

WRITING *THE WRONGS OF WOMAN*

by

S. HALEY JACOBSEN

(Under the Direction of Roxanne Eberle)

ABSTRACT

In William Godwin's 1798 publication of *Posthumous Works of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, we find Mary Wollstonecraft's last, yet unfinished, literary attempt, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria. A Fragment*. Although Godwin claims to leave the novella in its original, "found" state, he nevertheless participates in editorial practices that grant the text a sublime aestheticism. Through interlacing the theories of Romantic Fragment Poems, prose poetry, and the fluid text, I intend to reveal the multiplicity of text, a theory to which both Wollstonecraft and Godwin cater in their writing and editing, respectively. I contend that they both advance a reading of the fluid text, albeit by different means. As such, I consider their efforts separately yet nevertheless complementary in penning a "lyric novella," a term I believe best represents the text in hand.

INDEX WORDS: Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria. A Fragment*, Fluid Text, Romantic Fragment Poems, Prose Poetry

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	1
A Constellation of Applied Theories.....	5
A Glimpse Ahead .....	24
2 CHAPTER TWO: INTRA-TEXTUAL FLUIDITIES IN MARIA.....	28
A Patchwork of Memoirs .....	36
A Love Story in the Marginalia: Reading the Fluid Text.....	42
3 CHAPTER THREE: WILLIAM GODWIN’S EDITING OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT .....	47
Composition at a Glance .....	47
Composing and Decomposing.....	56
Ending <i>Maria</i> in Collapse .....	60
4 CODA.....	68
REFERENCES .....	71
APPENDICES	
A <i>Maria</i> ’s Cover Page.....	75
B <i>Maria</i> ’s Title Page.....	76
C <i>Maria</i> ’s Contents Page .....	77

## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

In 1798, a year after Mary Wollstonecraft's death, William Godwin published two works in an attempt to secure his late wife's literary standing. The first was *Posthumous Works of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a four-volume collection compiled from the loose sheaves Wollstonecraft left scattered upon her death (Rajan 205). Once edited and bound together in *Posthumous Works*, these collated manuscripts revealed Mary Wollstonecraft's unfinished novella, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria. A Fragment*, as well as an assortment of excerpted letters and other miscellaneous writings that never made it to print during her lifetime.<sup>1</sup> In an effort to paint a more intimate picture of Wollstonecraft that would shade in the outline of the "unsexed"<sup>2</sup> political figure with which people were familiar, Godwin published, in that same year, *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the first biography of Wollstonecraft, which quickly eclipsed *Posthumous Works* in sales. As many scholars<sup>3</sup> have previously noted, Godwin's efforts to consolidate Wollstonecraft's writings and to unite her political, literary persona with her personal one did not achieve the success Godwin anticipated;

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<sup>1</sup> That is, with the exception of Wollstonecraft's "Essay on Poetry and Our Relish for the Beautiful," which appeared in a monthly magazine before being published as a part of *Posthumous Works* (Godwin, Preface to *Posthumous Works*)

<sup>2</sup> A term I borrow from Eleanor Ty, who quotes theologian Reverend Richard Polwhele, author of *Unsex'd Females: A Poem* in which he "denounced the followers of Mary Wollstonecraft as unnatural and 'unsex'd' women resigned to 'Gallic freaks' and 'Gallic faith'" (Ty 3), in her acclaimed work, *Unsex'd Revolutionaries*. Roxanne Eberle similarly quotes "unsex'd," describing Wollstonecraft as "the most notoriously 'unsexed' British Heroine and Proto-New Woman" in *Chastity and Transgression in Women's Writing* (Eberle 237).

<sup>3</sup> Tilottama Rajan, Mitzi Myers, Michelle Faubert, and Gary Kelly, to name a few.

rather than stabilizing Wollstonecraft's literary reputation, the two works dismantled it for nearly a century.

The highly explicit information Godwin controversially chose to reveal is a primary factor contributing to *Memoirs*' commercial success. In this first print edition of her biography, Godwin candidly unveils personal details about Wollstonecraft – confirmation of the rumor that her two pregnancies occurred out of wedlock as well as accounts of her multiple suicide attempts and of her relationships with Gilbert Imlay and Henry Fuseli – all of which earned her the reputation as a “fallen woman” with dangerous philosophies (Faubert 30). In a letter to William Taylor in 1804, Robert Southey famously critiques *Memoirs* and Godwin for “want of all feeling in stripping his dead wife naked” (quoted in Faubert 30). By shining light on the Jacobin writer and exposing her as human – that is, “reckless, passionate, [and] experimental,” according to Tilottama Rajan, or perhaps most simply, both rational *and* emotional – Godwin provided nineteenth-century readers and critics with ammunition to attack Wollstonecraft as a political figure, as a philosopher, as a woman, and as a writer (Rajan 212). For nearly a century after the publication of these two works, it is clear that Godwin's editing of Wollstonecraft's life changed the way people approached her and her writing. Even today, we can still find the reverberations of his editing in the critical discourse focusing on her sexual history instead of on her literary achievements. Upon its publication and success, *Memoirs* became the critical lens through which people read Wollstonecraft, and one that was repeatedly recreated in biographies following Godwin's infamous 1798 publication.

Wollstonecraft's political essays, particularly *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), largely recovered from the wreckage of her reputation and acquired greater attention as they were resituated in feminist theory in the late-nineteenth century, with Mathilde Blind and

“campaigns for women’s suffrage and educational equality” (Kelly 225), and in the mid-twentieth century, with New-Women-era writers rebuilding Wollstonecraft as a feminist icon (Eberle 236). The reception of her novellas, on the other hand, remained consistently marginal. Although occasionally appearing in print in various editions of Wollstonecraft’s collected works, most notably Camilla Jebb’s 1912 collection (Eberle 242), *Mary, A Fiction* and *Maria* received very little scholarly attention until recently, often being considered in Wollstonecraft’s own words as “crude production[s]” of fiction and accordingly cast aside in favor of her popular political essays (*Letters* 404). While *Mary, A Fiction* accrued some recognition in the Romantic period and was among Wollstonecraft’s major works reprinted at the turn of the nineteenth century, *Maria* went unnoticed and unpublished, with only occasional appearances in the form of excerpts in the aforementioned collected works. Some scholars point to Godwin’s initial publication of *Maria* in *Posthumous Works* as the reason for readers’ initial and continued dismissal of the unfinished novella. Branded incomplete and buried in a work filled with other posthumous writings, which were quickly overshadowed by the more frequently read *Memoirs*, *Maria* received a disadvantageous start.

Godwin’s publications of and on Wollstonecraft in 1798 have long been considered the reason for Wollstonecraft’s “fall” in the public’s eye, and not without cause. Although the extent to which Godwin is blamed varies, it is clear that *Posthumous Works* and *Memoirs* contributed to the decline in Wollstonecraft’s reputation in the nineteenth century. It is also not a far associative leap to claim that these publications indirectly established a precedent for misreading her works (as well as providing a justification for ignoring her philosophies altogether). In this thesis, I do not intend to reject this longstanding consensus. I do, however, adopt a more sympathetic view toward Godwin’s editing that considers his efforts as acting in line with Wollstonecraft’s own

writing endeavors. While acknowledging the likely unintended consequence of nearly a century of misrepresenting the author by focusing solely on her sexuality, a consequence largely brought on by the chosen paratexts, I argue that Godwin's publication of *Maria* presents Wollstonecraft and her ideas in a nuanced manner befitting of their complexity, and that the historical context into which *Posthumous Works* and *Memoirs* entered is more to blame for Wollstonecraft's fall than his editorial choices. While it is true that Godwin should have been aware of the context into which he published these two works (and thus expectant of the damage he caused Wollstonecraft's reputation), I believe that if he had not published them as they are, the consequence would be much worse, for these writings' preservation would not have been guaranteed.

In this thesis, I contend that Godwin's embrace and preservation of *Maria*'s roughness ensures the text's inexhaustible nature, as a reader will always be needed to construct the text. As such, I divide my attention equally between Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, and the reader in my examination of *Maria*. Intersecting Marjorie Levinson's theory on the Romantic Fragment Poem (RFP), Donna Stonecipher's comparison between prose poetry and cities, and John Bryant's "fact" of the fluid text, I attempt to define what kind of text Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and the reader jointly pen. Using a historical poetics perspective, I consider *Maria* as a prose-poem-hybrid, a "lyric novella." Although neither Wollstonecraft nor Godwin labeled *Maria* as such, they both participate in practices that complicate the text's genre and accordingly open it up to new literary possibilities, possibilities I will explore in depth here. In considering *Maria* a lyric novella, I view Godwin's editorial practices in a different light from scholars before me and argue that they appropriately respond to the unfinished, experimental nature of the text in hand, providing readers with a living monument of Wollstonecraft and her writing.

### A Constellation of Applied Theories

In uniting theories of the Romantic Fragment Poem, prose poetry, and the fluid text in my discussion of *Maria*, I hope to provide readers with a deeper understanding of *Maria*'s highly complex form while also elucidating the effects of Godwin's editing of the novella and, by extension, of Mary Wollstonecraft, the literary, political figure. Before offering a definition of the lyric novella, the designation that I believe best characterizes *Maria*, I want to first attend to other classifications (and traditions) with which *Maria* engages before ending with a brief meditation on the limitations of using genre in the first place. What follows then is an introduction to my methodologies. The original, and perhaps simplest, way to refer to *Maria* remains Godwin's broad label – a Romantic fragment – which is a categorization that nods to the genre Marjorie Levison identifies as the Romantic Fragment Poem (RFP). As an unfinished novella, *Maria* does not neatly conform to Levinson's definition of the RFP – “an unfinished *poem* [...] written by an English Romantic *poet*” (14 italics added). However, as the RFP was identified ex post facto, it lacks a certain cohesion that arises from writers knowingly engaging with and adding to a genre, as in the rise of the German Fragment Poem (Levinson 11). Thus, there remains a certain elasticity to the genre that makes extending it to include *Maria* far from unrealistic, despite any initial hesitation to do just that.

In my reading, I accept the flexibility of *Maria*'s form in tandem with the flexibility of the RFP as a genre. As I explore in chapter two, I join Romanticist Tilottama Rajan in recognizing the impact of Godwin's editing via assembling and disassembling *Maria*'s form to fit within prose *and* poetic structures. Both *Maria* and RFPs then reject typical, strict classifications as both rely on an assemblage of “prefabricated materials and units,” whether those include combining “gothic-tragic; coda-preface,” as Levinson identifies in RFPs, or the

blend of prose and poetry, as we will see in *Maria*. Levinson's definition of the RFP further allows for the slippage between prose and poetry that appears in Wollstonecraft's novella through Godwin's editing, as Levinson defines poetry as "an *interruption* of the linear, diachronic flow of language from a referent, through a code of grammar, to a listener" (Levinson 199; italics added). Levinson's definition proves crucial as it echoes both Bryant, who defines poetry as "language that always calls attention to itself" (48), and Stonecipher, who describes prose poetry as "a walking imbued with dancing, a seemingly goal-oriented use of language shot through with uselessness, with enchantment" (Stonecipher 41). These definitions elucidate Godwin's role in composing *Maria*, as his editing materializes as a series of interruptions meant to refocus the reader's attention on Wollstonecraft's language. In other words, Godwin allows us to read Wollstonecraft's *Maria* as a poem. Halting the reading experience with every editorial comment, Godwin forces the reader to approach *Maria* with a carefulness and a particular rhythm that is not often found when reading novels, but rather felt, once again calling upon Stonecipher's definition, through dance, through poetry.<sup>4</sup> Wollstonecraft also encourages a circular reading experience that mimics the movement of dance. Through representations of reading and the practice of interrupted listening, Wollstonecraft advances a poetic reading of the novella. Accordingly, Wollstonecraft and Godwin jointly guide the reader through the text, offering signage as to where we should stop and adopt a new perspective.<sup>5</sup>

As Godwin embraces poetic (and prose poetry) conventions, his editing of *Maria* turns away from the very form that precipitates the RFP and from which *Maria* is constructed – that is, published literary remains. While commenting on the predecessors of the RFP, Levinson explicitly addresses (poetic) fragments published as collected remains in the eighteenth century,

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<sup>4</sup> Or, as we will see once we get to Bryant's fluid text theory, in the experience of hiccupping.

