1790s, it was still possible for Wollstonecraft to publish such a revolutionary and potentially disrupting book as *Rights of Woman* without fearing dreadful repercussions. When she published it in 1792, the political implications of her work (which would later cause her name to be brandished as evidence of the horrible consequences of radicalism and feminism) were mostly neglected. Most of the reviewers – who were men – read it as a book on the education of women and did not see, or rather chose to ignore its political side. Hence, the book was generally well reviewed: those who were in favour of the Revolution praised it, and those opposed to the Revolution ignored it. Only the *Critical Review* (which, as we will see later, was established in the 1790s as a reaction against the Revolution) attacked it in two lengthy reviews, refuting Wollstonecraft's claim that women are not actually inferior to men but have been kept unjustly so by them. The critic instead argued that there is indeed an inherent sexual difference in minds, and wrote that

[...] physicians have told us, and we have reason to think their account, as it is derived from the observation of succeeding ages, true, that different bodily constitutions are connected with minds of different faculties and powers. They have distinguished the volatile, choleric, temperament from the slower and more steady melancholic, the one which rapidly attains and soon loses, from the other more capable of attention, requiring great diligence, and more carefully retaining the ideas acquired. Even a poet, no common observer of men and manners (we mean Horace), has distinguished the volatile youth from the more steady adult. If then there are similar constitutional differences in women, must we deny that there is not some difference in their minds?⁴³

Hence, the reviewer referred to the belief, still extremely influential during the revolutionary decade, that women were physiologically inferior to men, implying that nature had created them this way. Moreover, the critic deplored that Wollstonecraft's reasoning was "vague" and "inconclusive", "strung together with little art, and no apparent plan"⁴⁴. In the second part of the review, he wrote about her style that it was "weak, diffuse, and confused"⁴⁵. This negative opinion about *Rights of Woman* would become dominant after the revelations of the *Memoirs*:

⁴³ *The Critical Review* 4 (1792), pp. 389-398, p. 393.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

⁴⁵ *The Critical Review* 5 (1792), pp. 132-141, p. 141.

Gary Kelly writes that from the moment of its publication, “the style and method of *A Vindication* could be read with hindsight as discursive extravagance and transgression foreshadowing her emotional extravagance and sexual transgressions with Imlay and Godwin.”⁴⁶

Still, *Vindication* was generally favourably reviewed at the time of its publication: most critics supported the rights of man, hence there was no reason they should not greet the rights of woman with sympathy. Joseph Johnson, obviously, had reviewed Wollstonecraft’s pamphlet positively in the *Analytical Review*, writing that

[...] we have no doubt if even her contemporaries should fail to do [Wollstonecraft] justice, posterity will compensate the defect; and have no hesitation in declaring, that if the bulk of the great truths which this publication contains were reduced to practise, the nation would be better, wiser and happier.⁴⁷

R. M. Janes points out to the fact that the journals which reviewed *Rights of Woman* positively had previously reviewed her *Rights of Men* favourably as well.⁴⁸ Yet, as we have mentioned, most reviews took Wollstonecraft’s pamphlet to be a treatise on the education of women and chose to ignore the political implications of her work, which could disturb the relations between men and women. According to R. M. Janes, William Enfield’s review in the *Monthly Review* is a good example of the limits in the responses to *Rights of Woman*. Enfield was a dissenting minister and probably the most sympathetic to the feminist cause of the reviewers of the time. He agreed with Wollstonecraft’s conviction that men and women are intellectually equal and that better educated women would benefit society, writing that

[...] how jealous soever we may be of our right to the proud pre-eminence which we have assumed, the women of the present age are daily giving us indubitable proofs that mind is of no sex, and that, with the fostering aid of education, the world, as well as the nursery, may be benefited by their instructions.⁴⁹

Moreover, Enfield referred to Wollstonecraft as a philosopher, when most reviewers criticized her for referring to herself as such; and he decided not to call her an ‘authoress’ like many reviewers had: “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.”⁵⁰ Yet, we can see how

⁴⁶ Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Macmillan Press, 1992), p. 137.

⁴⁷ *The Analytical Review* 12 (March 1792), pp. 241-249, pp. 248-249.

⁴⁸ R. M. Janes, “On the Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39. 2 (1978), pp. 293-302, p. 293.

⁴⁹ William Enfield, *The Monthly Review; or, Literary Journal*, vol. 8 (1792), pp. 198-209, p. 198.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

Enfield reproduced cultural assumptions of the time concerning women's role and work opportunities:

We do not, however, so zealously adopt Miss W.'s plan for a Revolution in female education and manners, as not to perceive that several of her opinions are fanciful, and some of her projects romantic. We do not see, that the condition or the character of women would be improved, by assuming an active part in civil government. It does not appear to us to be necessary, in order to enlighten the understandings of women, that we should prohibit the employment of their fingers in those useful and elegant labours of needle, for which [...] they have obtained so much deserved applause.⁵¹

Therefore, if the responses to *Rights of Woman* were mostly positive, it is also because reviewers ostensibly ignored its political side: there was a general opposition to women who wanted to enter and participate to the public (and thus political) debate at the time.

