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Women's voices

After the fall of the Bastille in July 1789, British women took to their pens. They were already writing novels, lyric poetry, conduct books – genres dominated by women and the ones to which they had been historically relegated. Now urgent political concerns surfaced in their domestic tales. Women tried their hands at historical writing, traditionally a male preserve, and experimented with a variety of unladylike genres: proto-journalism, polemic and life-writing in the form of memoirs. They all wrote letters which they deployed for purposes beyond personal communication. As a result, through the 1790s a 'women's war' took shape in print in which their reactions to momentous events across the English Channel kept pace with those of their male contemporaries.

Like men, women expressed a range of complex positions on the religious and political issues of the day. But a curious thing happened: in joining the debate, women writers found themselves and what they wrote becoming enmeshed in the French Revolution quarrel. Writing about politics, they risked being viewed as suspect agents of a cross-Channel movement to radicalize Britain. In the extended crisis during the 1790s, women's intrusion into the male republic of letters signalled momentous changes in gender dynamics. The ancient question of the nature of woman was now debated against the backdrop of impending reforms in education, and the possibility of reform of laws concerning women. There was no more explosive topic for women to write about than the 'woman question' itself. The Revolution debate became even more contentious as it incorporated competing views on women's nature, roles and education.

The most complex aspect of the 'women's war' was the moral sphere of reputation. Bluestocking women had earlier ventured beyond the circumscribed private modes of writing sanctioned for women. Even such elite women were occasionally judged guilty of unladylike intrusion into the republic of letters that suggested a lack of decorum which itself hinted at sexual impropriety. In reacting to the French Revolution debate, women

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now seemed to infringe on the territory between the genteel domestic sphere in which they were supposed to dwell and the robust public sphere reserved for men. This raised alarms that female intellectuals might perceive themselves as equals in the fraught climate of opinion. The idea of the equality of the sexes was already in circulation since the seventeenth century, when the Catholic-turned-Protestant Huguenot François Poullain de la Barre, strongly influenced by the philosophical principle of Descartes, *cogito ergo sum* ('I think, therefore I am'), had matter-of-factly argued that the 'mind has no sex.' In the Revolution debate, the idea of sexual equality posed a particular danger. What appeared on the face of it to be a simple matter of asking men to be generous and include women in the benefits of natural rights, grant them the potential of intellectual equity and therefore the right to comparable education, was quickly recognized as a subversive political demand that would change the balance of power between women and men. The idea of gender equality was itself the subject of heated conversation in learned circles throughout Europe, especially in France. The French Revolution debate accelerated the impact of an idea whose time was at hand.

British women read reports in periodicals and pamphlets of the exciting, frightening roles that French women played as the Revolution unfolded. In the October Days of 1789, Parisian women mobilized to make the successful march on Versailles to demand that the King and Queen return to Paris with them. Women's political clubs quickly assumed heady power; in 1793 the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women was formed, 'the first political interest group for common women known in western history'.[1] Some women made radical proposals for transforming women's roles in every sector of French life. For example, Marie Madeleine Jodin's *Vues Législatives pour les Femmes* (*Legislative Views for Women*) (1790), addressed to the French National Assembly, opened with the assertion, 'et nous, aussi, nous sommes citoyennes' ('we are citizens, too') and sounded the call for women to demand republican rights.

Paralleling such activity, Olympe de Gouges's stirring *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* (1791), and her trial and execution in November 1793, thrilled, horrified and threatened to infect British female contemporaries. The execution of Girondist Manon Roland in the same month as de Gouges and posthumous publication of Roland's memoirs, *An Appeal to Impartial Posterity*, in English translation in 1795, provided another model of female civil activism to existing ones, and displayed the powerful political implications of life-writing. Unlike French women, British women did not generally marshal their concerns into collective action, and yet their involvement in the debate was nervously seen as a potentially cumulative effort. British women reacted individually, but their separate responses produced

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a climate of hostility among many male and female commentators. Establishment British men feared that women writers sought to be accepted as equal *citoyennes* in the sphere of diverse opinions. Personal attacks in print culture were the order of the day. The gloves were off towards transgressive British women as they were for disruptive men, like Richard Price, Thomas Paine and William Godwin.

The storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 produced Rational Dissenter Richard Price's expressions of jubilation at its occurrence, and famously prompted Edmund Burke to denounce both the principles of the French Revolution and their results, curiously, in part, through the prism of gender. Burke mourned Marie Antoinette as the tragic symbol of bygone feudal chivalry. Mary Wollstonecraft weighed in almost immediately with her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), which defended Price and pointedly rejected Burke's arguments. Catharine Macaulay responded to Burke as well, in equally adamant tones and opposing terms. Macaulay was a self-trained, self-proclaimed independent commentator on the vicissitudes of history through the lens of the British past, particularly the regicide of Charles I and the 'rediscovery of the idea of liberty'[2] in the so-called 'Glorious' Revolution that followed in 1688. In her *Observations on the Reflections of the Rt. Honourable Edmund Burke* (1790), Macaulay used her republican principles as an analytic tool to expose Burke's polemic as emotional, sentimental and pessimistic, with no appreciation of the heart of the new republic, 'the will of the people'. Macaulay's sober, even-handed reaction was one of the many responses to Burke's incendiary publication, and by his own admission, one that he took seriously.

The independently minded Macaulay in her last and proto-feminist work, *Letters on Education* (1790), applied the principle of liberty to gender issues, setting in play vexed questions about sex and power, perhaps in response to the scurrilous things said about her when she married a much younger man and gave herself a magnificent party for her forty-sixth birthday. Using a variation on the Socratic dialogue between teacher and student, both female in the *Letters*, Macaulay linked republican ideals with the inadequacies of female education and argued for the beneficial promise that the same moral and intellectual training for girls and boys held for future republican citizens of both sexes. She insisted, as Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays did later, that lack of a solid education rendered women incapable of sound judgements, powerless, dependent on and hostile to men, manipulative and disruptive. 'By the intrigues of women, and their rage for personal power and importance, the whole world has been filled with violence and injury' (Macaulay, *Letters*, p. 213). Macaulay devoted Letter XXIV to the pivotal question of how to educate girls and 'give such an idea of chastity, as shall

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arm their reason and their sentiments on the side of this useful virtue' (p. 218). The female teacher-narrator determined to 'breed my pupils up to act a rational part in the world, and not to fill up a niche in the seraglio of a sultan'. Thus the need to train girls to use their reason:

> I shall inform them of the great utility of chastity and continence; that the one preserves the body in health and vigor, and the other, the purity and independence of the mind, without which it is impossible to possess virtue or happiness. I shall intimate, that the great difference now beheld in the external consequences which follow the deviations from chastity in the two sexes, did in all probability arise from women having been considered as the mere property of men; and, on this account had no right to dispose of their own persons.
>
> (p. 220)

Macaulay traced the gendered definition of chastity to the notion that women are property. Like education, Macaulay insisted, 'the principles of true religion and morality' (p. 220) must function equally as guides for both sexes. To assign chastity exclusively to women was to enslave them. Macaulay's groundbreaking analysis proclaimed morality gender-neutral and therefore universal.[3] Macaulay championed gender equality predicated on the same education for girls as for boys. 'There is but one rule of right for the conduct of all rational beings; consequently that true virtue in one sex must be equally so in the other' (p. 201).

Macaulay criticized the corollary assumption that the loss of chastity is fatal to a woman's reputation. In Letter XXIII, *Coquettry* (*sic*), she argued, 'The first fault against chastity in woman has a radical power to deprave the character. But no such frail beings come out of the hands of Nature. The human mind is built of nobler materials than to be so easily corrupted' (Macaulay, *Letters*, p. 212). The particular errors imputed to Eve and her daughters were not innate to God's creation but rather imposed by man. Chastity was not gender-specific.

Mary Wollstonecraft was galvanized by Macaulay's radical principles. In the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) Wollstonecraft declared that chastity was not a sexual virtue, and that the fall from grace, the rejection from society, was too harsh a penalty for female infractions. In chapter 8 Wollstonecraft argued, '[The] regard for reputation [arises from] the grand source of female depravity, the impossibility of regaining respectability by a return to virtue, though men preserve theirs during the indulgence of vice' (*MW Works*, vol. V, p. 203).

