

# The Disappearance of Mary Wollstonecraft

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*Mary Wollstonecraft is an early feminist author and philosopher who lived in England in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Her most influential writings centered around the need for female education as an avenue to eventual equality. Her work was widely read during her life but largely disappeared from popular thought in the 50 years following her death. Many historians attribute this disappearance to a tell-all memoir, written and published by her husband in 1798. Though the details of the memoir were shocking—including Wollstonecraft's affairs and multiple suicide attempts—critics of her work, rather than the memoir, are responsible for her tarnished legacy in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

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Despite enjoying success and moderate fame during her lifetime, Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas were excluded from the larger body of philosophical thought for the better part of the nineteenth century. Her most controversial arguments can be found in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she advocates for increased political and educational freedoms for women.<sup>1</sup> Her argument is built on the insistence that women have the same mental capacity as men, and would excel in positions of power if they were given the same opportunities. While this book was well received by certain progressive readers, it garnered Wollstonecraft a fair amount of harsh criticism by her peers. The year after her death, her husband William Godwin published *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which tells an intimate account of Wollstonecraft's life—including an illegitimate pregnancy and multiple suicide attempts.<sup>2</sup> Though Godwin's intentions were pure and he simply wished to provide an honest portrayal of his late wife's life, the memoir was not well received and Wollstonecraft was criticized for her actions. Though she had been widely read during her life, in the fifty years following her death, most of the literary world deemed her work unsuitable. Scholars generally attribute this to the negative impact of Godwin's memoir. However, the true cause of the decline of Wollstonecraft's reputation is more nuanced than that, with roots stretching back to her own lifetime.

Since the start of the twentieth century, scholars have begun to reexamine Wollstonecraft's life and work. The majority of this work is focused on the interpretation of Wollstonecraft's feminist writings. Laura Fink, Joan Mulholland, and Ewa Badowska have all written intellectual histories on Wollstonecraft's feminist texts.<sup>3</sup> Though there has been substantial research on the subject, scholars disagree on

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> William Godwin, *A Short Residence in Sweden and Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001, Vol. 2, Routledge, 2003.

exactly how her work should be interpreted—as some of her ideas seem antiquated to the modern reader. Barbara Taylor, after studying Wollstonecraft's writings extensively, argues that the writer's philosophical aim was to inspire "the liberation of their sex not as an isolated goal but as part of a historic movement."<sup>4</sup> Taylor's intellectual history of Wollstonecraft examines the religious underpinnings of her work, while scholar Wendy Gunther-Canada analyzes her writing using contemporary political theory.<sup>5</sup>

While not as prolific as texts analyzing her prose, there also exists a body of work that examines Wollstonecraft's life. Vivien Jones published a study called *The Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* as a way to provide readers with further insight into her life.<sup>6</sup> In the same vein, Cora Kaplan examines Wollstonecraft's sexuality while arguing that to look at *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* without considering the broader context of Wollstonecraft's life is to examine only half of the picture.<sup>7</sup> Gary Kelly takes a similar approach in *Mary Wollstonecraft as vir bonus*.<sup>8</sup>

Many articles on Wollstonecraft the philosopher—regardless of their central argument—address the fact that she was criticized in her day and ignored for decades after her death. However, there is little written specifically about the relationship between her and her critics, and the effect they had on the reception of her writing. With a few exceptions, she was ridiculed by her contemporaries and her work was largely discredited in the decades immediately following her death. While modern historians attribute this entirely to Godwin's memoir, this paper will look carefully at the nature of her contemporaries' criticisms and argue that the groundwork for her disgraced reputation was laid years before the memoir was published—Godwin simply made it easier for critics to achieve their goal.<sup>9</sup> Because of the success of her critics in undermining her ideas and her legitimacy as an intellectual, her goals and aspirations for women were not taken seriously until around 1900. This paper will provide a more accurate explanation for Wollstonecraft's delayed impact on popular feminist thought and philosophy in general.