Similarly, at the beginning of the 1790s, Robinson was still praised for her poetry by most critics. In 1791 she published *Poems*, which received positive reviews in literary journals.⁵² The review of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, for instance, shows the general positive sentiment that the publication of her *Poems* produced:

Of the Poems [...] we pronounce, without the smallest hesitation, that they are generally elegant, harmonious, and correct; a spirit of pensiveness pervades them all; and Nature, on various occasions, seems to have asserted her rights, by inspiring some very delicate and charming sentiments. Many of these pieces have been printed before, and, we believe, read with much approbation.⁵³

The use of adjectives such as “elegant”, “delicate” and “charming” indicate how the reviewer insisted on Robinson's feminine style and on the sentimentality of her poetry, surely to undermine any political or social aspect of her work. One review, however, was not so admiring of Robinson's poetic talents. The *Critical Review* denounced and condemned a “new species of Poetry”, referring to the Della Cruscan:

Within a very few years, a race of versifiers has sprung up, determined to claim at least the merit of novelty in expression, in unusual figure and striking combination. Rejecting the accustomed modes of description and phraseology, these fastidious writers seem fond of introducing uncommon terms and ideas, to provoke attention and excite admiration.⁵⁴

As Judith Pascoe explains, the Della Cruscan school was at the time the culturally dominant poetic group,⁵⁵ and it is as a member of the Della Cruscan that Robinson's successful poetic

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

⁵² Judith Pascoe, *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* (Broadview Press, 2000), p. 37.

⁵³ *The Gentleman's magazine*, vol. 61, part 1 (1791), pp. 560-561, p. 560.

⁵⁴ *The Critical Review*, vol. 2 (1791), pp. 309-314, p. 309.

⁵⁵ Judith Pascoe, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

and literary career would take off. Della Cruscan poetry was often characterized as being excessively sentimental and was sometimes “criticized for being no more than glittering nonsense.”⁵⁶ During the revolutionary period, Della Cruscan poetry became associated with radical ideas and with the dangerous influence these ideas could have on British society, potentially disrupting it.⁵⁷ Robert Merry, who was the leader of the movement, had moved to Paris in 1792 after writing his “Laurel of Liberty” (which would then inspire Robinson’s poem “Ainsi va le monde”) and had become involved in radical politics. When he came back to England in 1793, he knew that the government was watching him – he remained out of the police’s reach and finally decided to leave for the United States in 1796.⁵⁸ Because most of its members had friendly views on the Revolution, Della Cruscan poetry as a whole became considered radical and potentially subversive. William Gifford’s attack on the Della Cruscans and Robinson in his poem “Baviad, and Maeviad” (1791), which we have studied earlier, is a good illustration of the conservative backlash the group faced. Hence, after 1793, Della Cruscan poetry disappeared from the literary scene, and Robinson detached herself from it, in order to continue her pursuit of literary fame.

b. Reception of their works from the 1793s onwards

When British opinion started turning against the Revolution from 1793 onwards, both Wollstonecraft and Robinson were attacked for remaining supportive of such a violent and bloody event. As women voicing their opinion on an increasingly contested revolution, they were seen as dangerous and as potential threats on British society. But it is more than their political convictions which were attacked: conservatives used this growing counter-revolutionary climate to attack their feminist convictions, linking it to their – now badly seen – revolutionary affiliations.

Edmund Burke, of course, was one of Mary Wollstonecraft’s most loyal critics. His writings definitely contributed to render the climate of the counter-revolutionary period even more conservative. In a private letter he sent to a friend, Mrs. Crewe, in 1795, he wrote about

⁵⁶ Daniel Robinson, *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 17.

⁵⁷ Jeffrey C. Robinson, ed., “A poetry of mind: the Della Cruscans, Mary Robinson, and the Fancy at the time of the French Revolution and Beyond”, *Unfettering Poetry: The Fancy in British Romanticism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) pp. 111-138, p. 112.

⁵⁸ Adriana Craciun, *British Women Writers and the French Revolution: Citizens of the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 77.

the issue of female ‘transgression’ – about the danger of women who did not stick to the feminine traditional sphere – just like many other conservative male critics (and mostly anti-Jacobin writers) would do in the following years. In his letter, he warned Mrs. Crewe about the dangerous influence women like Mary Wollstonecraft could have, considering that his friend was not taking seriously enough the danger they represented. He wrote:

I hope and supplicate, that all provident and virtuous Wives and Mothers of families, will employ all the just influence they possess over their Husbands and Children, to save themselves and their families from the ruin that the Mesdames de Staals and the Mesdames Rolands, and the Mesdames de Sillery, and Mrs. Helena Maria Williams, and the Mrs. Woolstencrafts &c &c &c &c and all that Clan of desperate, Wicked, and mischievously ingenious Women, who have brought, or are likely to bring Ruin and shame upon all those that listen to them. The Sex has much influence. Let the honest and prudent save us from the Evils with which we are menaced by the daring, the restless, and the unprincipled.⁵⁹

We can sense here that Burke was afraid of these women who supported the Revolution and embraced the feminist cause, especially since they were public figures and were therefore politically influential – Helen Maria Williams but also Mme Rolland had indeed well-known salons in Paris. Interestingly, he acknowledged the power and influence they could have, and compared these ‘bad’ women, only capable of bringing “ruin” and “shame” upon society, to the ‘real’ ones, those he considered “honest”, “prudent” and good mothers and wives, who contributed to the good functioning of society. The terms he used are interesting and revealing: these dangerous women are “mischievous”, “ingenious”, “Evils”, “daring”, “restless” and “unprincipled”. Burke’s letter is an instructive example of the threat and danger that Wollstonecraft and other radical and feminist women represented over British society at the time: they were not satisfied with the roles attributed to women and the fact that they supported the Revolution in France could mean that they wanted the same revolution to happen in Britain, hence disrupting the whole of British society.