Later, Jane Austen commented on the disparities in social sanctions on male and female indiscretions with reference to the consequences of the adultery committed by Maria Bertram Rushton and Henry Crawford in

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Mansfield Park: 'That punishment, the public punishment of disgrace, should in a just measure attend *his* share of the offence is, we know, not one of the barriers which society gives to virtue. In this world, the penalty is less equal than could be wished.'[4]

Another area of intense debate was the civil status of dissenters, and this provided Anna Laetitia Barbauld, the celebrated poet and commentator, an opportunity to express her views. In 1790 Barbauld published *An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts*, in which she rejected 'toleration' as no longer necessary; 'What you call toleration, we call the exercise of a natural and unalienable right.'[5] Barbauld made the connection between religious and political freedom, moral and just public action:

> England, nursed at the breast of liberty, and breathing the purest spirit of enlightened philosophy, views a sister nation with affected scorn and real jealousy . . . Let public reformation prepare the way for private. May the abolition of domestic tyranny introduce the modest train of household virtues, and purer incense be burned upon the hallowed altar of conjugal fidelity . . . May you never lose sight of the great principle you have held forth, the natural equality of men.[6]

Barbauld never developed further the gendered implication of her metaphor, but she implicitly posed an obvious question, what of the natural equality of women? The inclusion of 'domestic tyranny' in Barbauld's visionary invocation signalled her acknowledgement that in addition to the national and theological demands for reform that were part of the Revolution debate she was well aware that there were strong concerns on the part of feminists.

Barbauld did not parse 'the natural equality of men' for its relevance to women; that work was done by Mary Hays, Rational Dissenter, religious controversialist, experimental novelist and feminist biographer. Hays discerned that the rights of men could and must be applied to women. She represented the extreme left among the women at war, a disturbing presence, sometimes shrill, who insisted on being heard in the republic of letters. Yet more than any other among her female contemporaries, her voice joined the issues of religious and political dissent to concerns of gender. Hays discerned the pro-woman sympathies among her male associates; in print she was one of the late Enlightenment thinkers to explore the possibility that Rational Dissent, to date solidly male, had the potential to become something more inclusive and therefore more radical, that its theological inquiries gestured towards a new kind of human equality, feminism.

In her Wollstonecraftian *Letters and Essays, Moral, and Miscellaneous* (1793), Hays included a piece written during the terrible days of the Terror

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in post-revolutionary France. In 'Letter II: Thoughts on Civil Liberty', Hays exposed the social menace as women reacted to the Revolution debate:

> As women have no claims to expect either pension or place, they are less in the vortex of influence; they are also more unsophisticated by education, having neither system, test, or [*sic*] subscription imposed upon them; and some subjects require only to be examined with an impartial and unprejudiced eye, to ensure conviction . . . The emancipated mind is impatient of imposition, nor can it, in a retrogade [*sic*] course, unlearn what it has learned, or unknow what it has known.[7]

Here, then, was a clear and present danger for conventional society. According to Hays, untutored women could look with great clarity at the political scene and make their own judgements, irrespective of the impediments that divided men – loyalty oaths, party ties, or others' persuasions – for what partisan man would judge it necessary to convince a woman of the need to support his opinions in parliamentary voting, except perhaps for elite women who made a difference in high-wire electoral politics? Hays's phrase, 'the emancipated mind', suggests that every woman who put pen to paper and contributed to the Revolution debate believed she possessed a legitimate opinion and the right to voice it. Hays alluded to Rational Dissenter Joseph Priestley's conviction that in the divinely appointed progress of human understanding, knowledge would spread almost without the intention of readers, students and the people generally to include the ineluctable, irresistible expansion of women's knowledge. The very dissonance of the choir of female voices continued to demonstrate that they were present, if not absolutely united by their shared gender, yet still observing the female condition in the larger conflicts, reflecting and commenting.