<sup>5</sup> This focus on perspective will become especially important in our discussion of prose poetry and cities.

a genre in which *Maria* initially appears to fit as it is situated amongst Wollstonecraft's other unfinished writings and published in *Posthumous Works*. However, Levinson's characterization of this genre contradicts nearly every other aspect of Godwin's edition of *Maria*, beginning with the claim that the fragments published in these editions are "offered by way of biographical or possibly technical insight rather than as works presumed capable of eliciting and satisfying certain aesthetic expectations" (Levinson 21). While I admit that there is a biographical focus to *Maria*, as scholars<sup>6</sup> and readers repeatedly attempt to overlay Maria, the heroine, onto Wollstonecraft, the author, it is not in place of aesthetic considerations of form. I recognize that this definition of collected remains may not neatly fit *Maria* because it is a novel and not a fragmented poem; nevertheless, it is clear that Godwin's edition of *Maria* is aware of the "aesthetic expectations" of both published literary remains and "finished" Romantic novellas as he both abides by and subverts them through his editing. In line with this thinking, Rajan argues that *Maria* flirts with many other genres yet also fails to meet their criteria.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, a pattern emerges that indicates Godwin's purposeful complication of genre, a pattern that matches Wollstonecraft's own writing philosophy and her rejection of classification.

Finally, Levinson observes that the editors of these collected remains also often "suppress available 'workshop' fragments" because of their "admiration for the poet – that is to say, for his sanctioned, or greatest and most polished (finished) achievement" (Levinson 21; italics added). Again, this description may not apply to *Maria* because Levinson is speaking of poetry rather than of prose. With that concession made, Godwin's edition of *Maria* directly opposes this

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<sup>6</sup> Tilottama Rajan and Gary Kelly, to name a few.

<sup>7</sup> "The same problem of linkage arises with regard to the text's literary genre, which could be that of the story, whose forensic criteria of unity and plausibility Wollstonecraft fails to meet. Or it could be that of the sentimental romance or emancipatory program, which, in their different ways, evade these criteria. Or indeed it could be the genre of literary remains," but yet again, through Godwin's editing, *Maria* fails to meet the criteria articulated by Levinson as particular to that genre (Rajan 209).

characterization of “published literary remains,” suggesting that he desires for *Maria* to be read outside of, or at least adjacent to, that tradition. As we will see with Godwin’s incessant editorial interventions beginning as early as the title page, Godwin deliberately pushes the boundary of narrative form (and perhaps form itself) in his embrace of irresolution. Rather than suppressing the “workshop” writings, Godwin embraces and elevates them to a level on par with Wollstonecraft’s more complete and “polished” achievements. In writing *Maria*, Wollstonecraft is also pushing back against tradition by arguing for “unfinished” heroines as opposed to the more polished ones of her contemporaries. Therefore, Wollstonecraft and Godwin are working in tandem to promote an unfinished and unpolished text that reveals the true condition of woman in society in nineteenth-century England.

Furthermore, it is important to note that while Levinson’s generalizations about collected remains published in the eighteenth century indicate Godwin’s turn away from that literary tradition and *Maria*’s proximity to the RFP, her suggestion that “to publish such fragments would be to expose one’s author half-dressed” certainly rings true (Levinson 22). Yet, this is a quality that collected remains and RFPs share, as Levinson contends that the RFP “comes to its readers *en déshabille*” (Levinson 203). Reminiscent of Southey’s aforementioned complaint regarding *Memoirs*, Godwin strips *Maria* down to its bare bones, just as he exposes a “naked” Wollstonecraft in his first biography of her. Rather than smoothing over the roughness resulting from the work being unfinished, Godwin embraces it and makes the reader aware of every punctuation error, every narrative gap, every conceivable blemish through his exhaustive editing. Its nakedness becomes an intentional aesthetic consideration. As we will see, Wollstonecraft also presents her characters “*en déshabille*.” Rejecting the more “polished” heroine – or, in Wollstonecraft’s own words, the “highly finished Minervas” (Wollstonecraft 158) –

Wollstonecraft opts instead for a gritty realness that at once confronts the reader with the unsettling underbelly of English society and its treatment of women and charges the reader with an increased narrative responsibility, requiring that they work to piece together, to “clothe,”<sup>8</sup> the text, imbuing it with their own experiences and suppositions and, as I will argue later, a sense of presentness. Wollstonecraft and Godwin strip characters, authors, and texts alike, engaging in a late-eighteenth-century practice of prioritizing the real, or to use Godwin’s alternative title to *Caleb Williams*, revealing “things as they are.” It falls on the reader to dress each (the character, author, and text) and fill in the gaps that mark the text as real, as fluid, a practice that, in turn, ensures the text’s timelessness and inexhaustible nature. The gaps intrinsic to *Maria* are made to be a marker not of the text’s frailty but rather its robustness. Because of the gaps Wollstonecraft purposefully interlaces in the novella and that Godwin augments by publishing it in its unfinished form, *Maria* outlasts traditional publishing restraints as readers are repeatedly instructed to bring the text into the present.

Levinson offers another definition of the RFP that more directly and unquestionably includes *Maria* and that further reveals the newfound significance of the reader in the Romantic period. Revisiting her previous definition (“unfinished poem [...] written by an English Romantic poet”), Levinson adds that RFP refers to a work whose “irresolution is thematized” (Levinson 8). As a published fragment, Godwin ensures that the fragmentary form in which Wollstonecraft left *Maria* is preserved and interrogated by the reader. In her work, Levinson acknowledges a close connection between a work’s unfinished-ness and the added responsibility

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<sup>8</sup> In using this extended metaphor of texts coming to the reader “*en déshabille*” and suggesting that readers must “clothe” the text, I do not mean to suggest that they must cover up the imperfections. Rather, I mean that by clothing the text, they offer their own personal perspective to fill the gaps. As long as responsibility rests on readers’ shoulders, the text will remain relatable (and “inexhaustible” to use Levinson’s term) as it will accommodate eighteenth-century and modern readers alike.

of the reader. As irresolution relies on “an idea of completion,” that idea “naturally varies in accordance with the *particular* idea of resolution felt to be relevant” to the *particular* reader (Levinson 25). According to Levinson, “the RFP displays the gaps that separate what the poet would say from what he can say,” leaving the reader to guess at what the “ideal (abstract and extrinsic) whole which the RFP projects.” Because the whole can never be fully realized, the reader is left aware of the distance between part and whole, the text and its Platonic ideal, a distance that will be especially important in defining both the prose poem and the fluid text. Cognizant of these gaps, the form then invites the reader to step into the text and participate in its very construction, as Levinson cleverly equates “how a particular fragment constructs its readers” to “how it seeks to make a reader construct it” (Levinson 25). The poem’s irresolution then becomes a kind of “shaped absence,” one that is filled with vibrating tensions (“part to whole, text to poem, writing to reading,” etc. (Levinson 217)) to which the reader must be in tune.<sup>9</sup> In engaging in the RFP tradition, I contend that the reader of *Maria* is made to be a writer and editor like Wollstonecraft and Godwin.

*Maria*’s poetic and aesthetic capabilities that connect it to the Romantic Fragment Poem tradition contradictorily challenge the text’s genre and overall form. Levinson turns to Rilke who explains these gaps in relation to high art. When viewing one of Rodin’s armless statues, Rilke contemplates the feeling of completeness. His realization suggests that we, as human beings, often engage in closural conventions that give us a feeling of completeness even when the thing itself is not. While we do tend to participate in these conventions and imagine what an unfinished text would look like, Godwin seems intent on subverting that natural inclination through his editing. Rather than considering the work as “complete,” he wants us to be aware of *Maria*’s

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<sup>9</sup> As I will address in chapter one, we can find “shaped absence” mirrored in the content of the novella as well.

unfinishedness, to make us confront the armless statue and recognize that something is, indeed, missing. He also wants us to see that what is missing has a beauty in its own right. His editing not only highlights the gaps intrinsic to the text but also *creates* gaps. Wollstonecraft too creates gaps in her writing of *Maria*, thereby encouraging her reader to tear down the statue altogether and reject the fixity it implies. With every gap that accrues from the statue's breaking, the tension within *Maria* increases as readers must contend with competing interpretations. I draw focus to this tension because it is what Stonecipher identifies as the characteristic trait of all prose poetry: staring at the armless statue, we read a prose poem.

However, before delving into the specific tensions of prose poetry, I want to first offer a brief introduction to the genre and Stonecipher's engagement with it. The invention of prose poetry is often accredited to two nineteenth-century French authors, Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, and their respective works, *Petits Poèmes en Prose* (1869) (also referred to as *Paris Spleen*) and *Illuminations* (1886). In describing his collection to friend and editor Arsène Houssaye, Baudelaire asks, "Which one of us, in his moments of ambition has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyric impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibs of conscience" (Baudelaire x). In Baudelaire's collection, "the miracle of a poetic prose" employs the paragraph as its building block, with the gaps between them intensifying the "jibs of conscience" that jolt the reader to attention of its structural makeup. Importantly, Baudelaire further describes the origins of "this haunting ideal" as born out of his "exploration of huge cities" (Baudelaire x). It is this connection to cities – Paris, in particular, for both Baudelaire and Rimbaud – that Stonecipher investigates in her critical book *Prose Poetry and the City*. My

interest, however, is less in the imagination of these cityscapes and more in the perspectives garnered from them.

Using Michel de Certeau's essay "Walking the City" as her jumping off point, Stonecipher reveals the double cities – the conceptual and the lived – that are elicited in all prose poetry (and that I argue emerge in *Maria*) and the perspectives represented in each. The conceptual city refers to the abstracted city perceived as if from the top of a skyscraper, an elevated perspective that turns the roaring city into a comparatively fixed picture, or map. In imagining the prose poem as such, the blocks of paragraphs separated by indentations become the city grid. And from this perspective, the city, in effect, becomes an idea, a concept (Stonecipher 8). Stonecipher relates the vertical elevation achieved in this reading to poetry, which often adopts a more abstracted, lofted position, requiring the reader to jump from association to association, from paragraph to paragraph, from block to block. On the other hand, the lived city refers to the city seen from street level. Walking as a pedestrian, or Baudelaire's flâneur, the speaker follows a more horizontal trajectory, interacting with the individuals that comprise the crowd. This grounded perspective is associated with stories, legends, and myths, that all follow specific characters in telling the narrative.<sup>10</sup> Both Wollstonecraft and Godwin recognize these opposing yet complementary perspectives in *Maria* (and, as I will soon argue, complicate both). What Stonecipher, Godwin, and Wollstonecraft make clear is that these two perspectives are impossible to hold simultaneously. One cannot be at the top of a skyscraper and down on the streets at the same time. Prose poetry thus recognizes this dilemma and accordingly makes the reader abundantly aware of the perspective they are missing in being situated above or

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note here that I follow Wollstonecraft's and Godwin's lead and use genre only to deconstruct it. While I consider prose and poetry along these simplistic binary terms, I later complicate it. I reveal that it does not matter which perspective prose and poetry embody respectively; what is more important is that the perspectives cannot be held simultaneously.

within city streets. Prose poetry acknowledges these gaps as they are vital to its very formation. Returning once more to Stonecipher's perhaps too simplistic, yet nevertheless delightful, definition of prose poetry as a "walking imbued with dancing," we can track that same movement in *Maria*, as it is how Wollstonecraft and Godwin expects us to traverse the gaps.

Oscillating between these two perspectives, the conceptual and the lived (the abstract and the real, the text and its ideal), *Maria* has to "contend with the expectations" of both. As such, the novella houses a tension often found in prose poetry (and RFPs and fluid texts, as well), indicating to the reader the gaps intrinsic to the text. In addition to the aforementioned tensions brought on by the distance between perspectives and between part and whole, real and ideal, writing and reading, etc. that Levinson detects in RFPs, Stonecipher identifies a gap in prose poetry between the "form of prose" and the "content of poetry" that complicates our earlier understanding of poetry offering an abstracted view and novels a lived one. It seems that poetry and prose already carry tensions that their combination in prose poetry further exacerbate. Just as poetry offers an abstracted view, it (particularly the lyric) also frequently carries a subjective, individual perspective. On the other hand, while novels can follow certain characters and grant the reader with a semblance of the lived perspective, they also engage in the social, abstract network. In *Maria*, we find the content of poetry, the condition of woman, which is both abstract and intensely subjective, confined within the parameters of the novel form, representative of the larger social constraints. I will argue in chapter two that the novel form thrusts the otherwise monologic recitation of the abstracted wrongs of woman into a larger, more abstracted yet simultaneously more lived discourse. Unlike poetry or even Wollstonecraft's political prose, *Vindication*, the latter of which Wollstonecraft speaks as herself, *Maria* offers a plethora of different voices that place the text in direct conversation with the real world. What the

combination of poetry and prose exposes is the discourse of all language. Complicating Mikhail Bakhtin's distinction that poetry is monologic and poetry dialogic, the prose poem reveals "the intrinsic dialogical nature of all language" (Stonecipher 50-1). No text can exist in isolation. It must engage with both the individual reader and society. In addressing these different audiences, one abstract and one lived, gaps necessarily arise. While all texts house this tension, prose poetry forces the reader to contend with the individual and society, the individual *in* society, and the sometimes-corrupting influences that union entails.