Now, it is interesting that conservative responses to *Rights of Woman* did not only come from men, but also from women. For instance, Anne Grant (1755-1838), a Scottish poet and author, wrote an extensive critique of Wollstonecraft’s book in a letter dating from 1794. Published in the second volume of her *Letters from the Mountains*, she warned about the dangerousness of Wollstonecraft’s work:

⁵⁹ Edmund Burke, letter to Mrs. John Crewe, 11 Aug. 1795, in *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 8, ed. R. B. McDowell (Cambridge UP, 1969), p. 304. Cited by Deborah Kennedy in “Benevolent Historian: Helen Maria Williams and Her British Readers”, *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, ed. Adriana Craciun and Kari E. Lokke (State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 317-336, p. 334.

I have seen Mary Woolstonecraft's book, which is so run after here [...]. It has produced no other conviction in my mind, but that of the author's possessing considerable abilities and greatly misapplying them. – To refute her arguments would be to write another and larger book; – for there is more pains and skill required to refute ill-founded assertions, than to make them. [...] I consider this work as every way dangerous.⁶⁰

Grant disagreed with Wollstonecraft's conviction that women are intellectually equal to men, and claimed that women should not be given the same responsibilities or work opportunities as men:

I think the great advantage that women, taken upon the whole, have over men, is, that they are more gentle, benevolent, and virtuous. – Much of this only superiority they owe to living secure and protected in the shade. – Let them loose, to go impudently through all the j[o]stling paths of politics and business, and they will encounter all the corruptions that men are subject to, without the same powers either of resistance or recovery [...]. I am sorry to tell you *in a very low whisper*, that this intellectual equality that the Misses make such a rout about, has no real existence.⁶¹

She then criticized Wollstonecraft for referring to herself as a philosopher, which was a masculine term at the time, and for her style, that she considered too masculine as well:

As to superiority of mental powers, Mrs. W. is doubtless the empress of female philosophers; yet what has she done for philosophy, or for the sex, but closed a ditch, to open a gulf? There is a degree of boldness in her conceptions, and masculine energy in her style, that is very imposing.⁶²

The use of the terms “boldness” and “masculine energy” is significant, because it was badly seen for women to take stances on subjects like philosophy at the time, and here Wollstonecraft is compared to a man. These two examples show us that indeed, even before the *Memoirs* were published, Wollstonecraft was the prey of conservative critiques, because the climate in Britain was increasingly counter revolutionary. Later in this paper, we will see that we find the same type of terms when critics referred to Wollstonecraft in their reviews of the *Memoirs* and in the satires published about her after her death: women like her were dangerous and unruly – all in all, impossible to control. In the meantime, in the next part we will study the *Memoirs* more closely, as to understand why it provoked so many reactions and attacks on Wollstonecraft's works and personal life.

⁶⁰ Anne Grant, “Letter LXXXIX”, *Letters from the Mountains, being the real correspondence of a lady, between the years 1773 and 1803*, vol. 2, 1794. (London, 1806), p. 211.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 213-214.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 216.

c. A turning point: the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's memoirs by William Godwin

Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman were written by Wollstonecraft's husband, William Godwin, an English journalist and radical political philosopher. He was part of Joseph Johnson's radical circle in London, and it is through Johnson that they met. Godwin had read Wollstonecraft's works and he respected her opinions very much. When they became a couple, he became her closest confidant and she told to him everything about her life and difficult memories.⁶³ The *Memoirs*, which were published by Johnson in 1798, were written with an unusual frankness and openness for the time, which contributed to its controversial reception. They began this way:

It has always appeared to me, that to give to the public some account of the life of a person of eminent merit deceased, is a duty incumbent on survivors. It seldom happens that such a person passes through life, without being the subject of malignant calumny, or thoughtless misrepresentation. [...] There are not many individuals with whose character the public welfare and improvement are more intimately connected, than the author of a *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.⁶⁴

From the very beginning, Godwin established his wife as a moral model, whom he considered the unfair victim of scurrilous and unjust attacks during her life, although she had always worked to improve public benefit. With his book he disclosed almost every scandalous aspect of her life: her sexual entanglements outside of marriage with Gilbert Imlay but also with himself, her suicide attempts, her unorthodox religious opinions, the fact that her child with Imlay was actually illegitimate,... One thing he did not mention, though, was that she had helped her sister escape from her violent husband, perhaps because he did not want to cause Eliza trouble.

Considering the cultural inclinations of the time regarding women's role and feminism, it is not surprising that Godwin's biography produced such vivid responses. Mitzi Myers writes that because of these fierce anti-feminist and counter-revolutionary sentiments, "both subject and author bore the stigmata of sans-culottic reform, and 1798 was clouded by political repression." Godwin had a philosophical tenet of sincerity in all of his works, and these frank revelations about Wollstonecraft's life shocked public opinion and served the conservative

⁶³ Mitzi Myers, "Godwin's "Memoirs" of Wollstonecraft: The Shaping of Self and Subject", *Studies in Romanticism* 20. 3 (1981), pp. 299-316, p. 299.