Though relatively few historians have focused their research solely on the cause of Wollstonecraft's disgraced reputation throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, most are compelled to address it in brief. Comments on her disappearance from philosophical thought often take up only a sentence or two in the introductory paragraphs. In these cases, authors oversimplify the cause by attributing it solely to the publication of Godwin's memoir in 1798. For example, in their article analyzing Wollstonecraft's impact on the American women's rights movement, Eileen Botting and Christina Carey state "the *Memoirs* damaged Wollstonecraft's posthumous reputation because it revealed many shocking details about her romantic life including her affair and child with Gilbert Imlay and her premarital sexual

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Gunther-Canada, *Rebel Writer: Mary Wollstonecraft and Enlightenment Politics* (Champaign: Illinois University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Vivian Jones, "The Death of Mary Wollstonecraft," in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 211-232.

<sup>7</sup> Cora Kaplan, "Wild Nights: pleasure/sexuality/feminism," in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 398-410.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Kelly, "Mary Wollstonecraft as *vir bonus*," in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 363-377.

<sup>9</sup> William Godwin, "A Short Residence in Sweden and Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'" (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987).

relationship with Godwin.”<sup>10</sup> This is the only statement in the article regarding Wollstonecraft’s posthumous reputation. While Botting and Carey are not wrong in stating that Godwin’s memoir was damaging, the statement is misleading because it presents the memoir as the sole cause. Unfortunately, Botting and Carey are not alone in making this inaccurate assertion. In an article devoted to the reception of Wollstonecraft’s work, R.M. Janes states the following: “As should now be commonly known, Wollstonecraft’s reputation lapsed as a consequence of... Godwin’s publication of her posthumous works, including *Maria Or The Wrongs of Woman* and his *Memoirs of the Author of Vindication of the Rights of Woman*”.<sup>11</sup> Janes’ article was published in 1978. Since she assumes her statement is already common knowledge, it is apparent that this idea regarding the link between Godwin’s memoir and Wollstonecraft’s reputation has long been a commonly held view among scholars. This essay will challenge that view, as the true cause is more complex than the existing narrative suggests.

This paper will examine primarily letters, newspaper articles and book reviews published during Mary Wollstonecraft’s life and in the years immediately following her death. Close attention will be paid to political figures like Horace Walpole who commented on *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, both because the criticism is relevant and also because Walpole wielded such power in his day. His role as a Whig politician was far more esteemed than Wollstonecraft’s as a middle-class writer and woman. The most extensive source drawn from for this project is *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001*. It compiles over twenty different reviews of Wollstonecraft’s writings. This is beneficial because it allows the reader to garner a sense of the general contemporary reaction to her body of work as a whole—which is itself necessary to gauge the effects such criticism had on her legacy. In the introduction, Harriet Devine Jump concluded that: “It will be clear from these posthumous reviews that a process had begun which was to continue for many years. The *Rights of Woman* was now perceived to be a dangerously radical political text.”<sup>12</sup> This paper has revealed that the process Jump is referring to actually began several years before the publication of *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Unfortunately, contemporary articles in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics* are attributed to the newspaper or journal in which they were published rather than a particular author, making it difficult to contextualize them. Nevertheless, they maintain their significance to this paper’s argument.

Through a close analytical reading of these reviews, the ways in which Wollstonecraft’s ideas were devalued or affirmed is apparent. Through the chronological analysis of source data, this paper will demonstrate how the tone of these reviews changed as her philosophy became more radical—from *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) to *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Despite the aforementioned issue of anonymity, there is a lot of information to be gleaned from each journal or magazine in which these specific articles were published. For example, the *Analytical Review* is complementary of Wollstonecraft’s work and forgiving where other authors are harsh. This can be attributed to both the liberal nature of the publisher and the fact that Wollstonecraft had written for them on

<sup>10</sup> Botting, Eileen Hunt and Christina Carey, “Wollstonecraft’s Philosophical Impact on Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Rights Advocates,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (2004), 707-722.

<sup>11</sup> R.M. Janes, “On the Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft’s: A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (1978), 293-302.