Turning to the title of Wollstonecraft's unfinished novella, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria*, we can identify these very tensions, albeit in a simplified manner. In one reading, *Maria* gestures to the individual, the lived perspective, the novel, while *Woman* points to the collective and abstracted view, poetry. The function of "or" as opposed to "and" emphasizes the distance between the two and the resulting tension brought on by the separation. I emphasize that this is one reading, for in chapter two I will further complicate this binary. To some degree, it matters not which perspective is aligned with poetry and prose; what is important is that these forms elicit different and often competing perspectives that their union attempts, but can never, satisfy. Finally, Stonecipher concludes by noting the overarching pressure inflicting all prose poetry, claiming the prose poem exists "within the tension of being crushed and the refusal to be crushed" (Stonecipher 52). In other words, the prose poem is a form in perpetual collapse. It is stuck in time just as much as it is timeless. Yet, these tensions are necessary to the form's existence. They create a kind of pressure that crystalizes in the formation of the prose poem. The form must be on the brink of collapse in order to be considered prose poetry at all. Godwin's publishing of the remains in their near-original form is an act that ensures the text will always be found and read in a moment of deterioration.

Embracing the gaps intrinsic to the fragmentary and poetic nature of *Maria*, gaps that I argue are amplified through the editing processes, Wollstonecraft and Godwin reaffirm the novella as a fluid text. Just as gaps, and the tensions that fill them, position a text in conversation with prose poetry, they also reveal a text's fluidity, its propensity for change, and its history. According to John Bryant, every revision (and editorial intervention) "occupies a space and reflects the passage of time; it reveals options and choices; it has direction. It is a chord of dissonances and harmonies, not a single note" (Bryant 12). The fluid text combats the myth of a singular, isolated text in favor of the belief in the multiplicity of texts. As we have seen in RFPs and prose poetry, there are multiple perspectives and intended audiences that gesture to different versions contained within one text. Rather than focusing on one iteration or one version (one perspective or one audience), the object of fluid-text analysis is instead "on the *distance* between texts: the changes," the gaps (Bryant 143). While it is true that published fragments lend themselves more readily to this kind of reading, as they appear in a liminal state between unfinished and finished (fluid and finite) and thus lack "textual stability and determinacy" (Levinson 202), Bryant contends that every text is, in fact, fluid. He argues that as writing is intrinsically a fluid phenomenon, requiring endless conscious and unconscious revisionary steps while adapting to shifting intentions and social pressures, the work that emerges from that process must also be fluid. Arguing against the general assumption that texts, although capable of producing multiple interpretations, are, in themselves, fixed and "frozen in print" (Bryant 2), Bryant demonstrates that even gravestones, on which words are literally written in stone are fluid, citing evidence that some have been changed over time, whether the result of harsh climate conditions or human intervention. Bryant urges us to rethink our assumptions and to acknowledge that the only "definitive text" is the fluid text. Although all texts are fluid, Bryant's

“fluid text” not only acknowledges but also actively engages with a multiplicity of text, ensuring the reader is made aware of the gaps underlining its very construction.

In every text, there lies a real and ideal version, two versions that the fluid text must interlace together. The real is what is printed on the page while the ideal refers to the author’s imagined text. The gap separating the two versions (which I will explore in greater detail later) is partially built off of the foundational gap between word and idea. Bryant reminds us of the insufficiencies of language to stand in for bigger concepts, what he calls the “incommensurable forms of reality” (Bryant 48). Bryant relates it back to his definition of poetry: “Poetry is particularly good at revealing such slippages [between idea and word, self and culture, past and present] because as a language that always calls attention to itself, it is by its very nature a kind of embodiment of the incommensurate” (Bryant 48). Although Bryant relates this directly to poetry, these slippages and resulting gaps can be found in all texts. Here, Bryant’s focus on “embodiment” of the “incommensurate” also plays an especially important role in our understanding of Godwin’s editing of *Maria* and the gendered collapse between text and body that not only Godwin encourages in his publishing of *Memoirs* alongside *Posthumous Works* but also Wollstonecraft enforces in the embedded memoirs of *Maria*.

Ultimately, this gap between word and idea creates a destabilizing space that leaves the reader in general discomfort about the unknown, leading both Bryant and Levinson, who also acknowledges this phenomenon, to draw upon John Keats’s “negative capability” as a model that encourages the reader to “continue speculating if only to feel for ourselves the potentialities of the past” (Bryant 135). In gaps, the fluid text holds endless potential, allowing for competing versions that cross generations to be held at once. Bryant ties this gap to the act of “*miswriting*” (Bryant 37). Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Kahn” offers an excellent example of this kind

of “miswriting,” as Coleridge describes the poem to have come to him in a dream. Despite having dreamt of no less than “two to three hundred lines,” when he woke and put his pen to paper, “only eight or ten scattered lines and images” remained while “the rest passed away like the images on the surface of a stream” (639). According to Bryant’s theory, although Coleridge’s dream text will never materialize, it still constitutes a version of “Kubla Kahn.” We can therefore read the finished version of *Maria* that never materializes as a version worthy of analysis.

Between these two versions (real and ideal) lies a destabilizing space that a reader must not only identify but also use as conduit. While real and ideal versions of a text are characteristic of all forms of writing, the fluid text situates the reader in the gap between them, offering a guide as to how to approach that disrupting, and sometimes terrifying,<sup>11</sup> space. Specifically, it is the fluid-text editor’s job, a role both Wollstonecraft and Godwin take on, to not only recognize the multiplicity of text but to guide the reader in reading for fluidity and traversing the great divide.

However, the fluid text does not rest all the responsibility on the editor. As readers are expected to navigate this destabilizing space that decenters both text and reader, they play a crucial role in tying together past, present, and future iterations of the text: “reading is an idiosyncratic actualization of a document from the past; it animates through the present reader’s consciousness and in our present tense the thoughts and creations of an earlier, other consciousness, world, and time” (Bryant 113). The reader holds a unique position, acting as both “destroyer and preserver” (Bryant 100), capable of assembling and disassembling the different versions of a text. Bryant repositions writers and editors as readers as well, who are “empowered to alter the text” (Bryant 99). He claims that there are always “two people [sitting] at the writing desk: the writer writing and the writer reading” (Bryant 99). Yet, he also recognizes the *general*

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<sup>11</sup> That is, terrifying as it relates to the sublime.

reader, us, who “plays a role in revising texts.” This reader often reads and revises “on behalf of themselves and in some sense as agents of culture” (Bryant 100). The reader then mediates between the individual and collective, an aforementioned tension fundamental to all three theories: the fluid text, prose poem, and RFP. In considering the “readers” of *Maria*, we must include Wollstonecraft, Godwin, us, and nineteenth- through present-day society. In this thesis, I focus on the general reader, who, like the author, similarly experiences a reciprocal relationship between reading and constructing (or writing). As readers participate in crafting the text *in real time*, their position then grants the text a greater sense of immediacy, a feature that proves significant in delivering Wollstonecraft’s social critique to generations.<sup>12</sup>

Reading for the fluid text means reading for the energy behind the creation of a work, for the-process rather than a final product. “Writing is *labor*” (Peters 283), as John Durham Peters reminds us, and I maintain that Godwin preserves the “energy of [Wollstonecraft’s] labor” in his editing of *Maria* (Bryant 121). Yet, as we have seen from the position of Bryant’s “reader,” Godwin also captures the writer’s, editor’s, general reader’s, and society’s energies that occasion the novella. Bryant contends that “a literary work is more than the sum of its texts; it is the combined energies of individual and social forces which through the process of authorial, editorial, and social revision revolve from one version to the next and emerge from time to time as documents to be read by the reader” (Bryant 112). As such, “perhaps more than any other object in a culture,” Bryant purports that “a literary work is the locus of private and public energies” (Bryant 112). This mediation between private and public is a phenomenon not only found in fluid texts, but also in RFPs and prose poetry, as all three materialize through the pressure between individual and society. Bryant gestures to consumerism as a reason for texts’

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<sup>12</sup> I will return to the social critique enhanced by the form of the novella in chapter two.

supposed fixity, contending that texts “only appear to be stable because the accidents of human action, time and economy have conspired to freeze the energy they represent into fixed packets of language” that are easily digestible (and sellable) (Bryant 110-111; italics added).

Paradoxically, despite society’s role in creating the fluid text, it is also one of the primary imposers of fixity. While *Maria* tempts readers with feigned fixity, disguising the unsettling tensions that compose the text, both Wollstonecraft and Godwin ultimately position fluidity as the only means by which to receive and respond to Wollstonecraft’s social critique.

Notably, a focus on process draws the fluid text and the RFP together. Because of the reader’s required involvement in filling the absences (and, at times, choosing a preferred ending as we will see in *Maria*), the text’s existence extends beyond its material, printed, and singular form. Defying economic expectations of a finalized, marketable product, *Maria* remains a work-in-progress, always anticipating a reader’s engagement with it. Levinson succinctly describes the text’s rejection of fixedness in a Marxist frame:

Unlike the finished work, the RFP foregrounds the radical relativity not just of literary response but of the object. Because the reader cannot but see the extent to which his engagement with the fragment actualizes the work for him, he cannot experience the work as an object waiting his consumption. A work that is never consumed can never be exhausted. (Levinson 214-5).

Interestingly, *Maria*’s incompleteness, which could be considered a sign of its ephemerality, is actually the reverse, a factor integral to its longevity as readers will never be able to “exhaust” it. When discussing texts in light of the RFP and the fluid text theory, “work” no longer means a single, fixed product (*œuvre*), as one might assume, but it instead refers to the entire process of

writing and revising and reading (*travail*) (Bryant 61).<sup>13</sup> By considering a work as constantly moving, or “fluid,” we can come closer to understanding why Godwin chose to publish these fragments in the first place. Despite their seemingly frail structure, riddled with textual lacunae, Godwin’s publishing ensures that these writings can never be truly lost or exhausted, no matter how long they are neglected.

I contend that Godwin acts as *Maria*’s fluid-text editor, ensuring the novella always remains a “work-in-progress,” awaiting a reader to construct it. Through his editing, he seems just as concerned with representing the process, as his footnotes mark moments at which Wollstonecraft hesitates or jumps to new topics. In his extended description of an appropriate fluid-text edition (or “edition imaginaire”), Bryant admits that, “the problem is that the complexity of fluid texts often requires a highly interruptive apparatus that invariably spells the death of ‘easy’ reading, and even patient scholarship” (122). According to Bryant, the apparatus must be moved onto the reading page, so that “the text and apparatus become an integrated whole” (Bryant 125). Of course, the “integrated whole” must also be clearly composed of parts, of fragments, that makes the reader aware of the text’s very construction, and of its fluidity. Bryant observes that the apparatus must be “recondite, inhibiting, or alienating,” drawing the reader into the gaps and encouraging them to play a part in constructing the text. Readers of Godwin’s edition of *Maria* certainly find this interrupting apparatus on nearly every page, making their experience of reading comparable to “hiccupping” (Bryant 125). Interruptive of a regular reading experience, the fluid text fosters a kind of circular reading, requiring the reader to read and reread to gain a fuller awareness of the energies governing the text, much like the reading experience of poetry. The reader is expected to dance, to use Stonecipher’s metaphor

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<sup>13</sup> In this paper, when using the term “work,” to substitute *Maria*, I am also referencing this process.

again, and match the rhythm of the text. In *The Fluid Text*, Bryant quotes Jerome McGann, who praises Hans Walter Gabler's *edition imaginaire* of James Joyce's *Ulysses* as "a self-deconstructing and unstable text" whose "procedures make the structure of fluidity – its finite limits – very clear" (Gabler quoted in Bryant 126). I believe that McGann's praise can be extended to Godwin's edition of *Maria*. Published in a form on the brink of collapse and fragmented with each editorial insertion, Godwin marks the fluidity of the text and encourages the reader to embrace the gaps and move with the "jibs of conscience." Godwin's editing encourages the reader to engage in "deconstructing" the "unstable text" Wollstonecraft commissioned. However, contra Gabler's *edition imaginaire*, Wollstonecraft and Godwin's *Maria* rejects "finite limits." Holding reverberating tensions between part and whole, real and ideal, writing and reading, etc., *Maria* shatters boundaries and extends the text beyond its published borders.