⁶⁴ William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1798. (London, J. Johnson, 1798), 2nd ed., pp. 1-3.

press, which used it for a vicious propaganda campaign. As a consequence, Wollstonecraft's life, but also her *Memoirs* and more importantly her death became warnings of insatiable female sexuality cut loose,⁶⁵ and it caused a lasting damage on her image. She was "vilified by the press, and [...] hers was a name to brandish at feminists as evidence of the horrific consequences of female emancipation."⁶⁶ Even those close to Godwin were shocked by his honesty: he who embodied Enlightenment values of reason and freedom now epitomized immorality and licentiousness. The tainted image he drew of his wife stayed in the popular mind long into the Victorian era.⁶⁷

3. The role of the conservative press in the construction of reputation

We have seen that the publication of the *Memoirs* revealed many controversial aspects of Wollstonecraft's life and shocked British opinion. In the last part of this chapter, we will see that the reviews of the *Memoirs* and the satires on Wollstonecraft which were published after it perfectly illustrate the political backlash against British radicals and against women writers who threatened traditional social and sexual hierarchies. Hence, we will see that there was an evolution in the terms and expressions used by conservatives to speak about Wollstonecraft once the *Memoirs* were published; and also about Robinson, especially since she published her *Letter* after Wollstonecraft's memoirs and claimed to be her follower. Eventually, we will see that most women who used to support Wollstonecraft distanced themselves from her when her reputation got tarnished by the revelations on her private life.

a. The anti-Jacobin critique and the *Memoirs* of Mary Wollstonecraft

In the first place, we must concentrate on the reviews of the *Memoirs* published by the British conservative press, and most precisely by the anti-Jacobin press, which was quick to review it. The three periodicals which I will discuss here are the *European Magazine*, the *British Critic* and the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, all three strongly conservative and polemical periodicals. Concerning the *European Magazine*, it was interesting to notice that its review of

⁶⁵ Mitzi Myers, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

⁶⁶ R. M. Janes, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

⁶⁷ Mitzi Myers, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

the *Memoirs* in the April 1798 issue is thought to have been written by Richard Polwhele, a fierce Tory belonging to the high Church. Polwhele would write an extremely aggressive satirical poem about Wollstonecraft following the revelations of the *Memoirs*, which we will study later in this paper. Hence, although the review of the *European Magazine* was published anonymously, some commentators have argued that strong similarities exist between the review and Polwhele's footnotes on the *Memoirs* in his poem.⁶⁸ As for the two other periodicals, both appeared during the revolutionary decade, and were therefore developed in reaction to the Revolution. The *British Critic* was established in 1793 as a conservative and High-Church review journal, riding the tide of British reaction against the French Revolution. The *Anti-Jacobin* was established very late, in 1798, in reaction to the French Revolution as well. It is described as 'ultra-Tory' and it was a vocal element of the British anti-Jacobin backlash against the ideals of the Revolution.

Unsurprisingly, these periodicals were extremely interested in commenting Wollstonecraft's sexual life when the *Memoirs* were published. In their reviews, they used details of her private life so as to make her (and so by extension her works) look devious, irresponsible, impulsive and untrustworthy – all ancestral characteristics associated to 'bad' and 'unruly' women. The *European Magazine* reacted to the fact that Wollstonecraft stopped attending church by claiming that when she stopped "commenced those eccentricities in Mrs. Godwin's conduct, which stained the latter part of her life with ignominy. A female, unrestrained by the obligations of religion, is soon ripe for licentious indecorums."⁶⁹ The term 'eccentricities' is interesting: it refers to something unusual, therefore considered as devious. Back then, everything devious was sexualized, because it did not correspond to traditional feminine values: it is therefore a way for the critic to sexualize Wollstonecraft. In the *Anti-Jacobin*, we find a review of no less than eight pages dedicated to the *Memoirs*, in which we find the same type of terms and stereotypes associated to bad and unruly women. She is said to be a "creature of impulse"⁷⁰ for instance, which harks back to this ancestral image of a creature given over to her womb.⁷¹ This idea that women have no control over their womb is linked to the fact that they must be controlled, because it makes them impulsive and reckless

⁶⁸ Claudia L. Johnson, *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (Cambridge UP, 2002), p. 4.

⁶⁹ *The European Magazine, and London Review* 33 (1798), pp. 246-251, p. 247.

⁷⁰ *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 1 (1798), pp. 94-102, p. 96.

⁷¹ Nathalie Zemon Davis has worked on this idea that the female sex is disorderly (and has been considered to be so since the beginning of times): the woman's womb was always seen as "a hungry animal" which is "likely to wander about her body, overpowering her speech and senses" if it is not "fed by sexual intercourse or reproduction". See Nathalie Zemon Davis, "Women on Top", *Early Modern Europe: Issues and Interpretations*, ed. James B. Collins and Karen L. Taylor (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 398-411, p. 398.

creatures. Moreover, the fact that Wollstonecraft did not attend Church in the last years her life, but also the fact that she referred to herself a philosopher was attacked by these periodicals. In the *British Critic*, it is written that

[...] the reader of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, will perhaps be surprised when he is informed, that, during her last illness [that is to say when Wollstonecraft died giving birth to her daughter, Mary Shelley], no religious expression escaped the author's lips. [...] She had long discontinued her attendance on public worship; she preferred the saint glimmerings of a false philosophy to the glorious light of the gospel.⁷²

Philosophers, and especially female philosophers were harshly attacked during the French Revolution. The argument of a “false philosophy” is a reaction against secularization and against the cult of Reason, which was France's first established state-sponsored aesthetic religion, intended as a replacement for Catholicism during the Revolution. During the Terror, which, as we know, was one of the principal arguments of British conservatives against the Revolution, Reason was held as a divine power by Robespierre and other major figures of the Revolution. It is therefore taken against her that Wollstonecraft refers to herself as a philosopher.