<sup>12</sup> Harriet Devine Jump, “Introduction,” *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge: 2003), 5.

multiple occasions. Reviews and responses to William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* also shed light on the true cause of Wollstonecraft's disappearance from philosophical discussion during the early nineteenth century, considering the general consensus among scholars that this work is the cause. It is clear that Wollstonecraft garnered attention during her life and it is reasonable to think that her tragic and untimely death could have bolstered her popularity. However, as previously stated, her work lost traction for the better part of a century. Through careful analysis of the critical reviews, it becomes clear that that the controversial memoir was by no means the sole catalyst. Rather, it worked to reinforce and add fuel to the claims made by critics during Wollstonecraft's lifetime. Many already felt threatened by her ideas and were working to discredit them, and the posthumous memoir was simply the final bit of evidence necessary for critics to silence her voice for almost a century.

In 1788 the *Monthly Review* published an anonymous review of *Thoughts on The Education of Daughters*, one of Wollstonecraft's milder pieces of writing.<sup>13</sup> The review is generally sympathetic to the piece. However, subtle language is used to undermine Wollstonecraft's ideas. While the author praises Wollstonecraft's "sensible remarks", he—a gender assumption may be made on the statistical likelihood that a man was writing for this journal—makes a point to remind his readers repeatedly that a woman authored *Thoughts on The Education of Daughters*. The first line of the short review begins with the phrase "A female pen."<sup>14</sup> The second sentence opens with "The lady begins."<sup>15</sup> While the author's sex is not wholly unimportant to a review, it is certainly not necessary to mention so frequently. The author of this review intends to undermine her ideas by qualifying her gender. It is as if to say that her ideas are sensible for a woman rather than simply sensible in their own right. This sort of backhanded praise is mild considering the subject of Wollstonecraft's work. *Thoughts on The Education of Daughters* was widely regarded by contemporaries as a subject that women were qualified to write about.

The *Analytical Review*, a more progressive journal for which Wollstonecraft was herself a writer, published an approving review of *Vindication of the Rights of Men* in 1790. The review states that *Vindication* "abounds with just sentiments, and lively and animated remarks" while also commenting on the use of "nervous language" verging on the edge of criticism.<sup>16</sup> Due to the nature of the journal, it is unsurprising to find a sympathetic review of Wollstonecraft's controversial writing, however, the journal stops short of overwhelming praise for the author's ideas. In addition to the sort of lukewarm validation, the *Analytical Review* sidesteps much genuine analysis of *Vindication* by discussing Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* at length. This is relevant as *Vindication of Rights of Man* was written in response to Burke. However, that work was so widely read at the time that it hardly needed to be summarized in this review. The reprinted sample of *Vindication* is a portion of the book in which Wollstonecraft is challenging Burke's ideas on government. It is a relatively tame portion of her argument which allows the *Analytical Review* to avoid any serious controversy. Given that the most progressive journal in England during the late eighteenth century strayed away from fully

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<sup>13</sup> "Review of Thoughts on The Education of Daughters," *Monthly Review*, 1788 in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 21.

<sup>14</sup> "Education of Daughters," *Monthly Review*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> "Review of the Vindication of the Rights of Men," *Analytical Review*, 1792 in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 33-49, 35.

endorsing Wollstonecraft's text, it is unsurprising that more conservative critics were quick to label it as dangerous.

In 1791, the *Monthly Review* published an anonymous review of the same work. The review cannot be considered scathing, yet it is certainly not approving. The author of this article attacks Wollstonecraft's writing style as well as the clarity of her argument by stating "she overloads her sentences with foreign ideas and a multiplicity of words. Her principle assertion often lies concealed among remote connections, dependencies and allusions."<sup>17</sup> This criticism could be considered an exaggeration of Wollstonecraft's shortcomings as an author. However, Wollstonecraft herself admitted to writing *Vindication of the Rights of Man* hastily so as to respond to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* promptly. Modern critics have explained the perceived failings of her writing style as a reflection of her internal struggle both to conform to the traditional conventions of philosophical writing while also denouncing the structures in which they existed.<sup>18</sup> This is undoubtedly a difficult endeavor, though it may not have been apparent to her contemporary readers. Nevertheless, to ignore the value of the argument in favor of criticism of the style does a disservice to Wollstonecraft. As a female author during this era, she would not have been able to succeed if she had not already proven herself a skilled writer and thinker. Criticisms of this nature are certainly not among the most damaging. However, they still play a part in discrediting Wollstonecraft, making her eventual vilification much easier.