Interestingly, just as Godwin implements this kind of fluid-text editing in *Maria*, Wollstonecraft also represents it in her characterization of the heroine. In considering Godwin's editing in *Maria*, Rajan notes that while Godwin attempts to mediate Wollstonecraft so as to recreate her in his vision, he ultimately presents Wollstonecraft as a "subject-in-process." She becomes a "zone of intensity rather than the origins of a fixed corpus of beliefs" (175). From Rajan's description, I argue a distinct and notable parallel emerges. Just as *Maria* is a fluid text that Wollstonecraft "recommenced and revised" multiple times according to the preface (Wollstonecraft 155), Wollstonecraft becomes a fluid subject that Godwin "revises" as he presents her in different contexts (political, literary, and social). We can extend this parallel even further, into *Maria*'s, the character's, fictionalized world. In the author's preface to the novella, Wollstonecraft comments that while the "hero is allowed to be mortal," "the heroines [...] are to

be born immaculate” and to “come forth *highly finished* Minervas from the head of Jove” (Wollstonecraft 158; italics added). In writing *Maria*, Wollstonecraft attempts to redress this problematic representation of women in novels of this type. She chooses to oppose this trend and accordingly presents Maria, the character, as unfinished and fluid. Just as Wollstonecraft “allows” her heroines to be mortal in *Maria*, Godwin “allows” Wollstonecraft to be human in *Posthumous Works* and *Memoirs*. Thus, we can observe palimpsests of fluidity, as Maria, *Maria*, and Wollstonecraft are all characterized as works-in-progress in Godwin’s publications. Returning to our discussion of the classifications of *Maria* that began this section, perhaps one of the most accurate designations would simply be “work in progress,” a label that “allows” for the fluid and fragmentary nature of the text itself and for the humanity of its author.

While I alternate using categories such as “work-in-progress,” prose poetry, fluid text, RFP, lyric novella, and more to describe *Maria* throughout this thesis, I also recognize the limitations of employing classifications of that sort. If texts are fluid, so are genres, as they similarly respond to the tension between the individual and society, word and idea. Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright recognize this fluidity as they describe the permeability of genres, with texts “[moving] amongst genres” as all writers are between culture and ideologies (Rajan and Wright 6). Gabrielle Starr, in considering the overlap between novels and lyrics, offers a useful analogy, quoting Henry Home, Lord Kames, who argues that “literary compositions run into each other, precisely like colours: in their strong tints they are easily distinguished; but are susceptible of so much variety and take on so many different forms, that we never can say where one species ends and another begins” (quoted in Starr 9). Genres can never be stable fixtures if the texts inside them are intrinsically fluid. Nevertheless, I believe genre classification can be a useful starting point, guiding us in our discussion of texts. In this thesis, I consider a multitude of

genres that I use in partial to help realize the composite text in hand. To use genres as permanent designations, however, would be an error. In my reading of *Maria*, I argue that genres bleed into each other to create a text that breaks the frame in which it is held.

Wollstonecraft actively blends genres together in *Maria* (a topic which I will explore in depth in chapter two), and so does Godwin in his editing of it. Even prior to *Maria*, we can identify Godwin's interest in complicating genres. In *The Herald of Literature* (1783), a parody of eighteenth-century literary reviews, Godwin imitates "nearly all the current literary genres of the time, from historiography and political discourse to poetry, drama, and reviewing as such [...] The effect," according to Jon Klancher, "was to blur the literary reviews' careful discrimination of generic boundaries" (Klancher 23-4). In writing *The Herald*, Godwin reveals the obsolete sense of genres; they serve only as superficial categories used to satisfy public, commercial interests. As a result, Klancher cleverly renames *The Herald of Literature* as the "herald instead the *undoing* of 'literature'" (Klancher 25; italics added). In Klancher's renaming of *The Herald*, a notable parallel emerges between Godwin's *Herald* and his editing of *Maria*, which similarly deconstructs the boundaries of genre in line with Wollstonecraft's own endeavors, exposing the insufficiencies of genre borders as the text repeatedly crosses them. Just as Godwin responds to the specificities of genre in *The Herald of Literature*, he also deconstructs them. This process of binding and unbinding will be a phenomenon to which we repeatedly return in chapter three. Ultimately, in reconsidering genres as fluid, we can begin to see the gaps intrinsic to its makeup. As both Starr and Klancher recognize, every genre contains gaps. For Starr, in particular, these gaps reveal opportunities for collaboration with other genres. Considering the overlap between novels and lyrics, Starr asserts that "the problems that the breaks in one genre pose can be answered by another" (Starr 5). Here, however, I disagree. The

combination of genres frequently adds just as many gaps as it fills, which, in effect, doubles the fragmentary nature of the text itself.

Finally, Godwin's decision to leave *Maria* in draft form also complicates the genre. According to Rajan, his doing so "[halts] any premature phrasing of its episodes within a genre such as sentimental, romance, or feminist communal narrative" (Rajan 179-80). In other words, Rajan purports that "Godwin's editing returns the text to the preparatory work that precedes its unification into a genre" (Rajan 209). So just as it is a form in collapse, it is also a form in creation. However, I do want to complicate this idea of Godwin's editing as a means of "return." In the act of publishing, Godwin is not returning the text to its draft form but rather pushing it forward. He establishes and situates *Maria* within the canon of Wollstonecraft's complete works, and thus opens it up to the possibility of interacting with other formal genres. He shows us that *Maria* is just as capable of pushing against and being informed by social, individual, and political pressures that define a text and situate it within multiple genres. I believe it would be a disservice to consider *Maria* as "preparatory work" preceding genre, for it devalues the text as a work deserving of serious examination.

### **A Glimpse Ahead**

In order to fully comprehend *Maria*'s elusive, fragmentary, and fluid form, I take an integrated approach and divide my exploration of the topic into two chapters, reserved for Wollstonecraft and Godwin respectively. The first chapter, titled "Intra-textual Fluidities of *Maria*," investigates Wollstonecraft's efforts in writing, addressing her mix of established genres (such as emancipatory narratives, legal dramas, and memoirs, to name a few) that creates a fragmented text. I will additionally consider absences Wollstonecraft includes within the text.

Just as gaps naturally accrue in the writing process, in turn producing an ideal and real text, there are also gaps *purposefully* interlaced throughout *Maria*. While the former inevitably occurs as it is engrained in the writing phenomenon, the author (and/or editor) must choose to include absences, or “lacunae,” within a text, consciously paralleling its outer structure with its interior one. In this chapter, I track four absences that Wollstonecraft includes and that Godwin draws the reader’s attention to through his editing. The first comprises the fragmented stories, or the “patchwork” of memoirs, of Maria, Darnford, and Jemima. The reader glimpses only a fragment of each character’s life, with some characters, like Jemima, repeatedly interrupted and thus further fragmented. The second refers to Darnford as the text’s primary lacuna, and, as I will argue, as a physical manifestation of *all* of the text’s breaks and gaps. Paying particular attention to how Maria reads Darnford, we can observe that she too fills in the gaps to create an idealized version of the pseudo-hero. Relatedly, the third absence refers to the blossoming love story she reads in the marginalia of Darnford’s philosophical books. Again, we find a reader who looks for meaning in the fragments and confuses her expectations with reality. Upon identifying the second and third absences, I argue that these two kinds of gaps circulating around Darnford offer a meta-reflection on how the reader should approach *Maria*. Lastly, upon uncovering the absences within the text, I consider its effect by attempting to answer questions such as: how does Wollstonecraft craft a fluid text? And what does the text’s structure say about the social structures Wollstonecraft is critiquing?

In the second chapter titled “William Godwin’s Editing of Mary Wollstonecraft,” I refocus our attention on Godwin and his role in both composing and de-composing the text before us. As I detail at length, Godwin repeatedly draws attention to his editorial interventions, beginning with the title page. While recognizing the disastrous consequences of Godwin’s

publications of *Posthumous Works* and *Memoirs* immediately following their release to the public, I argue that his edition nevertheless provides current readers with the most nuanced, albeit disjointed, depiction of Wollstonecraft and her philosophies. In embracing fragments and creating more gaps than those just found in Wollstonecraft's original manuscript, Godwin fosters opportunities for the reader to step in and engage with the "real" author, in turn further encouraging a meta-reading of the novella, one that runs parallel to Wollstonecraft's meta-reflections. In this chapter, I will also argue that Godwin's "Frankensteinian" approach to the text, pulling apart and piecing together Wollstonecraft's literary remains, presents the reader with a "new"<sup>14</sup> form that nears the prose poem popularized in the late-nineteenth century with Charles Baudelaire. In this section, I draw on other genres, including composite forms, as defined by Stuart Curran, and lyric essays, as described by Deborah Tall and John D'Agata, to clarify my understanding of *Maria* as lyric novella.

In this thesis, I present a counter-narrative to scholars' negative conception of Godwin's editing of *Maria*. Although employing different literary techniques, as I will detail in the following chapters, both Wollstonecraft and Godwin engage in the fluid text and advance the sublime aestheticism it embodies. As such, I consider his editing acting in accordance with Wollstonecraft's writing philosophy that questions the fixity of genre and encourages a circular reading. In considering both author, editor, and reader in composing the text, I hope to reveal the social network underlining every individual text. Even Godwin's version of *Maria* does not fully capture the elusive novella, the fluid text. In reading for the fluid text, we read for all versions, those written on the page and those secured in every writer's and readers' mind. By extending my consideration of Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, I intend to show how Godwin's editing pulls

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<sup>14</sup> I use "new" tentatively, speaking more of the genre's popularization as opposed to its initial appearance.

together Wollstonecraft's sometimes fleeting facades to provide readers with a moving, breathing portrait of Wollstonecraft and her writing. In considering *Maria* through a lens of connection, we can use our reading of this often-overlooked novella as a key to unlocking Wollstonecraft, the enigmatic literary persona, and her canon.

## CHAPTER TWO

INTRA-TEXTUAL FLUIDITIES IN *MARIA*

Although an early critic of the novel, Wollstonecraft appropriates the form to advance her political philosophy, later articulated in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She describes her first attempt, *Mary, A Fiction*, as “an artless tale, without episodes, the mind of woman, who has thinking powers is displayed” (Wollstonecraft 76). Wollstonecraft’s first novelistic endeavor proves a useful starting point in our discussion of *Maria*, as it introduces Wollstonecraft’s distinction between artifice and nature that defines her use of genres in her later works and also informs her writing philosophy. In a letter to the Reverend Henry Dyson Gabell<sup>15</sup> in September 1787, Wollstonecraft remarks that she “[has] drawn from Nature” to compose her characters (*Letters* 136). In expressing her preference for “natural” representations, Wollstonecraft reprioritizes the real over art and fancy, an endeavor we see repeated in her use of other genres and styles. In the advertisement that precedes *Mary*, Wollstonecraft provides a useful analogy between art and nature that is helpful in understanding her work as a fluid text. In the advertisement, she contends that many authors get “lost in a pleasing enthusiasm [...] solicitous to gather expected flowers, and bind them in a wreath, according to the prescribed rules of art” (Wollstonecraft 75). This analogy gains greater poignancy if we consider Wollstonecraft’s comparison between women and flowers in *Vindication*. In her novels, Wollstonecraft works against patriarchal novel conventions that “bind” women as flowers, and that strip women of both their agency and individuality. In this reading, “prescribed rules of art” then stands in for

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<sup>15</sup> Reverend Henry Dyson Gabell is a clergyman and teacher Wollstonecraft met on her trip to Ireland (*Letters* 134).