Reaction to *Letters and Essays* among male reviewers was swift. The gentleman who wrote for the conservative periodical *The English Review* described Hays, more in anger than sorrow, as 'the *baldest* disciple of Mrs Wollstonecraft'. He continued, 'Miss Mary Hays conceives but her conceptions are an indigested heap and the whole of this paper is an abortion.' 'Female philosophers', he advised, 'while pretending to superior powers carry with them (such is the goodness of providence) a mental imbecility which *damns* them to fame.'[8]

Conservative responses to Hays's publications grew more vituperative through the decade. They announced a new campaign of gender warfare in opposition to the proposals of gender radicals, in which sex, politics and the potential for revolution that might extend to domestic life collided with even greater consequences. The British Establishment view was that the liberty women presumed when they aired their views in public threatened to become

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almost as noxious as sexual activity by unmarried women. Conservative Reverend Richard Polwhele expressed this fear in its most hysterical terms when in 1798 he proposed a new category of gender identity for the 'unsex'd females', 'a female band despising NATURE's law'.[9]

Chastity persisted as the great moral directional for all women, no matter how learned or intellectual or of which political or religious persuasion. Women's published reflections on the subject had already begun to undermine the reflexive Christian habit of laying all the blame for seduction on the weak nature of 'woman' as a daughter of Eve. The controversy over the political implications of chastity announced by Macaulay was extended by Amelia Alderson (later Opie), the daughter of a respected physician, herself attractive, lively, well read, reared and active within the sophisticated Norwich Unitarian community centred on the Octagon Church. The Norwich circle greeted the French Revolution enthusiastically. In her first novel, *The Dangers of Coquetry* (1790), Alderson dramatized the effects of social training on a talented young woman who was transformed into a much admired flirt and, in the way the Anglican Macaulay predicted, was ultimately betrayed by the false values and irresponsible behaviour she acquired.[10] Alderson later published a second novel, *The Father and Daughter* (1801), in which she rejected the loss of chastity as the ultimate determinant in the life of a woman. Agnes Fitzhenry, the heroine, succumbs to the temptations of the 'libertine' Clifford: he is called to duty with his regiment and soon after, Agnes discovers that 'she should in all probability be a mother before she became a wife'. She rolls 'herself on the floor' to induce a miscarriage but without success. In time, she gives birth to a healthy son and attempts to redeem herself. Agnes's closest female friend refutes polite society's opinion that the unchaste woman must be a social outcast: 'I know many instances . . . of women restored by perseverance in a life of expiatory amendment . . . Keeping her eye steadily fixed on the end she has in view, [the fallen but repentant woman] will [not] seek the smiles of the world, till, instead of receiving them as a favour, she can demand them as a right.'[11] Like Wollstonecraft, Alderson built on Macaulay's foundational hypothesis: chastity was not innately gendered female, it was constructed so by historical misogyny. Like Wollstonecraft, Alderson insisted that women have the same human right as men to be allowed and forgiven sexual transgression and incorporated again in God's grace and therefore society's.

Helen Maria Williams witnessed the Revolution. In *Julia, a Novel* (1790) and *Letters Written in France in the Summer of 1790* (1790), Williams offered a new brand of female dissident proto-journalism using a range of genres to communicate the complexity of issues and early events of the Revolution. Charlotte Smith, radical, published *Desmond: A Novel* (1792),

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in which she responded in opposition to Burke's *Reflections* and in support of Helen Maria Williams's pro-Revolution *Letters*. The poet William Cowper later suggested that Smith may have been in the pay of the radicals when she wrote *Desmond*.[12]

When Louis XVI was executed in January 1793, followed by the execution of Marie Antoinette and the declaration of war between Britain and France, patriotism was closely linked to gender conformity. Women writers brought their battles back to the domestic realm, where they continued the critique of gender prejudice. That year Mary Ann Hanway published a novel, *Ellinor; or, The World as It Is* (1793), in which she responded to the new drive for autonomy among British women writers. Despite her Anglicanism and conservative politics, Hanway endorsed the view that women are ill equipped by their mediocre early education to fulfil themselves as God intended. 'Did we make greater exertions, and call into action those powers entrusted to us by the Creator of the Universe, we should find that he has distributed his gifts nearly equal between the sexes.' Hanway went so far as to assert that 'There are very few arts or sciences that women are not capable of acquiring, were they educated with the same advantages as men',[13] a position that only Mary Hays in *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798), published anonymously, also advanced.

