

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: A REVOLUTIONARY LIFE

Janet Todd. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000.

EMPOWERING THE FEMININE: THE NARRATIVES OF MARY ROBINSON, JANE WEST, AND AMELIA OPIE, 1796-1812

Eleanor Ty. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.

BY LISA WOOD

It's no easy task to write Mary Wollstonecraft's life. Not only has there been a proliferation of Wollstonecraft biographies since the 1970s, but Wollstonecraft occupies a privileged place in feminist history. As writer of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which articulates her revolutionary feminist philosophy, she has come to be considered the first modern feminist. Her life and work laid out many of the questions that continue to challenge feminists of the early 21st century: is femininity "natural" or a social construct? what is the relationship between desire (especially heterosexual desire) and feminist politics? and how do we transfer feminist theory into the realm of lived experience?

Janet Todd positions Wollstonecraft within feminist history not only as a theorist, but as the first writer to explore a modern form of female subjectivity: "In Woll-

stonecraft's writings a new female consciousness comes into being, one that valued and reflected endlessly on its own workings." To this end, Todd focusses on the connections between Wollstonecraft's experience, her representation of that experience in her letters, fiction, reviews and theoretical writings, and her feminist thought. This project demands the inclusion of a wealth of biographical detail, which sets Todd's biography apart from previous versions of Wollstonecraft's life.

Wollstonecraft's rise as "the first of a new genus" (as she termed herself)—a woman writer and intellectual within the radical group surrounding the publisher Joseph Johnson in London—is carefully laid out by Todd, and interwoven with her experiences as a sister and daughter (she was the main financial support of her two sisters, two brothers, and, grudgingly, of her abusive father), a lover, a revolutionary, and a mother. Todd draws links between these levels, to show that there was a reciprocal relationship between Wollstonecraft's experience in all of these roles and her political theory. This argument is not new; Todd's contribution is to offer persuasive connections grounded in solid textual and historical evidence.

In spite of weighty and detailed research, the early chapters dealing with Wollstonecraft's girlhood rely heavily on speculation. Very little is known about Wollstonecraft's early years, and in the absence of other evidence Todd has turned to local periodicals and municipal and church records to flesh out her portrait of a peripatetic childhood in London, Beverley, and the village of Laugharne in Wales. Yet there is little support for such statements as "[c]ontemplating [Beverley Minster] she could not have avoided gaining some taste for religious beauty," or, describing a family trip across country, "[g]iven their father's volatile temper, they must have turned ill humour on each other."

However, this opening section also displays one of the strengths of the biography: its ability to reproduce the detail and texture of the experience of a young middle-class woman in the late eighteenth century. A discussion of Wollstonecraft's reading leads into an explanation of George Cheyne's nerve theory and its link to the cult of sensibility; her trip to Portugal in 1785 provides an opportunity to explain how a British sea traveller of the period could obtain passage to Europe; and the family's move to Beverley allows a description of the kind of amenities available in an English country town in the 1770s. Not just a biography, this is a reference book for the cultural context of late eighteenth-century Britain.

However, the historical detail I have singled out as the most impressive feature of this biography also makes for some confusing reading. The lengthy list of "Principal Characters" at the beginning is absolutely necessary to the coherence of the narrative. A more obvious placement of dates within the biography itself would facilitate the job of situating events chronologically. I found myself turning to Claire Tomalin's biography as I was reading Todd's, simply for her chronology of Wollstonecraft's life. This, however, is a small complaint about what is an impressive scholarly undertaking.

Like Todd's biography, Eleanor Ty's recent monograph, *Empowering the Feminine*, deals with the intersection of experience, writing, and female subjectivity. Building on her earlier work in *Unsex'd Females: Five Women Novelists of the 1790s* (1993), Ty expands her reading to include women writers of the same period who are less overtly revolutionary. Sections on the moderately radical Mary Robinson and Amelia Opie frame a central analysis of the deeply conservative Jane West. In contrast to Mary Wollstonecraft, these writers seem less obvious subjects of feminist

scholarly inquiry, yet Ty's approach here proves valuable to feminist literary history. Reading these writers against one another allows Ty to move beyond the well-documented "war of ideas" between radicals and conservatives, or Jacobins and anti-Jacobins, to examine the shared project of these writers: constructing an empowered female subjectivity in fiction. "Robinson, West, and Opie," Ty argues, "each explored the various ways women could empower themselves and be empowered without necessarily breaking with cultural definitions of the feminine."

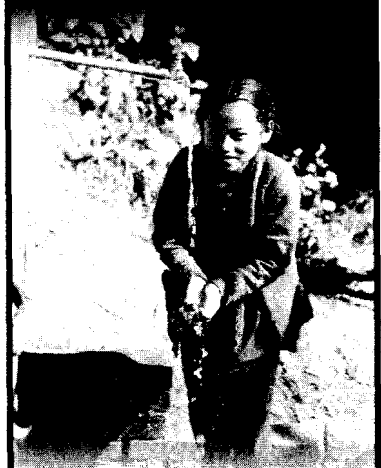
Ty grounds her analysis in poststructuralist theories of language and psychology, drawing specifically on the work of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Lacan. Psychoanalysis as a feminist methodology has drawn frequent criticism on the grounds that it assumes a transhistorical gendered subject. Ty counters this criticism by proposing a subject that maintains some transhistorical elements, but is at the same time constituted by historical conditions. More importantly, she historicizes her argument by positioning each writer within her cultural context, tracing each text's engagement with contemporary political, aesthetic, and social debates.

Individual chapters, each of which deals with a separate novel, explore the ways in which female subjectivity is constituted textually. Acknowledging the contention of recent scholars that femininity in novels of this period is highly politicized, Ty explores the ways in which female characters are made to represent complex social issues. The seduced heroine of West's *A Tale of the Times* (1799), for instance, becomes the British nation in danger of seduction by French and revolutionary philosophy; Opie's characterization of Agnes in *The Father and Daughter* (1801) challenges contemporary assumptions of the social role of the "fallen" woman. The psychoanalytic

aspect of female subjectivity is foregrounded in Ty's attention to family structures, particularly mother/daughter and father/daughter relationships, which she places in the context of the Freudian "family romance." The way each writer represents these relationships is, Ty argues, closely linked to her political philosophy. By exploring this intersection of politics and psychology, *Empowering the Feminine* offers a refreshing new perspective on these texts.

Part of the value of *Empowering the Feminine* is its serious engagement with works, like West's *Infidel Father* (1802) and Opie's *Temper* (1812), that rarely receive critical attention. Devoting an entire chapter to each text allows for a detailed and distinct analysis, and contributes to the structural clarity of the study. There are thematic similarities between chapters, however, that make me long for some overlapping analysis, even at the risk of messiness. More explicit connections could be drawn, for instance, between the differing uses of the prevalent topos of the fallen woman in the work of all three writers. This minor observation aside, *Empowering the Feminine* is an important contribution to the study of the women writers of this period, and certainly promises, as Ty hopes in her afterword, to "encourage alternative readings and other ways of engaging with these texts."

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