“societal expectations.” As we will see in her later novel, *Maria*, Wollstonecraft actively works against societal rules that prescribe to the patriarchy. In commissioning an “artless” tale, Wollstonecraft attempts to portray “things as they are,” and to reveal the thorns hidden under every bunch of flowers.

In the preface to *Maria*, Wollstonecraft explicitly addresses her compositional design. She begins by attempting to separate her work from the romantic novels by popular writers like Charlotte Smith, claiming that “[her] sketches are not the abortion of a distempered fancy, or the strong delineations of a wounded heart” (Wollstonecraft 157). Her story does not take place on a stage, where the audience is aware of the pyrotechnics behind the show, but rather in real life. As such, she conveys the “finer sensations” of her characters, prioritizing the internal as opposed to external events of the narrative (Wollstonecraft 159). Succinctly put, Wollstonecraft claims that “in many instances, I could have made the incidents more dramatic,” but concedes that “would have sacrificed my main object,” which is to “[exhibit] the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society” (Wollstonecraft 157). Wollstonecraft does not wish to portray the woes of her heroine as isolated instances; rather, she seeks to represent the woeful condition of Woman as determined by the patriarchal rules governing society. As such, Wollstonecraft reaffirms that her goal for this novella, or “history,” “ought rather to be considered, as of woman, than of an individual” (Wollstonecraft 157). Although the novella pieces together individual stories, Wollstonecraft suggests that we are to be reading for Woman. Only through telling the fragmented stories detailing the “wrongs of different classes of women, equally oppressive though, from the difference of education, necessarily various” can Wollstonecraft gesture to an overarching representation of England’s treatment of women.

The novel then offers Wollstonecraft a productive medium through which she can convey her revolutionary purpose and mediate the tension between individual and society identified in the preface (and, as we have seen, in the title, *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*). Prior to 1770, the novel, and specifically characterization, focused almost exclusively on characters' navigation through social systems of exchange (Starr 104). As more authors experimented with the novel form, the genre expanded to encompass both individual and societal consciousnesses. According to Gabrielle Starr, there are two distinct movements in the post-1770 novel:

On the one hand, empiricist ideas of subjectivity – the contention that the world beyond the self is the object of individual perception and of uncertainty – could seem to hem individual selves; on the other hand, radical changes in British life – a new nation of Britons, an expanding empire – enforced pressures toward imagined community. (Starr 8)

We can see this tension between individual and collective in Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, in which Wollstonecraft "hem[s]" women's tales together to gesture to an "imagined community" of Woman in the aggregate. While recognizing this tension between individual and collective in novels of this type, Starr contends that it is part of the text's "stabilization" (Starr 106). Here, however, I disagree. I argue Wollstonecraft acts as the fluid-text editor by representing women and Woman side-by-side. By positioning the individual and collective as such, Wollstonecraft also reveals the gaps that separate them. Returning to our earlier metaphor, she untangles the bunch of flowers. Although all women are entrapped by the patriarchal systems of oppression, they experience that subjection differently, and often separately.

Wollstonecraft reinforces the novel structure by drawing upon the conventions of other genres that similarly advance the verisimilitude of her claims. At the time she was writing *Maria*, the novel was still a relatively new genre, making its borders flexible as authors, like

Wollstonecraft, incorporated a slew of other styles and genres. In the editor's preface to *Maria*, Godwin emphasizes Wollstonecraft's engagement with this eighteenth-century tradition, contending that the "structure of the following work" was a "favourite subject of meditation with its author" (Wollstonecraft 155). In a footnote to "structure," Michelle Faubert, the novel's Broadview editor, suspects that Godwin is "[referring] to the hybrid form of the novel as both a Gothic novel and a fictionalization of [Wollstonecraft's] polemical prose work, *Rights of Woman*" (Wollstonecraft 155n). Although Faubert aptly names two genres to which I will return, Wollstonecraft suffuses the text with many more styles of discourse, including Romantic sentimental novels, memoirs, autobiographies, emancipatory narratives, and legal dramas, to name only a few. The mix of genres affirms *Maria* as a fluid text. Composed of parts, Wollstonecraft allows the text to flow into different forms and absorb the literary associations that come with them. The patchwork of genres serves as the perfect backdrop on which Wollstonecraft can demonstrate the fluid text reading experience (a topic to which I will return). As Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us, "in the presence of the novel, all other genres somehow have a different resonance" (Bakhtin quoted in Starr 6). As we will see in Wollstonecraft's use of romance, the gothic, and memoirs, genres are far from fixed entities. Wollstonecraft exploits the fluidity of genre in the interest of advancing verisimilitude.

Courtships novels about romantic love served as one means to represent reality. Not unlike today's conceptions, eighteenth-century readers linked romance to women writers (and readers). Specifically, Laurie Langbauer differentiates romance from the fantastical tales of the seventeenth century and claims that with the emergence of eighteenth-century courtship novels, romance often substituted for "immature writing, lacking the novel's complexity of form and sophistication of content," or, in its most general sense, romance referred to "pure, artless,

simple, naïve writing” (Langbauer 210).<sup>16</sup> In the eighteenth century, women were conceived in the very same terms: simple, naïve, innocent, artless. Wollstonecraft combats this long-held conception not only in her *Vindication* but also in her writing of *Maria*, the latter of which presents readers with a heroine who possesses sexual experience and thus lacks the typical naivety found in romance novels of the time. While some critics like Mary Poovey disapprove of Wollstonecraft’s use of romance in *Maria*, claiming that it leads her into the patriarchal traps that *Vindication* strongly deplors, Wollstonecraft cleverly reclaims the genre and positions it in the novel form in order to convey the very real atrocities women face in eighteenth-century England. In line with Godwin, Wollstonecraft finds that romance

follow[s] the logic of self-consciousness to the point of imputing a superior knowledge to the romancer who knows the true motives of his historical characters because he has invented them, as opposed to the hapless historian who must perpetually mistake the motives of historical characters whose inner lives he has been unable to grasp. (Klancher 31).

By fictionalizing her *Vindication*, a reading I later complicate, Wollstonecraft grants the text a greater semblance of reality, as she can accurately relay the innerworkings of her characters in conjunction with the external, social structures restricting them. Wollstonecraft further augments the verisimilitude of the text by recognizing the limitations of perspective and introducing textual devices that account for it. Her use of interruption and partial representation further complicates romance, positioning the genre under the pressures of social structures as defined by the novel form. It is important to recognize that Wollstonecraft does not reject romance in favor of fiction,

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<sup>16</sup> For a time, Wollstonecraft also considered romance as inferior to other forms of writing. Laure Langbauer attributes Wollstonecraft’s variable stance on romance to the “instability of the term itself” (Langbauer 212). Wollstonecraft’s changing opinion reaffirms the need to read for the fluid text, as we can see the fluidity inherent in her as a writer, philosopher, and as a woman.

or vice versa; instead, she holds the two in tandem, “the two genres occupy[ing] competing,” yet nevertheless complementary, “positions” (Starr 2).

Wollstonecraft incorporates gothic elements in *Maria* for those same purposes. The novella opens with “abodes of horror,” and is subsequently filled with gothic tropes, among them gothic castles, trapped heroines, and terrifying scenes of nature that “amuse while they affright” (Wollstonecraft 161). The sensationalism of the heroines’ predicament is not used to distort or dilute women’s frustrations; rather, it allows Wollstonecraft to insist on the commonplace occurrence of assaults against women in eighteenth-century English society. Marilyn Butler contends that “Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft were drawn to the Gothic because it had developed powerful images for conveying an oppressive environment” and magnifies the “clash between victimized individual and the social institution” (91). Thus, the gothic acts in line with the novel, RFPs, and the fluid text in navigating the disparity between individual and society. Matching (and consequentially augmenting) the tension of the aforementioned genres, the gothic blends easily into the text. Further, the gothic tendencies in the novella gesture to the sublime composition of the text I define in greater detail in chapter three.

The mix of romance and the gothic also bleeds into another sub-genre of the novel – that is, the political, philosophical novel of her contemporaries, including Godwin and Thomas Holcroft. When reading *Maria*, Wollstonecraft’s political-philosophical arguments, often concerning women’s subjugated position in society, appear through the medium of the narrator's voice, as well as a multitude of characters, all of whom effectively act as mouthpieces for the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Some excerpts seem to be pulled almost directly from that well-known political prose work, such as the narrator’s query, “Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?” (Wollstonecraft 167). By interweaving her philosophical

theories into the discourse of the novel, as well as through the form of rhetorical questions, Wollstonecraft “claims membership” to a genre in which “autobiographical material was to be expected” (Kelly 208). Therefore, even if Godwin had not published *Maria* in *Posthumous Works* and in the same year as *Memoirs*, the text would still have been read through an autobiographical lens, just as Wollstonecraft intended. It is clear that Wollstonecraft was aware of the expectations of the genres she elicited and that she united the political philosophical novel with the gothic and romance to enhance the tension between individual and society while simultaneously strengthening the legitimacy of her claims.

Wollstonecraft also draws upon the affordances of the Romantic lyric in the reading experience she evokes from her readers. Unlike other novels of the period, *Maria* does not follow a strictly linear plot.<sup>17</sup> Popular writers of the time, including Frances Burney, Jane Austen, and Charlotte Smith, tended to “crowd their fictions with so great a number of events,” to quote from Godwin’s famous critique (Wollstonecraft 287). In these other texts, we typically follow a young lady’s entrance into the world, joining her as she engages with different public and private spaces. In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft traps us in one space – Maria’s cell, which corresponds to the formalist restrictions oft found in poetry. To use her language in the advertisement to *Mary*, Wollstonecraft focuses on the mind of a woman with thinking powers and transcribes it in a tale that lacks clear episodes, a description closely aligned to lyric poetry, as defined by William Wordsworth: poetry follows the “fluxes and refluxes of the mind” (509). While trapped in the prison cell along with Maria, we listen to “story after story of injustice and atrocity told by various female voices” (Ty 38). The circular reading Wollstonecraft encourages through the

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<sup>17</sup> Janet Todd considers the narrative structure in gendered terms, arguing that the “circular binds [the heroine] to male relationships” while “the linear tends towards freedom and maturity,” often achieved through relationships with other women (Todd quoted in Johnson 64).

repetition of shared tales creates a “claustrophobic and restrictive structure” that works to “thematize woman’s oppression” (Ty 38). Through this nested narrative that circles around the reader, Wollstonecraft encloses us in the very social structures the characters are desperate to escape. The novel then represents the social strictures under which the lyric ultimately collapses.

While other genres bleed almost seamlessly into each other, the locations at which poetry and prose collide are moments of extreme tension at which social critique is best expressed. Donna Stonecipher describes prose poetry as existing between “the tension of being crushed and the refusal to be crushed” (Stonecipher 52), and *Maria* is in a state of perpetual collapse. The combination of poetry and prose reveals tensions between past, present, and future. As Ty notes, Wollstonecraft plays with narrative time, as we find most of the action of the story is in the past or future. The present then becomes a liminal space where everything is said to happen, but nothing actually happens. By situating us in this liminal space, we become restless and pushed to further action, a feature necessary to Wollstonecraft’s social critique.

Another tension in prose poetry is between the individual and the collective. Drawing from Baudelaire’s and Rimbaud’s collections of poetry, Stonecipher distinguishes poetry as offering a more conceptual, abstracted view of a subject compared to prose.<sup>18</sup> As if positioned on the top of a skyscraper, or an insane asylum as in *Maria*, we view the world from above, creating generalizations about the individuals below. Prose, on the other hand, moves with the characters as we walk beside them. In the simplest terms, poetry then refers to an abstract, a collective, while prose gestures to the lived, the individual. Wollstonecraft conveys both the general and the particular in her novella, showing us the general “Wrongs of Woman” through the story of one

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<sup>18</sup> As we have seen in the introduction, both Wollstonecraft and Godwin complicate this distinction. Lyric poetry in particular is often associated with the subjective. Nevertheless, for our purposes here, it is helpful to consider poetry and novels in abstract terms for it reveals Wollstonecraft’s use of genres to advance her social critique.

woman, Maria. Starr similarly recognizes the distinction Stonecipher implies in prose poetry. For Starr, poetry connects to an abstract ideal while the novel refers to a lived present. In her reading of Thomas Percy's "The Child of Elle," she argues that he "[makes] the impersonal narration of Britain's poetic past speak to the vital energy of the novel's present" (Starr 6). I find this same movement in Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, as the abstract Woman is made real through the lives of Maria, Jemima, and the other women whose stories are told through these main characters.

