

this volume serve as an insight into many aspects of the life of young women in the late 1700s and early 1800s, and touch on the questions of marriage, widowhood, survival in a male-dominated world, and how one woman in particular overcame many obstacles. It is extremely well edited, and LeFaye's comments are unobtrusive and do not in any way interfere with the thrust and continuity of the letters; rather they serve to elucidate situations and explain some of the customs prevalent in India, England, and France during that time. They are particularly revealing with respect to the plight of many women at the time, for whom marriage was one of the few available options.

The author tells how Eliza's mother, Philadelphia Austen, sister of Jane Austen's father, journeyed to India in search of a husband. There she married Saul Tysoe Hancock; she continued to live there until 1765 when she returned to England with her husband and Eliza, born in 1761. Her husband would return to India and never see his family again, but there are many poignant letters between husband and wife, and father and daughter.

Later we read correspondence between Eliza and another cousin, Phylly Walter. They corresponded for over 30 years and these letters contain gossipy little snippets about fashions, hairstyles, life in Paris and even the French Court. After the death of her father, Eliza and her mother had moved to the continent because the cost of living was cheaper. Eliza married a young Captain in the Queen's Regiment of Dragoons, Jean-François Capot de Feuillide (who liked to be known as the "Comte de Feuillide," though in fact he was only the son of a provincial lawyer). She spent a few years as a young officer's wife, and may well have suffered one or two miscarriages (there is mention of an "accident" in one letter, which was a euphemism for miscarriage at the time). She and the "Comte" did eventually have one son whom Eliza named Hastings-

François-Louis-Henri-Eugène, no doubt, at least in part, for Eliza's benefactor, Warren Hastings.

In much of the correspondence between Eliza and Phylly, Eliza's life and lifestyle are spelled out: the death of her husband by the guillotine during the Terror; the poor health and early death of her son; the courtship by not one, but two, of Jane Austen's brothers; and her eventual marriage to Henry Austen in 1797. Once again, she spent time as an officer's wife while Henry was in the Oxfordshire Militia, and there is some correspondence covering this period which again deals with parties and descriptions of some of the new fashions (some of which were thought scandalous at the time). These letters are quite "gossipy" and it is not too difficult to think of them as being simply chatty and somewhat hollow, but on closer reading one realises the insight they do give into the lives of ordinary people, their relationships, family disputes, and disagreements. It seems that James Austen's wife formed a particular dislike of Eliza and thought her flirtatious—with all the Austen [male] cousins and even George Austen himself.

The later correspondence tells us of trips both to Steventon and Godmersham (the estate of Austen's brother, Edward Austen Knight) and meetings with Austen over the years. There are also a few letters between Austen and her sister Cassandra, written while Jane was staying with Henry and Eliza in Sloane Street in London. Unfortunately, Eliza was to succumb to illness (probably the same breast cancer that had killed her mother) and it was Jane whom Henry asked to come and stay with her. Jane was with Eliza when she died in 1813 at the age of 50.

Deirdre LeFaye has compiled and edited a wonderful collection of correspondence from this fascinating woman, as well as others, and her comments and sense of history tie these letters together into an interesting and readable account of the life of one "outlandish" lady. This

correspondence reveals much about the life of a woman of the middle class with a limited income but ample wits. Eliza de Feuillide lived an interesting life and, it would seem, to the fullest. She travelled half the world, spent time on not only the fringes of two royal families but was witness to, and aware of, her political surroundings, while her cousin has often been accused of ignoring all that was happening in the outside world when writing her novels. Yet it is Jane Austen whom the world knows, and Eliza is simply her 'outlandish cousin'.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION

Barbara Taylor
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003

THE COLLECTED LETTERS OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Janet Todd, Ed.
New York: Columbia University Press, 2003

REVIEWED BY LAURA MCLAUCHLAN

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was never afraid of asking hard questions. As Ann Crittendon notes in *The Price of Motherhood* (2001), after the American and French Revolutions, "Wollstonecraft posed the perfectly logical question: How could societies founded on the principles of universal human rights deny those rights to women?" Her questions stay with her reader. And so does her rebellious example of seizing life and living it by her own

moral precepts. Wollstonecraft remains a controversial figure: her entry in *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (1990) refers to Wollstonecraft as “a focus of admiration and loathing.” In comparison to scholarly publications about her contemporaries, figures such as Catherine Maccaulay, Anna Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Mary Hays, Wollstonecraft stands out with a “gritty unfeminine iconoclasm” (Taylor).