By 1795 Prime Minister William Pitt's 'cold war' against political radicals and their publications had intensified. Invasion fears and near invasion by the French off the coast of Ireland created a heightened climate of fear and suspicion. Women writers began focusing more on issues of education and less on explicitly political discourse. They recognized the expedience of genre, as an outward expression of gender conformity, and published their views in fictional epistolary exchanges that dealt with women's public roles and the implications of these in their sexual dilemmas. Maria Edgeworth, daughter of Irish inventor and educationist Richard Edgeworth, drew on a distressing experience from her own idiosyncratic upbringing in *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795). In this, her first publication, two gentlemen exchange letters: they are modelled on Richard Edgeworth and his great friend, Thomas Day, novelist and adherent of Rousseau's pronouncements in *Emile* (1762) that women are meant to be the passive foils and comfort of men. The first gentleman extends his congratulations to the second on the birth of his daughter but expresses his concern that the Richard Edgeworth character is 'a champion for the rights of woman and insist[ed] on the equality of the sexes' which might translate into educational equity for girls. He cautions the new father against fanciful enthusiasms that could turn his offspring into a prodigy with aspirations for prominence and power beyond

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what is appropriate for her sex. The father rejects his friend's description of himself – he also denies that

> knowledge must be hurtful to the [female] sex, because it will be the means of their acquiring power. It seems to me impossible that women can acquire the species of direct power which you dread: the manners of society must totally change before women can mingle with men in the busy and public scenes of life. They must become Amazons before they can effect this change; they must cease to be women before they can desire it.[14]

Rather, he insists, 'Women have not the privilege of choice as we have; but they have the power to determine.'[15] Maria Edgeworth argued for women's right to education on the basis of their equal intellectual potential and their aspirations to express views in the republic of letters. The piece concludes with the father's assertion, 'It is absolutely out of our power to drive the fair sex back to their former state of darkness; – the art of printing has totally changed their situation; their eyes are opened, – the classic page is unrolled, they *will* read.'[16]

The possibility of women's sexual, as well as intellectual, freedom was proposed by Eliza Fenwick, wife of Godwin's associate John Fenwick and friend to Wollstonecraft and Hays, who extended the reach of female autonomy in her novel *Secresy; or, The Ruin on the Rock* (1795). Fenwick contemplated the effects of 'marriage' without parental approval or religious rites. Using the device of conversation between two female friends, Fenwick tells the story of an isolated young woman who proposes a consensual 'marriage' to her illicit lover that is sealed only by sexual intercourse. She becomes pregnant, gives birth to a stillborn child, and dies. Her friend provides a running commentary on characters and events that is political critique, more elevated than gossip. She meditates on a woman's education, in the Lockean sense of the full experience of a life, explicitly connected to a woman's ability to navigate the shoals of her sexuality:

> With such an education as [your guardian] has given you, unless you had been a mere block without ideas, it was impossible you should not become a romantic enthusiast . . . I well know, my friend, that you did not mean to separate duty and pleasure. Motives the most chaste and holy guided you. No forms or ceremonies could add an atom to your purity, or make your's [*sic*] in the sight of heaven more a marriage.[17]

In 1796 Mary Hays published *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, a fiction based on her correspondence with Godwin and William Frend, Unitarian mathematician and the object of her real-life passion. Through letters, Hays tells a dramatic story in the context of a blazing critique of political,

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economic and gender realities. She turns the tables in pursuit of love: her heroine is the aggressor while the hero flees and withholds sex and romance. Hays proposes a revised balance of power in heterosexual relations by exposing a real woman's meditations on sex and aggression. In the most notorious statement in the book, Hays's apostasy as a respectable woman is mischievously broadcast as she blurts out Frend's name as a homophone: '*My friend*,' Emma cries, '*I would give myself to you* – the gift is not worthless.'[18] Hays's novel was greeted with invective from readers of both sexes and all persuasions.