In short, the abstract becomes real to us as it is resituated in the novel. Poetry then can be compared to Wollstonecraft's abstracted political philosophy, for it is only by fictionalizing it, and bringing it into the novel's present, that it can capture the reader's sympathies and inspire future action. The connection between poetry and political philosophy is further strengthened when we consider poetry's relation to an ideal. In the Romantic period, lyric often referred to a self seemingly "unmediated" and "unaffected by social relations" (Jonathon Monroe quoted in Stonecipher 50-1). In other words, lyric was uncorrupted. Yet, as the familiar saying goes, "rules are made to be broken;" therefore, the lyric, in representing an ideal, simultaneously "calls loudly for its violation as for its worship" (Starr 133). It is for this reason that Claudia Johnson argues that *Maria* is not a fictionalization of *Vindication* but rather *Vindication* in decline. In her reading, the novella "narrates the undoing, not the development, of the program she had earlier formulated" (Johnson 59). Wollstonecraft demonstrates England's falling away from her poetic vision represented in *Vindication*. In other words, *Maria* is what results when poetry meets prose, when the individual must confront the social pressures of the time, and collapse.

### **A Patchwork of Memoirs**

So far, in my consideration of Wollstonecraft's manipulation of genre, I have failed to consider one of the primary components of the narrative – the memoir. This form proves crucial in advancing Wollstonecraft's interest in the fluid text. As Bryant contends that every text is fluid, comprising multiple versions simultaneously, Wollstonecraft manufactures doubles through the highly reflexive form. Here, I will apply Starr's analysis of the epistolary tradition to my understanding of the memoir's effect on *Maria's* fluidity. Much like the letter, intrinsic to the memoir is a writer and intended reader. Therefore, when reading the memoirs enclosed in *Maria*, we are essentially reading a discourse network that mediates the tension between individual and society. Because the memoir recipient changes in the novella – from Maria's daughter, to Darnford, to Jemima, to us – the imagined community expands. Starr contends that the writer uses the letter to escape their own isolation as a “feeling subject, imprisoned at the very least by the force and uniqueness of emotion” (Starr 11). In *Maria*, the heroine's emotional imprisonment is reinforced by her physical one. The memoir thus offers Maria a way to reach beyond the confines of her prison and emote with a larger community of women. Gary Kelly, however, recognizes this very interplay between individual and community as potentially corruptive, contending that “the form of the memoir shows the damaging relationship of society and self as a continuing process, one inherited from the past and reproduced in the future, unless there is a revolution in the self” (208). In the patchwork of memoirs, we witness that very reproduction as women's oppression is detailed by multiple characters across generations. Furthermore, the occasion for Maria writing her memoir points to the corruptive influence of society. For Maria, writing serves as the only means to maintain a relationship with her daughter because her husband has unjustly, yet lawfully, imprisoned her. The memoir thus plays a crucial function.

Both in the protagonist's use of it and the embedded narratives nested within it, the memoir offers a way for Wollstonecraft to gesture to the generational violence against women.

In sum, the replicative nature of the memoir points to the systemic violence against women in eighteenth-century England. It is notable that Kelly mentions the past and future tenses contained with the memoir; when the memoir is transposed in the novel, we also gain access to the present, that liminal space to which I previously alluded, as we read the memoir in the novel's fictional "real-time." By encompassing all temporal dimensions, Wollstonecraft pulls the reader into the text, asserting the urgency of these grievances as they affect all generations of women. Tangential to the gothic tradition, the memoir also places pressure on reality by suggesting a real writer and real audience for these "found manuscripts." In gothic novels, found manuscripts frequently reveal potent and potentially destructive secrets. They serve a similar function here. Acting in line with the Female Gothic, which reveals the domestic sphere as a place of horrors, Wollstonecraft exposes the terror of living as a woman in eighteenth-century England through the written and oral memoirs of Maria and Jemima, respectively. Again, we see Wollstonecraft engaging in the eighteenth-century tradition of conveying "things as they are." Just as we read over the shoulder of the interchangeable intended reader, we seem to watch over Maria as she writes. By framing Maria's story in a memoir, Wollstonecraft constructs Maria as a writer. And in recognizing Maria as a writer, we can consider ways she "miswrites," to harken back to Bryant's term. "Life always exceeds the speed of the pen," Starr reminds us, and "the writer falls inevitably behind" (11). The memoir then comprises gaps, and these gaps places pressure on the reader, both fictional and real, to imagine what is left unsaid.

Composed from gaps, the memoir form prioritizes the writer's intentions and reader's response, in line with the fluid text. As such, the memoir reinforces Wollstonecraft's investment

in highlighting the thinking mind. It is “response and interpretation” that matter most to Wollstonecraft, not “event and action” (Starr 11). As such, let us turn to representations of reader response in the text. I argue that Maria’s very different responses to first Darnford’s memoir and then Jemima’s elucidate how we, the reader, are supposed to respond to the novella. Although Wollstonecraft left Darnford’s memoir in a “less finished state,” according to Godwin’s footnotes, Wollstonecraft also purposefully makes Darnford an elusive figure who Maria attempts to read. Maria responds to the gaps intrinsic to his narrative, and initially to his very body, by filling in with her own desires. She hears his rather self-serving descriptions of his own acts of charity and argues that this proves that he has a “disposition favourable to love,” a reaction that the narrator comments upon with both sympathy and critique, asking “what chance then had Maria of escaping, when pity, sorrow, and solitude, all conspired to soften her mind, and nourish romantic wishes, and, from a natural progress, romantic expectations” (Wollstonecraft 185). While Maria’s response to Darnford’s memoir represents the risks of empathic response, her interpretation of Jemima’s story offers another outcome – that of profound connection. After Jemima tells her story, “Maria took her hand” and “thinking of Jemima’s peculiar fate and her own, she was led to consider the oppressed state of women, and to lament that she had given birth to a daughter” (Wollstonecraft 206). Here again, we see the generational effect of memoir writing, inscribing a past, informing a present, and predicting a future. Our response further solidifies these happenings as we are not only involved in crossing the permeable boundaries of “self” and connecting these women’s stories, but also responsible for responding to the call to action and becoming a materialization of the future stories.

While we receive partial glimpses of Maria’s, Darnford’s, and Jemima’s responses to each other’s stories, we never hear the daughter’s. And it is the daughter’s existence that

occasions the novella in the first place. In considering the role of mother and daughter in the creation of the text, we can ascertain a clearer understanding of how Wollstonecraft conjures the fluid text. Maria positions the daughter as the intended audience in the opening sentence: “Addressing these memoirs to you, my child, uncertain whether I shall have an opportunity of instructing you, any observations will probably flow from my heart, which only a mother – a mother schooled in misery could make” (Wollstonecraft 210). The uncertainty represented in the above quote suggests Maria’s unstable position as both mother and, I would add, writer. As Jacqueline Labbe argues with respect to Charlotte Smith’s poetry, “the child both offers a reason to write and signals [Wollstonecraft’s] fitness to write” (66). As it is unclear whether the daughter is alive or not, Maria’s position as a mother is in jeopardy; it is only while she writes that she remains a mother (Langbauer 212). Through writing, these bonds remain intact, outlasting “death” and “physical decomposition” (Labbe 75). Therefore, both addresser and addressee are constructions that fit within the mother-daughter paradigm, a paradigm meant to outlast the original mother and daughter. As such, Maria and her daughter possess the potential to house multiple people. Abstracted to “mother,” or rather “mother schooled in misery,” and “child,” these generalities allow for a multiplicity of individuals, bodies, and texts. We can identify this multiplicity as Maria and Jemima mention other women’s stories of abuse. Therefore, within one memoir, we find the stories of many women. In a sense, the daughter also becomes a double. In writing to her daughter in the hopes of educating her, Maria claims to “embody” her, literally inscribing her story into her own. We can extend this action of embodying, or embedding, to Wollstonecraft’s proclamation in her preface: “The sentiments [expressed in the novella] I have embodied” (Wollstonecraft 157). Here, we observe a palimpsest of feeling. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft imbues the text within an autobiographical bent,

inscribing her own body over these other women. By overlapping her stories with those of Maria, Jemima, and the other nameless women, Wollstonecraft reinforces the multiplicity of *Maria*, which is characteristic of the fluid text.

The mother-author complex further bolsters the fluid nature of the text as its very construction evades fixity. The mother-figure is fluid, encompassing multiple people, and often oscillating between two polar positions – virgin and outcast. As feminist theorist Julia Kristeva famously claims, the mother is a division of language. It eludes closed classifications in favor of multiplicity. Labbe’s and Kelly’s respective understanding of the writing mother point to its elusive nature as well. According to Labbe, the writing mother of the Romantic period was often a figure of respectability whose physical body was nearly sanctified and placed in proximity to the Virgin Mary (Labbe 68). On the other hand, the content of Maria’s writing puts her sanctity in jeopardy. According to Kelly, Maria’s writing of the memoirs constituted a kind of “social rebellion,” “for in writing them Maria has to ‘break through all restraint’ in order to authenticate their picture of oppression with details too indelicate for a lady’s – or even a woman’s – pen” (213). Therefore, in the act of establishing herself as a mother, and thus deserving of social praise, Maria simultaneously transgresses social norms and puts her womanhood, and status as an author, at risk. Wollstonecraft does not position Maria under one conception of the mother-as-author figure or another, but rather supports both in conjunction. Paradoxically, while the mother-figure, as Wollstonecraft imagines her, represents an abundance of (contradictory) meaning, it also serves as an absence, operating as a “shadowy, not completely represented” figure, traversing the margins of the page (Langbauer 214). This final tension between absence and presence reaffirms the mother’s role as a literary representation of the tensions the reader is

expected to navigate in the text. Embodying tension, Wollstonecraft establishes the mother-author construction as the emblem of fluidity.

And as the emblem of fluidity, the mother-figure mediates the private and public realms the memoir establishes. According to Michelle Boulous Walker, “the maternal is performed through the (public) act of writing” (135). Like the author construction, which can only appear “at the moment of cultural recognition” (Bryant 11), the mother must similarly be acknowledged in order to exist. As such, interpretation and response are brought to the forefront of the text again. While the mother’s existence rests on the public’s recognition, Maria’s memoir, which she writes as a direct address to her daughter, is intensely intimate, private. Labbe further contends that the woman writer, in “[foregrounding] her maternal self” circumvents the public and enters “the domestic in its place” (67). Wollstonecraft’s use of the memoir then interweaves the public and private spheres. In fact, each relies entirely upon its binary. In writing *Maria* as a series of memoirs enclosed in the novel form, Wollstonecraft challenges the division that separates the public and political sphere from the private and domestic sphere. Wollstonecraft collapses these spaces by following Maria’s movements both inside and outside the home. She reveals that just as these personal memoirs are corrupted by the social world of the novel, so too is the domestic sphere, which cannot escape dangers from the outside world, including cruel fathers, suitors, and husbands. In essence, Wollstonecraft pushes the reader to repeatedly cross these boundaries between private and public that the mother-author does through the memoir form, actively engaging us in dissolving the domestic sphere entrapping women.

### **A Love Story in the Marginalia: Reading the Fluid Text**

Wollstonecraft does not leave her reader in the dark to traverse these fluid spaces alone. Instead, like other novelists before her, she provides us with a clear rendering of her ideal reader. Wollstonecraft shows us how her novels are to be read through representations of reading in the text. As Maria is both writer and reader, she becomes the primary figure from whom we learn. Maria's mistakes in hastily reading those around her and fixing their character in her mind, mistakes pointed out to the reader by the narrator, allow us to conceive the advantages of the fluid text in conjunction with the risks of reading for stability. While in the asylum, Maria takes up several books, including "Dryden's *Fables*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with several modern productions" (Wollstonecraft 173). These do not capture her attention as much as the marginalia written in the philosophical books Darnford loans to Maria through Jemima's connivance. At first, Maria reads these fragments for connection: "she turned over the leaves with awe, as if they had become sacred from passing through the hands of an unfortunate being, oppressed by a similar fate" (Wollstonecraft 172-3). As we will see in Godwin's editing of *Maria*, reading the marginalia inspires a sublime reaction, as one will likely find "a melancholy delight in contemplating" these "slight sketches," to use Godwin's own language. Furthermore, Maria finds Darnford's body written into the marginal notes just as the reader often collapses Wollstonecraft's body into the novella, finding the unfinished novella as evidence of the author's mortality. In Maria's case, these marginal notes become evidence of Darnford's intellectual capability as well as of his physical confinement, confined to the margins of the page and society. Through the materiality of the book, she can feel her own entrapped and marginal condition. In essence, she reads herself. In one of their book exchanges, Darnford includes a letter to Maria, which she reads with great zeal. In this letter, Darnford separates his exclamations of ardor with a number of dashes. These dashes represent both the reader's

required engagement with the text, representing the links that we are expected to make, while also pointing to the gaps we, along with Maria, must fill. Just as we never receive a full account of Wollstonecraft's novella, Maria never fully renders Darnford's character.