In February of 1791, the *Gentleman's Magazine* anonymously published a harsh review of *Vindication*. The article begins by exclaiming "The *rights of men* asserted by a fair lady!" as if the very idea is shocking to the author. In a later paragraph, the author states "We cannot for our lives find a shadow of reason in her declamation."<sup>19</sup> He later qualifies her ideas as dangerous while counterintuitively maintaining the claim that they are "incomprehensible." However, it is important to note that as early as 1792, six years prior to the publication of Godwin's memoir, Wollstonecraft's work was already being labelled dangerous. Furthermore, this review is of *Vindication of Rights of Men*, which is not even Wollstonecraft's most radical text. Her ideas center on the desire for a republican form of government with an attack against the aristocracy on behalf of the poor. The opening statement of this article makes it obvious that the author is primarily offended by Wollstonecraft's gender rather than her ideas. If her ideas were disagreeable to the author it can be assumed that the author, given the customs of the era, would have contested the ideas in a more respectful way. The modern historiography would agree that Wollstonecraft was undoubtedly criticized because of her gender. However, most historians attribute her disappearance from popular thought in the 1800s to the intimate and controversial memoir published by her husband.<sup>20</sup> This *Gentlemen's Magazine* article in particular suggests that her work was controversial enough to be feared prior to the memoir. So while the memoir was certainly a factor that sullied her reputation, her work played a much larger part than many modern historians argue.

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<sup>17</sup>"Review of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman," *Monthly Review*, in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge 2003), 26-27.

<sup>18</sup>Sydney McMillen Conger, "The Sentimental Logic of Wollstonecraft's Prose" in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 22-38.

<sup>19</sup>"Review of the Vindication of Rights of Men," *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1791 in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>20</sup>William Godwin, *A Short Residence in Sweden and Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987).

In reviewing *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—Wollstonecraft’s most famous and contentious piece of writing—even the most civil critics took issue with her arguments. The *Monthly Review* published a fair response to *Vindication* in which the author accurately characterizes Wollstonecraft’s main points. In the opening paragraph the author states, “The fundamental principle, on which the whole argument of this work is founded, is that...women be considered in the light of rational creatures...whose first object of ambition ought to be to obtain a character as a human Being.”<sup>21</sup> He went on to detail Wollstonecraft’s specific grievances and her ideas regarding the necessity of education for women. The author’s commentary on certain excerpts from *Vindication* remained neutral until the final paragraph in which he raised objections to her ideas on education and social advancement. After complimenting Wollstonecraft’s writing style, he states, “We do not, however, so zealously adopt Miss W.’s plan for a REVOLUTION in female education.”<sup>22</sup> He continues: “We do not see, that the condition or the character of women would be improved, by assuming an active part in civil government.”<sup>23</sup> In this manner, he goes on to refute a large number of Wollstonecraft’s assertions including the idea that women should have more opportunities for employment and that distinctions between the sexes are often arbitrary and detrimental. While this author is fair, polite and in many places complimentary of Wollstonecraft, it is still clear that he is fearful of her ideas. It is natural that a critic would disagree with such progressive ideas. However, the extent to which even this fair review disputed every idea Wollstonecraft proposed regarding gender equality demonstrates just how controversial this work was. Though her argument centered around access to education, critics understood that in practice, these ideas suggested radical change to the structure of British society.

Most of the journals are much harsher than the *Monthly Review* when evaluating *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The *Critical Review* published an anonymous critique of the work in 1792 wherein the opening paragraph states that many of Wollstonecraft’s conclusions are absurd.<sup>24</sup> In addition to finding her reasoning flawed, the author fails to see a need for such an argument stating that, “Mental superiority is not an object worth contending for.”<sup>25</sup> This statement alone indicates that Wollstonecraft’s argument has been misinterpreted, as she was arguing that women are mentally capable of equal intelligence and therefore deserve access to equal education. Nowhere in her argument does she advocate for supremacy. In fact, as Mary Lyndon Shanley states, “Wollstonecraft insisted, ‘I do not wish [women] to have power over men, but over themselves.’”<sup>26</sup> The author of the review goes on to argue that Wollstonecraft’s desire for an educated female population would result in a chaotic disruption of present society: “the state would lose 10,000 useful domestic wives, in pursuit of one very indifferent philosopher or statesman.”<sup>27</sup> Again, this is a complete mischaracterization of Wollstonecraft’s argument. During this time, it would have been alarming to think that a large number of women might choose to forgo all responsibilities related to child-rearing. However, this was not

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<sup>21</sup> “Review of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman” *Monthly Review*, 1792, in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 66-78, 67.