Emma Courtney marked the halfway point of the women's war: what followed for the women debaters was worse than what came before. In the year after Hays's novel was published and widely read, Wollstonecraft died of the after-effects of childbirth, Pitt's campaign against radicals intensified and so did the differences of opinion between women contributors to the Revolution debate, but not on the great questions of sex, sexuality and intellectual competence. Ironically, as women came under new pressure to choose sides, the consensus between them on women's issues grew clearer.

Talented, ambitious and energetic, Hannah More was a figure of authority and controversy throughout her life.[19] More's published works revealed her ambivalence about women's public presence. She anonymously published *Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Ladies* (1777), probably triggered by republican Catharine Macaulay's ostentatious celebration of her forty-sixth birthday. More quoted the Athenian general Pericles that woman's 'greatest commendation [is] not to be talked of one way or the other'.[20] In 1799 More published her influential *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, which went into a seventh edition within seven months. More argued against the radical implications of the feminism of Macaulay, Wollstonecraft and Hays. Yet she shared with them more assumptions than she conceded, as astute readers recognized. Mary Berry, a self-educated minor bluestocking, bitter about her lack of formal training, wrote to a friend after reading *Strictures* that she found it 'amazing, or rather . . . not amazing, but impossible . . . [that Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft] agree on all the great points of female education'. Berry predicted that 'H. More will . . . be very angry when she hears this, though I would lay a wager that she never read . . . [Wollstonecraft].'[21]

In *Strictures* More argued that as women have 'equal [intellectual] parts' as men, like men, they should be deliberately trained for their appropriate 'profession' to exert their influence as 'daughters, wives, mothers, and mistresses of families'. More attacked novels tainted by foreign influences with

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socially destabilizing messages. She compared women's novel reading to a 'complicated drug' capable of arousing erotic fantasies and the neglect of female Christian duties. Ladies who take the lead in society, More instructed, must 'act as the guardians of public taste as well as public virtue' to stem revolutionary tides washing across the Channel from France and Germany into elite boudoirs.[22]

More responded directly to Hays's Unitarian revision of the conduct book for women, *Letters and Essays, Moral, and Miscellaneous*. In chapter VII of *Strictures*, 'On female study, and initiation into knowledge', More refuted specifics of Hays's recommendations for the female reader in her own chapter VII, 'On reading Romances, &c.' More emphasized her differences from Macaulay, Wollstonecraft and Hays: intellectual women according to her plan were primarily Christian reformers, subscribing to the view that 'education be a school to fit us for life, and life be a school to fit us for eternity'.[23] Here was the great divide between More and her feminist Enlightenment peers: she wanted women disciplined for earthly, individual atonement; they envisioned female education for active republican citizenship and self-expression. Yet S*trictures* was as much a defence of More's reputation as an assault on the ideas of others. More meant to reassert her role as defender of Establishment religious and political values, probably because she had come under fire from Anglican churchmen when she organized a mini empire of Sunday Schools for the poor. In this war of words, More was identified with Jacobin and dissenting subversion and accused of sabotaging the Church of England.

Scottish novelist Elizabeth Hamilton staked a middle ground between the conservatism of Hannah More and the radical positions of Macaulay, Wollstonecraft, Hays and their associates. Unlike More, Hamilton expressed admiration for Wollstonecraft, whom she described as a 'very sensible authoress [who] has sometimes permitted her zeal to hurry her into expressions which have raised a prejudice against the whole' and considered the *Rights of Woman* 'an ingenious publication'.[24] Hamilton chose different tactics to express her brand of feminism in the women's war, deploying genre to display female competence in hitherto male-dominated forms like satire. Hamilton argued for the need for female economic independence, but she insisted on the pitfalls of sexual emancipation for her readers.

Hamilton published *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education* (1801), in which she condemned the intellectual pretensions and unseemly public ambitions of Wollstonecraft, Hays and their female allies. Hamilton argued that 'By far the greater part of those who have hitherto taken upon them to stand forth as champions for sexual equality, have done it

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upon grounds that to me appear indefensible, if not absurd.' Nevertheless, Hamilton's position on women's mental competence was more nuanced than her critique might suggest. She argued against 'Contempt for the Female Character' and resisted 'sexual prejudice'. She agreed with Hays and Wollstonecraft about the dire condition of women's education. Although Hamilton pointedly attacked Hays, she endorsed Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Hamilton, too, promoted the social benefits of training women 'for self-sufficiency and usefulness'; she advocated employing single women.[25] Hamilton stood her own ground: she did not look to improvements in female education to make revolutionary changes in gender relations or society in general. She was intent on equipping women better to fulfil their Christian roles.