The two books reviewed here provide readers with an opportunity to revisit her work and her intense life and times. In *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Barbara Taylor reads Wollstonecraft’s writing and interprets her life in the context of “her own intellectual world.” In *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, editor Janet Todd focuses on Wollstonecraft the letter writer, and argues that “Wollstonecraft’s value is as much in letter-writing as in public authorship.”

An authority on feminist literary history, Todd—also the author of *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*—notes, “Wollstonecraft grows [in her letters] from the awkward child of fourteen to the woman of thirty-eight facing her death in childbirth.” “She was writing,” Todd reminds us, “on the hoof, in cramped lodgings, on swaying boats, in the wilds of Scandinavia or in freezing Paris before queuing for bread, or between reviewings in London, or indeed before plunging into the Thames to end her life.”

In the age of email, we erase the correspondence of friends. By contrast, those who received Wollstonecraft’s letters usually saved them. Wollstonecraft’s correspondence with her lover, the American businessman Gilbert Imlay, was returned when she requested it. Todd states, “although it must have increased her pain, perhaps when she reread it she realized that letter-writing was her forte, her form.” In support of this argument she notes that, in addition



to Wollstonecraft’s *Letters from Sweden*, a letter forms the largest part of her unfinished novel, *The Wrongs of Woman*. For all their distance in time, Wollstonecraft’s letters to members of her “dysfunctional” family and circle of friends present a speaker whose voice is immediate. “Her huge sense of the ‘I’ is always believable and fully present.”

I taught *Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Man*, and *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, to a group of first year literary theory students last year. This experience added to my fascination with her work. Teaching her essays, I sought to suggest the relevance of her writing to issues of class and feminism in the twenty-first century. My students were wary, and perhaps they had reason. Taylor warns that “ripping her” from her place and historical context “to claim her for ours has had the paradoxical effect of reducing her real intellectual significance.” In seminar discussion, students said that it was hard to figure out what Wollstonecraft was actually arguing; she seemed to be “all over the map.” In *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Barbara Taylor makes a number of points that could have helped to make Wollstonecraft’s “vindication” more accessible to them. Taylor points out (as have other scholars before her) that when Wollstonecraft wrote *Vindication on*

the Rights of Women she was under pressure, “frantically scribbling with the ‘Devil’ [the printer’s assistant] at her elbow, ‘coming for the conclusion of a sheet before it was written.’” Critical elaboration about the manner in which the text was written helps to explain what Taylor calls the “messiness” of the finished work. Such references aren’t new in Wollstonecraft scholarship, although I could have used the reminder.

Taylor states that her book “is a study of Mary Wollstonecraft’s radical imagination, particularly her feminist imaginings.” On one hand, the idea of a study focusing on Wollstonecraft’s imagination seems overdue. On the other, “imagination” is not a quality that contemporary scholars, schooled to value cognition and reason, find easy to evaluate. Taylor reminds readers of the centrality of imagination to eighteenth-century moral and social discourses. It was central but suspect: “the imagination,” writes Taylor, “was a controversial faculty in the eighteenth century. Promethean creativity—the “true fire” of original genius, as Wollstonecraft eulogized it—the imagination was also seen as a dangerously maverick influence, particularly in political life.” As an ultra-radical intellectual of the period, Wollstonecraft embodied this “dangerous maverick” quality. She had a “wild wish ... to see the distinction of sex confounded.” And religion was vital in her political hopes, asserts Taylor. But Taylor warns that the contemporary reader can misunderstand certain key elements that Wollstonecraft’s contemporaries would be far less likely to miss.