<sup>22</sup> *Monthly Review*, 77.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>24</sup> “Review of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman,” *Critical Review*, 1792, in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 50-65.

<sup>25</sup> “Rights of Woman,” *Critical Review*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Lyndon Shanley, “Mary Wollstonecraft on Sensibility, Women’s Rights, and Patriarchal Power,” in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 353-371, 356.

<sup>27</sup> “Rights of Woman,” *Critical Review*, 53.

Wollstonecraft's goal at all. She advocated for women's right to education, but never belittled or denounced domestic duties.<sup>28</sup> Wollstonecraft actually stated that caring for children, particularly infants, "was one of the grand duties annexed to the female character by nature."<sup>29</sup> It is clear that the author of the review had purposefully misconstrued Wollstonecraft's arguments. In addition, the author of this review passed decisive judgment on her legacy by writing, "We shall leave miss Wollstonecraft at least to oblivion: her best friends can never wish that her work should be remembered."<sup>30</sup> This closing line clearly demonstrates that the author was fearful of the potential impact Wollstonecraft's ideas could have on the nature of British society. There was no reason for him to assume that Wollstonecraft's work would be quickly forgotten as it was widely read upon its publication. However, the author had likely decided that it was in his best interest for Wollstonecraft's ideas to be quickly disregarded by the general public. Critical reviews of this nature set the stage for the ultimate rejection of Wollstonecraft's body of work altogether. The process of labelling her ideas as dangerously radical began six years before *A Memoir of the Author of Rights of Woman* was published.

While critical analysis of Wollstonecraft's work during her life lacked the cohesiveness that can be seen in popular opinion of her during the 1800s, it is clear that a large group of critics were already beginning to label her as dangerous. Her goals for women were revolutionary for British society in the 1790s. It is apparent that many critics were fearful of those ideas even before her personal life was exposed to the public. Jump argues that Godwin's memoir caused "Reviewers and commentators [to be] increasingly unable to separate the writer from her texts."<sup>31</sup> While this may be true, it is more accurate to say that critics used the more shocking aspects of her life to *further* discredit her texts—as they had tried to discredit her work in other ways during her lifetime.

Given the popular reasoning for Wollstonecraft's marred reputation, it would make sense that the language of criticism surrounding her work would change. If her scandalous life was the cause, it follows to reason that critics would attack her personal choices provided by Godwin's memoir. While this happened on occasion, much of the available criticisms or reviews of Wollstonecraft's work written after her death contained similar language as those written during her life. Less than a decade after the philosopher's death, Anne Grant mentioned her in a collection of letters: "to refute her arguments would be to write another and a larger book; for there is more pain and skill required to refute ill-founded assertions, than to make them."<sup>32</sup> She in no way mentions the memoir but rather criticizes Wollstonecraft's "ridiculous subject" and warns those who would "adopt her vanity and skepticism."<sup>33</sup> While vanity and skepticism are certainly attacks on Wollstonecraft's character, they are unrelated to the content of the memoir. Besides, this attack was much more civil than Horace Walpole's, a politician who famously referred to Wollstonecraft as both a "hyena in

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<sup>28</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967).

<sup>29</sup> Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> "Rights of Woman," *Critical Review*, 65.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001. Vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Anne Grant, "Letters from the Mountains: Being the Real Correspondence of a Lady Between the Years of 1773 and 1807," in Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001 (New York: Routledge, 2003), 174.

<sup>33</sup> Anne Grant, "Letters," 177.

petticoats” and a “philosophizing serpent.”<sup>34</sup> If the memoir played as large a role as many critics suggest, we would expect to see more attacks like Walpole’s after its publication rather than before. Because the attacks were more vicious during her life, it indicates that those critiques were the primary cause of her tarnished reputation. If anything, the memoir simply served to strengthen existing criticisms.