William Stafford has explained that male anti-Jacobin writers undertook to make a clear opposition between ‘proper’ women writers, who wrote within feminine genres and corresponded to the ideals of femininity that prevailed during the eighteenth century, and their hated antitypes, those like Wollstonecraft and Robinson who were proud to be feminists and were politically radically involved. As we have seen, these anti-Jacobin critics concentrated their efforts in identifying the progressive ideas about women's condition and rights which appeared during the Revolution with revolutionary terror and with social breakdown – perhaps because they really believed these facts to be connected, but most probably because they feared women who stepped out of the feminine sphere. This misogynist propaganda was very effective in undermining these women's works and damaging their reputation.⁷³

An instructive illustration of this classification of women into the approved and the disapproved can be found in *The Unsex'd Females*, a poem written by Richard Polwhele. Published in 1798, *Unsex'd Females* is a strongly polemical and conservative poem about the role of women at the end of the eighteenth century, which also exemplifies the political backlash against the ideals of the French Revolution. It is mostly concerned with the author's

⁷² *The British Critic* 12 (1798), pp. 228-233 p. 233.

⁷³ William Stafford, *English feminists and their opponents in the 1790s: Unsex'd and proper females* (Manchester UP, 2002), pp. 1-2.

fear that the radical ideas of the French Revolution (which come together in the figure of Mary Wollstonecraft) will alienate British society. In his poem, Polwhele cited some women writers he approved and respected, among which Elizabeth Montague, Elizabeth Carter, Hester Chapone – women who, as Stafford has rightfully noted, were either not writing about women or not writing at all in the 1790s. There was also Hannah More, whom we know was holding conservative views at the end of the eighteenth century (she had voiced her opposition against the French Revolution and approved the traditional roles associated to women). On the other hand, Polwhele named the women he did not approve of in his poem, whom he called ‘unsex’d’ females: Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson, but also Catharine Macaulay, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Hays (who was a close friend of Wollstonecraft) and Anna Laetitia Barbauld (who was also a radical writer), among others – women who had many defaults, the main one being that they were openly politically involved. As we have seen earlier in this dissertation, women’s femininity was built on a number of values (modesty, delicacy, chastity...) and they had to stick to the literary genres authorized to them (poetry of feelings, letters and private diaries, conduct books... all in all, certainly not political or philosophical tracts). About these radical women who obviously did not embody these feminine values, Polwhele wrote:

A female band despising NATURE’s law*,
As “proud defiance” flashes from their arms,
And vengeance smothers all their softer charms.⁷⁴

To his poem, Polwhele added copious footnotes. In the notes about “NATURE’s law*”, he wrote that “Nature is the grand basis of all laws human and divine: and the woman, who has no regard to nature, either in the decoration of her person, or the culture of her mind, will soon walk after the flesh, in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government.” According to Polwhele, women who did not respect the role nature had given them were a danger for the whole of society. In the notes, he also referred to them as “the Amazonian band” and as “the female Quixotes of the new philosophy”⁷⁵. Later, he attacked these radical writers who had supported the Revolution by writing in the notes that “the female advocates of Democracy in this country, though they had no opportunity of imitating the French ladies, in their atrocious acts of cruelty; have yet assumed a stern serenity in the contemplation of those savage excesses.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex’d Females: A Poem, Addressed to the Author of The Pursuits of Literature* (London, 1798), p. 6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

Although Mary Wollstonecraft is not the only disapproved woman mentioned by Polwhele in the poem, it is primarily she who is targeted – she is sarcastically described by him as “the intrepid champion of her sex”⁷⁷. Hence, Polwhele referred to other radical and disapproved women in relation to her, claiming that they were all followers of Wollstonecraft. About Anna Barbauld, he wrote:

I was sorry to find Mrs. B. [...] classed with such females as a Wollstonecraft [...]. But though Mrs. B. has lately published several political tracts which, if not discreditable to her talents and virtues, can by no means add to her reputation, I am sure, she must reprobate, with me, the alarming eccentricities of Miss Wollstonecraft.⁷⁸

Here, we find again the term “eccentricities” we have found in the *European Magazine*’s review of the *Memoirs*, which makes us think that Polwhele could be its author. Similarly, when he referred to Mary Robinson, Polwhele praised her poetry, like many other male writers and critics had done before criticizing her prose, saying that there was “a peculiar delicacy” about it. Unsurprisingly, then, he added that “her Novels, as literary compositions, have no great claim to approbation – As containing the doctrines of Philosophism, they merit the severest censure.”⁷⁹

Just like he had done with Robinson, Polwhele attacked Wollstonecraft on the fact that she referred to herself as a female philosopher. In the poem, he had written “Pursue, Philosophy! thy phantom-form*”, and in the notes he explained that by “philosophy” he meant “philosophism, the false image of philosophy”⁸⁰, implicitly saying that Wollstonecraft was not doing, or capable of doing ‘real’ philosophy. Polwhele also attacked Wollstonecraft on her ‘immorality’ and ‘irreligion’ by using the revelations given by the *Memoirs* about her personal life: he referred to her affair with Henry Fuseli and to her sexual entanglements outside of marriage with William Godwin and Gilbert Imlay. He also highlighted the dangerous influence that a woman like Wollstonecraft could have on younger girls. He wrote that “botany has lately become a fashionable amusement with the ladies. But how the study of the sexual system of plants can accord with female modesty, I am not able to comprehend.” Referring once more to feminine virtues like modesty which were so valuable to conservatives during the eighteenth century, he then claimed that allowing young girls to read Wollstonecraft’s educational books would only make them “worthy disciples of Miss. W.” He then added that “if [young girls] do