I argue that Darnford serves as the text's lacuna, representative of all the novella's gaps and incongruencies. As such, we can discover how Wollstonecraft expects us to approach the novella by considering how Wollstonecraft portrays, and most importantly critiques, Maria's reading of Darnford. Maria first perceives Darnford from her prison window. Looking through the bars, which further fragments her point of view, she sees only his back. At this moment, she curses her tardiness for she just misses seeing his face: only "five minutes sooner" and she would have "been out of suspense." In order to diminish the effects of continuing suspense, Maria begins to form her own view of him, and "gave an outline to the imagination to sketch the individual form she wished to recognize" (Wollstonecraft 177). But Wollstonecraft does not want the reader of *Maria* to insert themselves in the text only to satisfy their desire of extinguishing suspense. Rather, acting in line with the sublime, Wollstonecraft instead caters to suspense, pushing the reader to inhabit a discomfoting space and embrace "negative capability." Wollstonecraft wants us to feel Maria's conception of Darnford as incomplete and unsatisfactory, just as she expects us to approach the fragmented memoirs.

In her representation of Maria's reading of Darnford, Wollstonecraft promotes a careful reading experience, one that imitates the circular narrative structure of the text itself. As tales are repeated, Wollstonecraft expects her reader to re-confront and re-digest the same problems presented in different contexts. In short, the reader is expected to re-read. Through the use of the critical heterodiegetic narrator, Wollstonecraft presents Maria as a bad reader. Maria reads the marginalia "over and over again," and begins to "sketch a character, congenial with her own,

from these shadowy outlines” (Wollstonecraft 173). Although Maria rereads, she rereads carelessly. Instead of questioning her initial conceptions, she reaffirms them with every read. Maria essentially seeks to fix Darnford’s in stone: “she [...] combined all the qualities of a hero’s mind, and fate presented a statue in which she might enshrine them” (Wollstonecraft 187). The biggest mistake when reading *Maria* is to suppose it as fixed, just as Maria constructs an ideal Darnford. When engaging with the gaps of the text, it is necessary to conceive of the multiplicity of meaning embedded in each one. As we will see, both Wollstonecraft and Godwin recognize and argue that no work, no canon, no person can be fixed. As we read Darnford, we receive Maria’s conception of him, infer the narrator’s and editor’s, and lastly must construct our own. It would be conservative to say that we receive two versions of Darnford, the story he tells and what Maria imagines him to be, for both stories are mediated by the narrator.

Just as we see two Darnfords, we can also identify two novellas in scenes in which Maria is especially under Darnford’s “spell” (Wollstonecraft 188). The narrator offers a joint focalization of Maria, Darnford and Jemima’s time together, exclaiming

Imagination! Who can paint thy power; or reflect the evanescent tints of hope fostered by thee? A despondent gloom had long obscured Maria’s horizon – now the sun broke forth, the rainbow appeared, and every prospect was fair. Horror still reigned in the darkened cells, suspicion lurked in the passages, and whispered along the walls. The yells of men possessed, sometimes, made them pause, and wonder that they felt so happy, in a tomb of living death. They even chide themselves for such apparent insensibility; still the world contained not three happier beings. (Wollstonecraft 189)

Here, we receive two versions of the same scene presented side-by-side. We have the real, “darkened cells and yells of men possessed” directly alongside the paradisaical romanticized

version of their confinement, where a “rainbow” appears, seemingly penetrating the prison’s stone walls. Only a mere period separates these two experiences. Returning to Wollstonecraft’s use of romance and poetry, here we see its collapse. In fragmenting these contradictory experiences of the same situation, Wollstonecraft offers a scene of ruin that is disguised by love. As such, it is clear that Wollstonecraft engages in the same aesthetics of textual decomposition that we will find in Godwin’s editing of the novella. Perhaps the final description of the asylum as a “tomb of living death” offers a useful image to end our discussion of Wollstonecraft’s fluid text, as it is reminiscent of how *Maria*, the novella, was found. Enshrined in a tomb (*Posthumous Works*) is Wollstonecraft’s dying breath (*Maria*).

## CHAPTER THREE

### WILLIAM GODWIN'S EDITING OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Although William Godwin claims that he represents Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria* just as she left it, scattered and incomplete, he nonetheless engages in the editorial practices required to produce a publishable work. In doing so, he uses an editorial eye to envision *Maria* in a new form, a form I argue nears the prose poem. In this chapter, I evaluate his role in both composing and de-composing the text before us. However, contra to the general consensus, I argue that Godwin's edits do not overwhelm the novella but rather emphasize Wollstonecraft's own writing philosophy and interest in fluidity discussed in chapter two. Editing for the fluid text, Godwin composes a "Frankensteinian" text. In defining this elusive, monstrous text, I draw upon a number of other genres, namely composite forms and lyric essays in addition to RFPs and prose poetry, with which Godwin engages, albeit unconsciously, to better illustrate how genre lines are blurred. Although I agree with scholars like Tilottama Rajan that Godwin's editing constitutes a strong aesthetic presence in the text deserving of its own individual attention, I contend that his efforts add to rather than detract from Wollstonecraft's own endeavors. Therefore, while recognizing two separate intentions, authorial and editorial, I consider both efforts as working toward one aesthetic: the sublime.

#### **Composition at a Glance**

Godwin's *Posthumous Works* comprises four volumes divided into two books. The first book contains *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria. A Fragment* and "Lessons," which are

fragments of “the first book of a series which [Wollstonecraft] intended to have written for [her] unfortunate girl” (Wollstonecraft Godwin 175). The second book contains letters, an extract of *The Cave of Fancy*, an essay on poetry, and finally “Hints” for the second part of *Vindication*. Before reaching the first chapter of *Maria* in Godwin’s 1798 edition, the reader receives numerous title pages that prepare them for the fragmentary, fluid structure that follows and, importantly, Godwin’s own hand in creating it. Beginning with the cover page,<sup>19</sup> Godwin relays key information, including the author’s name, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, the title, Posthumous Works of the Author of A Vindications of the Rights of Woman, the year, 1798, and finally the general framework, “Four Volumes in Two / Volume 1.” These “hints,” to use Godwin’s term, aptly prepare the reader in several ways for the unique structure that awaits them, and that serves as a good introduction here.

To begin, Godwin names the author “Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin,” the first time we see Wollstonecraft’s name printed on a title page. Although Wollstonecraft marries Godwin, and thus the addition of his last name to hers is not necessarily an error, it is still worth noting. To modern readers and nineteenth-century readers alike, the addition of “Godwin” is slightly jarring, for most are introduced to the author of *Vindication* as simply Mary Wollstonecraft, which is also the name under which that work initially appeared in print in 1792. The author, Mary, with two last names, Wollstonecraft and Godwin, personifies the community involved in bringing this text to fruition as we find two authors embedded in one name. Although Godwin claims in the editor’s preface that his aim is to “introduce nothing of himself into the work,” we can observe with the first words on the cover page that his goal may not be fully realized in the text itself (Wollstonecraft 156). By intentionally adding his name to hers, Godwin appears to recognize his

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix A for cover page.

voice in the text in conjunction with the “real” author’s, Wollstonecraft’s; accordingly, I argue we should do the same in our reading of *Maria*.

Godwin’s title, *Posthumous Works of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, also prepares the reader for the ensuing texts. Its effect can be broken down into three distinct parts. First, it identifies the thread connecting the diverse types of writing contained within the borders of the book – that being that they are all “posthumous works.” In doing so, Godwin frames each work with Wollstonecraft’s death, shading the reader’s perception of the fragment as evidence of the author’s mortality.<sup>20</sup> Second, Godwin describes Wollstonecraft as an “author,” a term that acknowledges her status and authority. It also recognizes the social element required in her existence, for an author “appears only at the moment of cultural recognition;” in other words, an author is a social construct (Bryant 11). Therefore, the composition of this work becomes even more collaborative, including Wollstonecraft, the author, Godwin, the editor, and us, the public. This final component that makes up the “author,” the public, will prove doubly important in filling in the gaps of *Maria*’s form (a topic briefly discussed in chapter one). Godwin’s interest in positioning the novella under this social contract aligns itself with Wollstonecraft’s own focus on the interaction between community and individual, public and private. Third, Godwin reminds the reader of Wollstonecraft’s most well-known literary work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in turn encouraging his readers to look for her political philosophies in her published literary remains and to thus consider the existence of the text beyond its published borders. Godwin’s insistence on reminding the reader of *Vindication* further strengthens the reading of *Maria* as a reverse *Vindication*, a deterioration of the ideals Wollstonecraft envisions in her earlier works, including *Mary*.

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<sup>20</sup> As we will see later, this collapse of Wollstonecraft’s life and the end of the novella contributes to the autobiographical reading this text elicits and that future readers adopt following Godwin’s edition.

Turning the page, the reader is next confronted with three title pages: the first two repeat the information from the cover and the third introduces the novella. From this final title page alone,<sup>21</sup> the reader can surmise what awaits them. On this page, the complete text reads, “The Wrongs of Woman / or, / Maria. / A Fragment. / In Two Volumes. / Vol. 1”. As it is impossible to know what Wollstonecraft would have titled this work, we must rely solely on Godwin’s editorial decision, or lack thereof. As the “or” would suggest, Godwin offers two titles: *The Wrongs of Woman*, which gestures to the collective, and *Maria*, which points to the individual. This “choosing not choosing,” a phrase I borrow from Sharon Cameron, mirrors Godwin’s editing choices of Wollstonecraft throughout *Posthumous Works*. Instead of choosing one frame for Wollstonecraft – a political, literary, or personal one – Godwin presents them all, side-by-side, with the frames themselves representing his editorial interventions that separate the pictures inside. The juxtaposition of the public (Woman) and private (Maria) perspectives inherent to this work parallels Godwin’s public and private representations of Wollstonecraft throughout *Posthumous Works* and *Memoirs*. The title also includes the amendment, “A Fragment,” positioned on its own line in the center of the page, thus drawing focus to Godwin’s (perhaps too simple) classification and to the fragmentary perspectives alluded to in the juxtaposed titles.

Finally, the title page informs the reader that the novella is divided into two volumes. It is here, however, that Godwin sets up expectations only to confuse them later. In the “Advertisement” situated between chapters fourteen and fifteen in volume two of *Maria*, Godwin concedes that “the performance [i.e. *Maria*], with a fragment of which the reader has now been presented, was designed to consist of *three* parts. The preceding sheets were considered as constituting one of those parts” (Wollstonecraft 272, italics added). Although

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix B for *Maria* title page.

acknowledging the text to be a fragment in the title, Godwin nevertheless imposes a sense of completion by claiming it is two volumes, as opposed to “two and a half.” Godwin thus only unveils the true form of the text after the reader reaches its most fragmentary section. It appears that some of the text’s mystery is left for the reader to find as the work unfolds before them. With that being said, some of the mystery also remains. Describing the “preceding sheets” as “constituting one of those parts,” it is unclear whether the fragments were supposed to be a part of that missing volume or whether they remain a part of volume two, as the sequential chapter headings beginning with chapter fifteen would suggest. Therefore, despite the relative clarity that the cover page brings to the text itself, contradictions abound.

