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Mary Wollstonecraft's lost letter, found

The following is a fictitious letter that was inspired by Janet Todd's 'speculative reconstruction' of fragments from letters written to the Swiss-born, English painter Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) by a love-sick Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). Todd, editor of *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (2003), explains that 'Knowles [Fuseli's biographer] printed brief excerpts from Wollstonecraft's many letters to the Fuselis (originals now lost) [...]; all are undated but were probably written late in 1792' (2003: 205). John Knowles (1781-1841), who published his three-volume biography in 1831, was also cruel if not insulting in his summary of Fuseli's rejection of Wollstonecraft: 'Fuseli found in her (what he most disliked in woman) a philosophical sloven: her usual dress being a habit of coarse cloth, such as is now worn by milk-women, black worsted stockings, and a beaver hat, with her hair hanging lank about her shoulders' (1831: 165). That Fuseli may have been the main reason for Wollstonecraft to escape to France for what was going to be a period of two years is attested to in William Godwin's *Memoirs* (1798): 'One of her principal inducements to this step, related, I believe, to Mr. Fuseli' (Godwin). Godwin, who had lost Wollstonecraft to puerperal fever, wrote clouded by grief but also second hand — and he presents his late wife as 'a female Werter [*sic*]', noting that 'she perceived too late, that, by continually impressing on her mind fruitless images of unreserved affection and domestic felicity, it only served to give new pungency to the sensibility that was destroying her' (Godwin 1798). We cannot, however, be certain that Mary told her husband everything. Godwin, in addition, wrote and published *Memoirs* shortly after Wollstonecraft's untimely death, when he was deeply upset and grieving. There was hardly time to talk to her family or deliberate in detail what happened to Wollstonecraft before she met and married Godwin.

Wollstonecraft and Fuseli first met at the publisher Joseph Johnson's house and probably as early as 1788, which is the year Fuseli married Sophia Rawlins, a much younger and very stylish wife. Wollstonecraft and Fuseli met at Johnson's dinner parties and would have looked at Fuseli's *The Nightmare*, discussing the new versions of the painting that he was then working on. *The Nightmare* is ripe with symbolism. While the work may represent Fuseli's ideal woman, I wonder what Wollstonecraft saw when she looked at it. The assumption is that when Wollstonecraft left for France, to see the Revolution first-hand, she was hankering after him. The made-up letter imagines that Mary wrote to Blake as a friend.

They, too, had met at Johnson's. When looking at Fuseli's *Nightmare*, Wollstonecraft, I believe, saw in this eroticised image a symbol of women's lifeless and unconscious habits. The weight of the incubus serves as a referent for an oppressed state of mind.

London, 13 December 1792

Dear Will,

I am done with all that noisy talk about the Revolution at Johnson's. I have not heard about any changes and feel deep disappointment and think that I have no alternative but to travel to France where I hope to begin a new life. I have packed my bags and intend to never return to London.

The favour I ask of you concerns our friend Fuseli. He is admired for his talent and fame, but I can see now that he is a shallow little man who has held me captive. He has been squatting on my chest like that horrid creature in the painting Johnson loves so much. I can see how his hand swooped across the canvas, slicing the flesh of that woman who is all but an empty vessel. I can no longer tolerate it.

It hurts so much. Have I not rushed to Johnson's house, abandoning my work in mid-sentence? He used to arrive early, and with Johnson busy welcoming his other guests, I could snatch a few moments. Time and again his attitude was one of reproof and belittlement. First with looks and then with words. My own words could not put a stop to it; he has been toying with me and now I must leave. I have shaken him off. I have healed my own mind and learned what I believe other women should be educated about.

I wish I had never committed my deepest thoughts about him to paper. Might he not hand you my letters? Would you try him for me? I simply could not bear anyone to think that I am in love with him.

Forever yours,

Mary

PS: Please commit my words to your heart and burn this letter.

Further Reading

Gaunt, William M., *Arrows of Desire: A Study of William Blake and his Romantic World*
(London: Museum Press Ltd., 1956)

Godwin, William, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798)
<<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16199/16199-h/16199-h.htm>> [accessed 16 July 2021]

Knowles, John, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli, Esq. M. A. R. A., Keeper and Professor of Painting to the Royal Academy in London; Member of the First Class of the Academy of St. Luke in Rome*, 3 vols (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), I
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38591/38591-h/38591-h.htm#FNanchor_40_40>
[accessed 16 July 2021]

Wollstonecraft, Mary, *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. by Janet Todd
(London: Allen Lane, 2003)