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

not take heed to their ways, they will soon exchange the blush of modesty to the bronze of imprudence.”⁸¹ We see here how female modesty is extolled by Polwhele even more than any other feminine virtue, and how losing this modesty would make young girls unfeminine, and therefore out of men’s control. Later in the footnotes of the poem, he hinted again at the dangerousness of “a woman who has broken through all religious restraints”, referring to the fact that “for the last ten years of her life, she frequented no place of public worship at all.” He concluded by saying that “how far a woman of such principles, was qualified to superintend the education of young ladies, is a point I shall leave, to be discussed”. Finally, when telling his readers about her two suicide attempts, he made Wollstonecraft look like a bad mother. Knowing how important the role of the mother was within the family at the time, he wrote that “at the time of the desperate act, she was a mother, deserting a poor helpless offspring.”⁸²

At the end of the day, Polwhele’s ultimate purpose was to prove that women who had forbidden and unnatural desires (such as political or sexual desires) and acted on it would face fatal consequences, just like Mary Wollstonecraft had.⁸³ He also made clear that Wollstonecraft stepping out of the traditional sphere associated to women and therefore her feminism was fundamentally linked with revolutionary politics and anti-Christian beliefs. The terms he used to refer to her throughout the poem are extremely aggressive, as we can see in this excerpt in which he refers to Wollstonecraft’s attempt to drown herself into the Thames:

And dost thou rove with no internal light,
 Poor maniac! thro’ the stormy waste of night?
 Hast thou no sense of guilt to be forgiv’n,
 Not comforter on earth, no hope in Heaven?
 Stay, stay – thine impious arrogance restrain –
 What tho’ the flood may quench thy burning brain,
 Rash woman! can its whelming wave bestow
 Oblivion, to blot out eternal woe?⁸⁴

All of Wollstonecraft’s ‘transgressions’, whether sexual, religious, political or philosophical are for Polwhele symptoms of the same disease, the ‘Gallic frenzy’ that has contaminated and unsexed the English woman. Referring to Wollstonecraft and her ‘group of followers’, he wrote:

I shudder at the new unpictur’d scene,
 Where unsex’d woman vaunts the imperious mien; [...]

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

⁸³ Adriana Craciun, *British Women Writers and the French Revolution: Citizens of the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 28.

⁸⁴ Richard Polwhele, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

With equal ease, in body or in mind,
To Gallic freaks or Gallic faith resign'd [...].⁸⁵

By 1798, the term 'Gallic frenzy' had become synonymous of radicalization and sexualization. It had a very negative connotation: it referred to secularization, to the reign of Robespierre, to the republican ideals. It was a way for Polwhele to refer to Wollstonecraft and other radical women as mentally and sexually degenerate. The use of the term 'unsexed' thus refers to the fact that these women have lost the precise virtues which make them feminine: they are now unsexed, they are not women anymore. But what is also very interesting is that although Polwhele tried to 'unsex' them in his poem, he also sexualized them when he wrote about the danger of their "softer charms"⁸⁶ and the power he acknowledged they could have over men.

Unsurprisingly, *The Unsex'd Females* was loudly praised in the *Anti-Jacobin Magazine*, which found it, "at once, politically useful, and poetically beautiful." The critic wrote that he was

[...] happy to see one the first poets of the day, one who ranks amongst the foremost for richness of language, vividness of fancy, and brilliance of imagery, employing his poetical talents, at this awful crisis of church and state, in vindication of all that is dear to us as Britons and as Christians.⁸⁷

Here, the critic referred to Wollstonecraft's irreligion, and approved the treatment Polwhele gave her, writing that "the poet [...] introduces to his readers one, whom he justly considers as the leader of these political *viragos*"⁸⁸ – *virago* being an archaic word meaning a woman of masculine strength of spirit, or in contemporary use a domineering and bad-tempered woman. The critic then used another term to describe her: "this *Penthesilea* of liberty and libertinism"⁸⁹, this time referring to the queen of the Amazons, which recalls of Polwhele's 'Amazonian band'. The *British Critic*, although it was created like its fellow periodical to fight Jacobinism, did not go exactly along with the *Anti-Jacobin* in its review of Polwhele's poem. The critic admitted that he "admire[d] the attention of this Poem", but condemned Polwhele's language for "bad taste"⁹⁰. However, readers of the *Anti-Jacobin*, after reading the *British Critic*'s review, wrote to the *Anti-Jacobin* to defend Polwhele's poetic choices.⁹¹

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸⁷ *The Anti-Jacobin review and magazine* 3 (May-Aug. 1799), pp. 27-33, p. 33.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸⁹ *The Anti-Jacobin review, op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁹⁰ *The British Critic* 14 (1799), pp. 70-71, p. 71.

