

Wollstonecraft's Ghost:

The Fate of the Female Philosopher in the Romantic Period

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Abstract

Mary Wollstonecraft's ghost haunts women's writing of the Romantic period. After her untimely death in 1797, and the publication of William Godwin's candid biography in 1798, Wollstonecraft's reputation was besmirched by the reactionary press in an attack on radical support for revolutionary ideals. Wollstonecraft's campaign for women's rights was conflated with a representation of her as sexually promiscuous, politically dangerous and religiously unorthodox. For women writing after Wollstonecraft's death, an engagement with her political ideals risked identification with her lifestyle, deemed both improper and impious. My thesis explores how women writers negotiated Wollstonecraft's scandalous reputation in order to discuss her influential feminist arguments and develop their own positions on these pressing issues in post-revolutionary Britain.

In the early nineteenth century, Wollstonecraft's life and work gets elided with the figure of the female philosopher, already popular in both pro- and counter-revolutionary writing of the 1790s. After Wollstonecraft's death, fictional female philosophers echo elements of her biography whilst voicing an often caricatured version of her arguments. By rejecting these satirically overblown feminist positions, women writers could adopt a more moderate form of feminism, often closer to Wollstonecraft's original polemic, to critique cultural restrictions on women, revealing how these warp female behaviour. My project modifies our understanding of the origins of modern feminism by focussing on Wollstonecraft's reception across a range of socially and politically diverse texts, and the ways in which the process of reading itself is treated as potentially revolutionary.

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