This trend continued in 1843 when Anne Elwood published *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England*.<sup>35</sup> Like Grant, Elwood took a strictly professional approach to reviewing Wollstonecraft’s work. In doing so, she makes no allusions to the subject’s personal life but rather qualifies the merit of her arguments. Elwood offers praise for Wollstonecraft’s “bold and original way of thinking” while criticizing her “masculine style of writing.”<sup>36</sup> George Eliot, twelve years later, composed a comparison between Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft in which she is also able to separate the work of the latter from the intimate details of her life.<sup>37</sup> In contrast to Grant, Eliot is complimentary of Wollstonecraft’s ideas while indicating the areas in which they fall short. Because these are among the earliest available criticisms to discuss Wollstonecraft’s work after 1798, they provide the best insight into public perception of her as both an author and feminist figure.

It would be possible for critics of this argument to point to reviews of Godwin’s memoir—which examine Wollstonecraft’s life in depth—as evidence that it was the overwhelming cause of her damaged reputation. While many of these reviews are damning, at least one publication defends her character. *The Edinburgh Magazine* published a review of *Memoirs* in 1798. After providing readers with an in-depth description of Wollstonecraft’s life, as told by Godwin, the author defends both of her premarital sexual relationships. The review closes with, “These Posthumous Pieces, notwithstanding their detached condition, partake fully of the lively sensibility and instructive sagacity of Mrs. G.”<sup>38</sup> The author is far more critical of Godwin’s writing style than any choices Wollstonecraft made. His primary complaint was that he failed to provide readers with details of Wollstonecraft’s intellectual development in addition to the factual details of his wife’s life. This demonstrates the author’s ability to value Wollstonecraft’s ideas despite knowing the intimate details of the author’s life.

However, this author’s attitude was by no means the norm, which is unsurprising given the criticisms she faced during her life. When the same work was reviewed in *The Scott’s Review*, the author is unforgiving. Prior to any summary of the memoir, the author states that, “Her conduct in the early part of her life was blameless, if not exemplary; but the latter part of it blemished with actions, which must consign her name to posterity (in spite of all palliatives).”<sup>39</sup> This critic clearly believes that Wollstonecraft’s actions should have an immense impact upon the reception of her work. A similar opinion is expressed in several other reviews of *Memoirs*, in varying degrees of intensity. However, given the memoir did not provoke

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<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Robbins Pennell, *Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin: Eminent Women Series*, (London: W.H. Allen, 1885), 41-42.

<sup>35</sup> Anne Elwood, “Extracts from: *Memoirs of the Literary Ladies of England*,” 1843, in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York, Routledge, 2003), 178-180.

<sup>36</sup> Anne Elwood, “*Memoirs of Literary Ladies*,” 179.

<sup>37</sup> George Eliot, “Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft,” 1855, in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Critics, 1788-2001* (New York, Routledge, 2003), 181-186.

<sup>38</sup> “*Memoirs of Mrs. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin*,” *The Edinburgh Magazine*, 1798, British Periodicals, 259.

<sup>39</sup> “*Memoirs of Mrs. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,” *The Scots Magazine* (1798), 255-301.

a unanimous, negative reaction from critics indicates that its role in tarnishing Wollstonecraft's reputation cannot be as singular as they often suggest. If the memoir alone caused Wollstonecraft's work to be ignored for fifty years, we would not expect to see a single author write in support of her ideas, much less defend her choices. Instead, it is clear that the memoir simply aided critics in an ongoing effort to undermine and delegitimize Wollstonecraft's then-radical ideas.

To allow the faulty state of dialogue currently surrounding Wollstonecraft to persist is an injustice. Attributing her tarnished reputation solely to the memoir serves to place the blame either on Wollstonecraft for her choices and misfortunes as a person or on Godwin for his judgment in writing about them. In any case, it absolves the critics of all blame when in fact a large number of critics purposefully discredited Wollstonecraft out of fear that her ideas would disrupt the societal hierarchy from which they benefited. At most, Godwin's account of his late wife's life unintentionally aided existing efforts to delegitimize her ideas, but it was by no means the sole cause of her damaged reputation. Understanding this distinction also helps us to appreciate the impact of her ideas during her lifetime. Accepting the memoir-centered explanation might suggest that her personal choices were more shocking and problematic than her arguments, when in fact the converse is true.

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