Religious belief is one of these elements. Despite their relevance to the eighteenth century as an historical period, this doesn’t mean that the significance of religious belief and imagination are easily grasped in our more secular time. Twenty years prior to the publication of *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Taylor described Woll-

stonecraft as “a forerunner to the Owenite-socialist feminists of the 1830s and ’40s.” This part of her argument did not change as she researched the book. What is new, she tells readers, is her finding that religion played a central part in Wollstonecraft’s thought. Wollstonecraft held the belief that the revolutions of the 1770s and ’90s were harbingers of that “glorious future,” a future of uncompromising egalitarianism, foretold in scripture.

One of Wollstonecraft’s central concerns was with sustaining her own independence. She had to make her own living, and she did so by writing. She frequently wrote to deadline. *The Collected Letters* provide a record of Wollstonecraft’s personal commentary on the difficulties she faced: “In short,” she wrote William Godwin in 1796, “I must reckon on doing some good, and getting the money I want, by my writings, or go to sleep forever.” Taylor helps set Wollstonecraft’s “reckon[ing]” on her writing in the context of her own time by writing at length about how Wollstonecraft’s life and work fit in the context of British radicalism of her period. She was, Taylor writes, “first and foremost [a] hard-pressed self-employed worker,” one in a community of radicals who made their living as authors: “rich ... in mind and energy, but as literary professional ... anything but fat of purse.”

The two books complement one another. Wollstonecraft’s letters return the reader to a “self-dramatizing” (Todd) writer, and Taylor’s book presents the author in the context of her time. In Wollstonecraft’s letters much is left out. She is not interested, as Jane Austen and Fanny Burney were, in describing “muslin dresses and hats.” Wollstonecraft did not like to cook, summarily dismissing the subject of dinner with a note to her husband, William Godwin, “I’ve ordered boiled mutton.” There are relatively few references to the contents of the books she reviewed for a living. Instead Wollstonecraft’s emphasis in letters was invariably on

the drama of the self immersed in the adventure of “shift[ing] for [her]self.” Her letters to Imlay remain painful to read. While in France during the revolutionary period, Imlay fathered Wollstonecraft’s first child, Fanny, and then abandoned them both for foreign business interests and other women. The intensity of Wollstonecraft’s letters to her errant lover is almost unnerving. She wrote to Imlay near the end of their relationship: “When I am sad I lament that all of my affections grow on me, till they become too strong for my peace.” Her subsequent relationship was with the philosopher and reformer William Godwin, whom she married in March 1797, less than a year before her death. With Godwin, Todd writes that Wollstonecraft found “a literary relationship, whose intimacy was embodied in the communal bottle of ink.” Writing was the central thing in Wollstonecraft’s life. Her daily struggles make compelling reading. As Todd observes, when read together her letters to her extended family, to Imlay, and to Owen, “tell a story no biography can truly match.”

“I have ... plans at heart which depend on my exertions” Wollstonecraft wrote to Godwin in 1797. In her “Epilogue” to *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Barbara Taylor reviews the critical reception of Wollstonecraft by women writers into the present. She concludes that “icons are never allowed to rest easy.” The turbulence of Wollstonecraft’s life and the plans that she persisted in executing make her all the more vital in our own turbulent times.

CRITICAL CHATTER: WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

Caroline Lambert, Sharon Pickering and Christine Alder.
Durham NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2003

REVIEWED BY ALISON G. AGGARWAL

Words slipped and fell about when we did not have shared meanings built from shared histories—unable to grab the falling words.

—Lambert, Pickering, Alder

Women in their personal relations tend to speak of their obligations, as a result of which there is an erasure of identity. So to speak about our individual human rights, we first need to discover our identities.
Eleanor, Philipines

This book is very much about understanding women’s human rights in terms of women’s words, women’s shared meanings, and women’s identities. I was fortunate to read this book at the 2004 World Social Forum in India, surrounded by many of the women who contributed to this publication. So as I read about the chatting, I was also part of the chatting—over tea and coffee, over dinner, while waiting for the toilet, while shopping. As Eleanor (all women quoted in the book are referred to only by their first names) says, “critical chatter” is “intimate sessions, candlelit, squatting on the floor, just being women.”

This publication develops the notion that critical chatter between women activists is both a method and a theory for negotiating the strategic universalism of feminisms and