⁹¹ See the section "Reviewers reviewed" of the *Anti-Jacobin review* 4 (Sept.-Dec. 1799), pp. 468-471.

b. Reviews of Mary Robinson's *Letter to the Women of England* at the end of the eighteenth century

Mary Robinson published *A Letter to the Women of England* in what was still a heavy conservative and anti-feminist atmosphere. It is no wonder that she published it under the pseudonym of Anne Francis Randall rather than under her real name: the responses to Wollstonecraft's *Memoirs* had shown how much critics liked to use obscene details of a woman's private life to undermine her authority as a writer and public figure.⁹² Yet, Robinson did not entirely protect herself from criticisms about her personal life when she published her pamphlet: indeed, she proudly claimed from the very beginning of her letter that she was of Wollstonecraft's school. From that moment, in the reviews that were published of her *Letter* she was criticized for her association with her controversial fellow writer. Accordingly, the *Gentleman's Magazine* bitterly commented that

[...] in the general confusion of ideas, religious, moral and political, [...] Mrs. R avows herself of the school of Wollstencroft; and that is enough for all who have any regard to decency, order, or prudence, to avoid her company.⁹³

As Sharon Setzer recalls, most reviews of Robinson's pamphlet highlight how her conservative male contemporaries feared women like her and did not focus on the work itself. Unsurprisingly, the three periodicals which we have studied earlier all put up a unified front against Robinson. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* quoted her when she wrote that she was "avowedly of the school of Wollstonecraft" and that it would require "A LEGION OF WOLLSTONECRAFTS to undermine the poisons of prejudice and malevolence"⁹⁴; and responded by writing:

Miss Anne Frances Randall, then, belongs to the 'legion of Wollstonecrafts', whose office is to 'undermine poison.' Though we are not 'profound scholars' enough to comprehend the art of 'undermining a poison', [...] yet we know what it is to diffuse the poison of corruption through the mass of society. This, we conceive, is the peculiar office of 'the legion of Wollstonecrafts.' It is *our* province, and our duty, to meet this legion; ('for they are many!') and, since '*no man can bind them, no, not, with chains,*' to endeavour to 'cast them out!'⁹⁵

⁹² Sharon M. Setzer, ed., *A Letter to the Women of England* by Mary Robinson (Broadview Press, 2003), Introduction, p. 20.

⁹³ *The Gentleman's Magazine* 69 (1799), p. 311.

⁹⁴ See Mary Robinson's notes in her *Letter to the Women of England*, ed. Sharon M. Setzer (Broadview Press, 2003), p. 41.

⁹⁵ *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 3 (1799), pp. 144-146, p. 146.

The critic of the *Anti-Jacobin* hence did not only diabolize Wollstonecraft and her followers, but he also shouldered the duty of ‘casting them out’. Similarly, the *British Critic* referred to Robinson as “a hopeful pupil of the school of Mrs. Wollstonecraft”, and then wrote about Robinson’s essay that it was “so desultory, that to give an analysis of it, if it were worth while, would be impracticable. [...] We are threatened with a *legion of Wollstonecrafts*, to ‘undermine the poisons of prejudice and malevolence.’ Probably, such a body would prefer storming to mining.”⁹⁶ The *Gentleman’s Magazine* had concluded its review by stating: “Let the motley list of heroines subjoined to this letter, and the anecdotes of female characters of all descriptions, interspersed in it, speak for themselves.”⁹⁷ Therefore, Robinson was being damned as a Wollstonecraft by right-wing papers, which did not properly review her work, since only her ludicrous feminist views were denounced.

c. British women writers distancing themselves from Mary Wollstonecraft

We know now that after the publication of her biography, Wollstonecraft’s reputation (and hence the posterity of her works) was considerably damaged. If she was still supported by Mary Robinson, many women writers, even those who were once close to or at least supportive of her works distanced themselves from her. It became increasingly difficult for them to even only mention Wollstonecraft’s writings by name. Hence, even though Maria Edgeworth would advocate a ‘revolution in female manners’ (which was Wollstonecraft’s formula), she would insist in *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1799) that she was not “a champion for the rights of woman” (like Wollstonecraft had been hostilely called by right-wing periodicals). Moreover, it seems that in the aftermath of the publication of the *Memoirs*, the character of the female philosopher, which Wollstonecraft embodied, became a figure of fun. Charlotte Gordon recalls that in Edgeworth’s novel *Belinda* (1803), two female characters dress up as men in several scenes in the book, as if demonstrating that female philosophers are masculine, unsexed, and lose their feminine identity from the moment they try to cross over the ‘masculine’ world of philosophy and reason. Similarly, in Elizabeth Hamilton’s novel *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, published in 1800, the heroine embraces Wollstonecraft and Godwin’s thoughts, but eventually these ideas end up being the cause of her ruin. Indeed, the heroine falls in love with a man whom she thinks is a philosopher, but in the end he proves to be a rascal and

⁹⁶ *The British Critic* 14 (1799), p. 682.

⁹⁷ *The Gentleman’s Magazine* 69 (1799), p. 311.

abandons her although she is pregnant. Hamilton's book was praised by the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, which saw it as bearing the opposition against Wollstonecraft's ideas. In the same manner, in Fanny Burney's *The Wanderer* (1814), the heroine is depicted as a pitiful woman living through the Terror who, although she is an advocate of the rights of woman, tries to commit suicide when the man she loves rejects her.⁹⁸ Hence, many women writers not only distanced but criticized and even mocked Wollstonecraft after her memoirs were published. Mary Hays is in my opinion an exception here. She was, like Wollstonecraft, profoundly committed to her feminist stance and had written a radical feminist essay, *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Woman*, even before she had read *Rights of Woman* (although she would only publish it in 1798). Hays would continue to campaign for more rights for women even after Wollstonecraft's death; but she would be forced to speak more cautiously of her convictions in this anti-feminist climate. She was a great admirer of Wollstonecraft and wanted to include her in her *Females Biography; or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of all ages and countries* (1803), which consisted into 305 mini-biographies of illustrious women. Yet, although she had included earlier feminists such as Mary Astell and Catharine Macaulay, she felt a pressure coming from public opinion not to add Wollstonecraft.⁹⁹ Her decision not to mention her shows just how dangerous it was for a woman writer to openly associate herself with Wollstonecraft at that time if she wanted to keep her reputation, to sell sufficiently and to be taken seriously. However unwilling Wollstonecraft's contemporary female writers were to endorse her name in their works or to openly acknowledge their debt to the feminist views she had expressed notably in *Rights of Woman*, one cannot undermine Mary Wollstonecraft's influence on the women writers of her day