At the turn into the nineteenth century, conservatives were in power and the most radical voices of both men and women were muted, but not stilled. Consumer demand for biographies exploded. Life-writing emerged as a more socially acceptable form of female history. Mary Hays, still recovering from the public assaults on her by detractors, turned to a major undertaking in which she advocated the contributions to human progress made by Macaulay, Roland and Wollstonecraft, and their importance for all women, *Female Biography: or Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women of All Ages and Countries* (1803).

Hays wrote the first death notice of Wollstonecraft in September 1797. In 1800 she published anonymously 'Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft' in the short-lived *Annual Necrology for 1797–8*. Her sombre meditation on Wollstonecraft's life and works testified to the feminist lineage from Catharine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* to *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Hays implied that the unheralded connection between the ideas of these two distinguished women thinkers provided yet another example of the invisibility of women's intellectual history. The absence of women was then explained as the result, rather than the cause, of their lack of achievements. Without a parallel history linking female endeavours to each other, each female thinker and her texts were perceived as idiosyncratic, without context and unconnected to any other. In the absence of a recognized lineage of women's thought, every woman believed that she was alone and must begin anew. Hays prophesied that Wollstonecraft's pioneering life was not lived in vain. 'The spirit of reform is silently pursuing its course', she promised, 'Who can mark its limits?'[26]

The memoir of Wollstonecraft was probably meant to be the first item in Hays's *Female Biography*, which contained portraits of 300 women, a daring experiment in history writing, and Hays knew it. In six volumes Hays

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constructed a new story of the past which paralleled existing ones. Her memoir of Macaulay addressed the fraught question of Macaulay's public career: 'A female historian, by its singularity', Hays wrote, 'could not fail to excite attention: she seemed to have stepped out of the province of her sex; curiosity was sharpened, and malevolence provoked.' Macaulay's brilliance was undeniable, so her critics turned their attention to her appearance. Hays spoke for Macaulay and for herself in describing the slurs the female historian incurred: 'She is deformed (said her adversaries, wholly unacquainted with her person), she is unfortunately ugly, she despairs of distinction and admiration as a woman, she seeks, therefore, to encroach on the province of man.'[27]

Hays resisted the oppressive climate of opinion to be the first to include Manon Roland in a compilation about women, and also dared to insert large excerpts from Roland's revelatory *An Appeal to Impartial Posterity*. She promoted Roland as heroine and Girondin martyr of the French Revolution, explaining that whatever her readers' political views, they would benefit from the fierce womanly honesty and courage displayed in Roland's story, an argument she had also used in the memoirs of Wollstonecraft. Hays sought to arouse enthusiasm for women's achievements, irrespective of conventional prejudices towards a political party or religious persuasion, endorsing figures that did not conform to traditional moral codes.

British women writers who participated in the Revolution debate displayed courage that had great and lasting consequences. Their staying power during the volatile 1790s and the Napoleonic Wars laid the foundations for their successors, such as Anna Jameson, Barbara Bodichon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Harriet Martineau, Jane Carlyle, George Eliot and Mary Somerville, to come forward as public female intellectuals. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, British women were first admitted to British universities and the Married Women's Property Acts were passed by Parliament (1870, 1882), giving wives legal identity and rights. In this regard, the Revolution debate had marked a historic turning point for British women writers.

NOTES

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7 Mary Hays, *Letters and Essays, Moral, and Miscellaneous*, ed. Gina Luria (New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), pp. 11–12, 16.
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14 Maria Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies. To which is added, an essay on the noble science of self-justification* (London: J. Johnson, 1795), p. 52.
15 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
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23 *Ibid.*
24 Claire Grogan, *The Feminist Politics of Elizabeth Hamilton (1758–1816)*, forthcoming.

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