⁹⁸ Charlotte Gordon, *Romantic Outlaws: the extraordinary lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter Mary Shelley*. E-book (Random House, 2015), p. 486.

⁹⁹ Claudia L. Johnson, *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (Cambridge UP, 2002), p. 145.

Conclusion

During both of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson's lives, reputation remained a fragile notion. Yet, it is during the revolutionary decade that their reputations evolved and were damaged the most, especially from 1793: indeed, the revolutionary decade was a key period in the construction of the reputation of female public figures such as them. The French Revolution made it possible for feminist discourses to appear, and the conservative press immediately associated these discourses with pro-republican ones, making them appear threatening.

With *Rights of Men* and then *Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft established herself as a worthy author. When she published them, British opinion was still globally in favour of the Revolution, or rather not yet against anything radical and feminist. It is clear that she did not live a conventional life and did not stick to the traditional feminine sphere with the topics she chose to write about; but only few people knew about the polemical aspects of her life until the *Memoirs* made them public. As we have seen, it is not until the midst of the 1790s that her name began to be tarnished with a growing anti-feminist atmosphere in Britain, and her reputation definitely collapsed by 1798 with the publication of *Memoirs*. Therefore, she could not have experienced the notion of reputation the same way as Robinson.

Mary Robinson became a celebrity from very early on because of her successful career as an actress and her affair with the Prince of Wales. She was early exposed to society's appreciation and judgment: she had to face standards of feminine virtue both as an actress and as a famous woman, which made the task even more difficult. Her involvement in the revolutionary debate exposed her to criticisms even more so than Wollstonecraft because she was a public figure. She was depicted in numerous caricatures whilst Wollstonecraft only rarely was during her life, and her romantic and sexual life were debated in articles and narrated in false biographies and memoirs. During all her life her reputation was precarious, but the fact that she published her feminist *Letter to the Women of England* in a strong anti-feminist context, a year after the *Memoirs* were published, and openly associated herself with Wollstonecraft undoubtedly damaged her reputation more than ever before.

This paper has proved how powerful and influent the dominant ideology of femininity was and remained throughout the eighteenth century, and how it dictated the daily life of women. We explored its effects not only on women's education but on their sexuality,

appearance in the public space and modes and styles of writing. Studying these standards of femininity have enabled us to appreciate even more the risk women writers like Robinson and Wollstonecraft were taking when they published writings which could be viewed as too radical or too feminist – when they chose not to write within feminine genres and styles and wrote on subjects which were considered improper for women to write about.

The fact that Mary Wollstonecraft wrote an answer to Edmund Burke at the beginning of the Revolution shows how privileged she was as a woman in the eighteenth century to have been surrounded by men who were appreciative of her ideas and to evolve in such an intellectually stimulating environment. As a woman coming from a middle-class background, it also reveals how brave she was to speak up her ideas in a conservative society and how confident she grew about her own ‘genius’, especially since she was still unknown as an author when she published her answer to Burke. Without this privileged environment which contributed to radicalize her thought but also without her bravery and determination, we can wonder if Mary Wollstonecraft would have written her *Rights of Men* to begin with.

The term ‘brave’ definitely applies to Mary Robinson’s life and work as well. As a public figure, as an actress, as a sex symbol, but also as a writer she suffered from this dominant ideology of femininity. The plurality of her talents makes her a fascinating character to study: she became a celebrity as much for her love affairs as for her talent for acting and writing, and was able to keep the curiosity of the public alive although her name was often tarnished. It seems that she enjoyed the influence and power being a celebrity gave her, but she is also probably the figure which illustrates the most how precarious the notion of reputation was for women at that time. What makes her life unique, and which I tried to emphasize in this dissertation, is how she always successfully re-invented herself, from an actress, fashion and beauty icon, to an acclaimed poet and novelist of sensibility, to a feminist and radical writer.

All in all, Wollstonecraft and Robinson definitely did not live the same lives and did not experience the construction and evolution of their reputations the same way. Yet some similarities bring them together and make their lives and writings interesting to compare. They were both women writers stating their opinion on a major event such as the French Revolution, at a time when it was unusual and badly seen – unfeminine – for women to take such political stances. Their romantic and sexual affairs outside of marriage were also taken against them, along with Mary Wollstonecraft’s suicide attempts and supposed atheism: because of the way they lived, they could fundamentally not be considered proper and worthy women. Their

radicalism and feminism were in contradiction to the society they lived in, and the last chapter of this dissertation demonstrates how the terms which were used to refer to them in literary reviews evolved from their early writings to their most radical and feminist ones. At the end of the day, Wollstonecraft and Robinson's contributions to early feminism illustrate how difficult it has always been for women to preserve a good reputation and at the same time be openly opposed to a patriarchal society's representation and construction of femininity.

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