Immediately following the title page, we find the two prefaces. Taking it one step further than the other paratexts, the prefaces offer the reader a glimpse of Godwin’s editorial style that guides the entire novella. The two primary editorial marks that we can observe in the prefaces and that permeate *Maria* are footnotes and insertions. Although both hold Godwin’s voice, these editorial marks function in different ways, revealing how Godwin intends for the novella to be read. Although abundant, footnotes, unlike insertions, do not force the reader to stop. While providing additional information, the reader can continue on their own reading trajectory. In Godwin’s preface, the first footnote of *Maria* simply alerts the reader to where they can find a “more copious extract” of the quoted letter to Mr. Dyson. With this addition, Godwin breaks down the boundaries of the text itself, encouraging a reading beyond the printed page. He also offers more insight into the writing and collecting processes in his footnotes, clarifying in the second footnote of the author’s preface that Wollstonecraft communicated only the “first fourteen chapters” of her manuscript to Mr. Dyson, a close friend, and Godwin, the current editor. These editorial interventions, rather than breaking up the text as we will see with his

insertions, extend the document by providing opportunities for the reader to consider the text beyond its material form.

Godwin's insertions constitute the second editorial technique that he employs in the prefaces, which can be identified as text confined in brackets. In the author's preface, Godwin injects his voice into the middle of the text, effectively breaking it in two. Following Wollstonecraft's proclamation that heroines are to "come forth highly finished Minervas," Godwin interrupts with, "[The following is an extract of a letter from the author to a friend, to whom she communicated her manuscript]" (Wollstonecraft 158). This insertion more directly draws the reader's attention to the text's construction than the footnotes previously mentioned. The reading experience also changes from footnotes to inserts, forcing the reader's focus back to the text's assembly and thus reflecting the content of the insert in the first place. Because this intervention is placed in between paragraphs, there is no opportunity to circumvent Godwin's voice, and thus the reader is required to stop reading Wollstonecraft. Further, by surrounding this editorial insertion with two strong dashes above and below it, Godwin breaks apart the preface even more and draws the reader's attention back to the cessation in the author's voice. Fragmenting the text into two parts also reveals a notable difference between the intended audiences from the excerpted sections, one from Wollstonecraft's drafts and the other from a letter to a friend. While the first half seems to be addressed to the general public, much like how the rest of the novella reads, the second half is directed to Mr. Dyson. Here, Godwin again sutures Wollstonecraft's public and private existences together, immediately confronting readers with the author's two sides and the text's two foci.

It is important to note, however, that while suturing the two versions of Wollstonecraft together, Godwin also paradoxically pushes them apart with his editorial interjection. This trend

of binding and unbinding through editing, which is first illustrated in the preface, can be tracked throughout the entire novella and plays an important role in classifying the text. Each of Godwin's editorial marks leaves a space between his voice and Wollstonecraft's. The room in-between the two launches the reader back and forth, making them aware of the competing voices printed on a single page. Godwin's manipulation of the letter not only adds another unheard, and unaccredited, voice to the page, Mr. Dyson's, but also simulates how Godwin serves both as an agent in the text's composition as well as its de-composition. Acting like Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, Godwin pieces together the scraps of Wollstonecraft's literary remains to create something sublime, preserving the rough and jagged edges of its unfinished form. As Tilottama Rajan observes, the "re-citing and 'transposition' of parts of the letter to Dyson provides a model for the process of linking made possible throughout by Godwin's de-composition of the text" (208; italics added). Appearing in both prefaces, the letter is cleaved apart and repurposed to fit different contexts. According to Stuart Curran, composite forms, like *Maria*, are "inherently risky for where there are no recipes or assured conventions the experiment can be unintentionally grotesque" (181). Godwin seems aware of that very possibility and rather than attempting to minimize it, he exploits the grotesque in order to advance *Maria*'s innate aestheticism. His use of the letter then indicates Godwin's aesthetic intent as he does not just present this letter "as he found it," but instead manipulates it to fit within both his and Wollstonecraft's philosophy on writing. Pulled apart and pieced back together, the letter reveals the strength of Godwin's editorial hand. His editing therefore strengthens Wollstonecraft's already disjointed text, composed from a collection of genres.

The use of the letter to Dyson also prepares the reader to experience multiple genres when reading *Maria*, for the prefaces already present the reader with a combination of epistolary

and prosaic structures. Here we see Godwin acting in line with Wollstonecraft, who similarly challenges genre boundaries. There is, however, an important distinction between Wollstonecraft's and Godwin's means of combination. Godwin does not seek to blend genres like Wollstonecraft; instead, he draws attention to the breaks, proving that the experimental combination of the two genres is "not a *confusion* of values but a paradoxical *reinforcement* of them, reminding us sharply of the very aesthetic distances they subvert" (Curran 5, italics added). Because of their joint effort, *Maria* becomes a difficult text to classify using typical literary conventions. Describing the construction of composite forms that operate like *Maria*, Curran further explains that the mix of genres "constitutes ways in which poets accommodate the past in the present" and, I would add, anticipate future forms. It is because of this patchwork of texts, to use McGann's term again, that Rajan considers *Maria*'s composition and asks whether we should consider these literary remains as "an aftermath or *avant-texte*," as a marker of the past or a glimpse into some future form (204). Godwin's time-bending play with genre, elicited from his combination of past genres to advance future forms, parallels Wollstonecraft's interests in time, as she documents past wrongs in eighteenth-century England that readers connect to those of the present day, wrongs she encourages her current readers to fix after they finish reading her text.

After the two prefaces, there remain only two pages that separate the reader from the much-anticipated novella: those being the textual errata and contents pages.<sup>22</sup> The errata section appears in small text and corrects two of the mistakes found in the printed *Maria* that follows. Although the errors are not substantial enough to constitute variants, as Bryant would define them, that change the meaning of the work or constitute different "versions" in themselves, they do point to the text being a "work-in-progress," to use a classification reached in the

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<sup>22</sup> See Appendix C for contents page.

introduction. Even after a work is printed, the text remains fluid as it has to continue to be revised. In these “errata,” we see the inevitable gap between the ideal, intangible text and the real, inherently flawed one. The errata also presents another layer of editing that can be easy to ignore. While we receive Godwin’s corrections to Wollstonecraft’s manuscripts throughout the text, this page illustrates an instance in which the editorial eye must be turned on Godwin. The layers of fluidity reveal themselves here. Revising becomes a never-ending cycle in which the editor becomes the writer and, in turn, requires another editor. The last page the reader encounters before reaching *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* lists the contents of the four-volume collection. Godwin reminds the reader of the context in which the unfinished novella is placed. Although he provides only brief and fragmented descriptions of the contents, Godwin chooses large font that dominates the page to note “VOL. I and II” and “VOL III and IV”. In doing so, Godwin rejects simplified distinctions and purposefully divides the chapter headings to highlight the parts over the whole, a theme intrinsic to his editing style in *Maria*.

Overall, Godwin makes thirty-two interventions. Rajan offers a comprehensive account of Godwin’s presence in the text:

These [interventions] range from his Preface, Conclusion, and an “Appendix” inserted after chapter 14, which he curiously entitles “Advertisement”: to asterisks and dashes in the text, or footnotes [...]; to seventeen parenthetical insertions, often seemingly minor.

(Rajan 177)

In labeling *Maria* a fragment, adding these editorial interjections, and including the editorial primers in the paratexts – all of which meticulously follow the process behind the text’s creation – Godwin encourages a meta-reading of the unfinished novella, *Maria*. He wants us to focus on the actual text *in hand*. He wants us to track and measure Wollstonecraft’s labor. Following

media theorist Marshall McLuhan's logic, Godwin makes "the medium [i.e. his editing] the message" by forcing the reader to stop and read "at" the text as opposed to "through." Godwin rejects easy reading. To continue our painting metaphor, Godwin's cubist-like *Maria* presents multiple, partial perspectives on a single canvas, forcing the reader to acknowledge the contradictions and ambiguities inscribed on the page that have resulted from its fragmentary and fluid form. Because of the frequency with which Godwin stops the reader within the text, it is clear that he promotes a particular reading experience, one that I argue conforms to the fluid text theory. Rajan argues that, "Godwin does not want us to read the *Wrongs* enthusiastically, as a premature or adolescent text. He wants us to see it as the result of a process of slow thought and ongoing revision, which calls for an equal reflectiveness on the part of the reader" (198). In crafting the novella's paratexts, Godwin prepares us for the text ahead, aligning his approach with Wollstonecraft's own representations of reading in *Maria*. As such, Godwin's conscious efforts to highlight the fluid nature of *Maria* and to foster a reading experience that appropriately responds to it, support rather than undercut the goals of the text.

### **Composing and Decomposing**

As the prefaces indicate, Godwin's editing both composes and decomposes the text. Fragmenting the text with each editorial interjection, Godwin produces what Rajan deems "mini-narratives" (209), reinforcing Wollstonecraft's own work, for *Maria* also privileges the parts over the whole as we receive the individual stories of Darnford, Jemima, and Maria further fragmented among other women's stories. With every break in the narrative, the novel form further collapses into its most basic elemental unit, prose, which Jean François Lyotard defines as an "ungraded supply of phrases" and "not a genre" at all (158). The overall structure of the

novella represents this collapse of genre, with *Maria* beginning with relatively finished chapters and ending with a debris of incomplete phrases. Acknowledging the text's "return" to prose, we are reminded of the processes underlining the creation of the work. In considering the novella as prose, a stronger connection to other genres, like Wollstonecraft's political prose, also emerges. Further, the "return" parallels the reverse *Vindication* reading that Johnson highlights. In promoting a "return" to reading, represented both in the scenes of rereading in the text as well as in the composition of the novella as a "return" to prose, both Wollstonecraft and Godwin oppose a linear reading in favor of a reading of "return," a circular reading.

While it is clear that Godwin's editing breaks down the text, I also argue that he simultaneously builds it up into poetic structures. I draw attention to the simultaneity of this endeavor as I perceive the prosaic and poetic qualities as intricately intertwined in this novella. Rajan similarly recognizes this poetic endeavor and points to Godwin's editing, and philology more generally, as the source of the text's poeticism. She argues that "by phrasing the text in the editorial genre Godwin makes the linkages that produce genre themselves an object of reflection." She continues, "Philology is the poetry of scholarship: a form of enjambment or hanging back. This hanging back [...] releases a certain narrativity within the edited text that configures it as a potential – rather than a mimetic – space" (210). For Rajan, it is precisely the editorial interventions that mark the text as poetic. Yet, both Wollstonecraft and Godwin participate in the same aesthetic that challenges genre boundaries and that simultaneously builds and deconstructs texts to fit within multiple literary categories. Notably, Rajan's identification of the space created from "hanging back," which I have been calling gaps, points to the important role of the reader, who Godwin calls upon to apply their own interpretive freedom in order to fill the text. In creating gaps, Godwin further suspends the reading process, consequentially forcing

the reader to focus on the poetic composition of the text (and both Wollstonecraft's, Godwin's, and the reader's hand in shaping it). Furthermore, "unbinding" the conclusion to produce disassociated fragments enriches the text's poetic sensibility, officially releasing it from the aforementioned narrative responsibility and allowing for a greater degree of abstraction, which is a hallmark of all poetry (Rajan 206).

Gabrielle Starr pays particular attention to these gaps, or chiasmic sites, as locations at which poetry reveals itself in a text. She defines chiasmic sites "as those places where readers are asked to map experiences of the world of dates, times, places, and letters onto the world of the fictional – to cross the boundaries of imagination and reality" (Starr 13). In other words, chiasmic sites are locations where the reader must step into the text and work in uniting the real and the ideal worlds presented in tandem. The function of these chiasmic sites is then to teach the reader to navigate these diametrically opposed states that poetry seeks to unite. These sites are also often where the individual confronts the cultural, and thus the reader is again called upon to mediate those boundaries and, often, reveal them to be illusory. The mediation between social consciousness (often conflated with the reader's) and individual consciousness (related to the character's) is not limited to lyrics (Handwerk 66), for lyric techniques can be found integrated into other forms, like the novel, which often "mediates chiasmically between two viewpoints or experiences, describing and determining the relationship between them" (Starr 114). While lyric is sometimes related to an ideal social vision, it is more often used as a mediating tool. By tuning into the lyric qualities of the novella through chiasmic constructions, Wollstonecraft and Godwin teach us how to navigate the private and public realms of eighteenth-century England. Here, I align myself with Sarah Zimmerman, who similarly argues that "Romantic lyricism" is a "vehicle for collapsing [...] distinctions" as it helps to "[submit] the seemingly private

reflections of an autobiographical speaker to a public view” (Zimmerman ix). Gaps, a feature intrinsic to our definition of the fluid text, prose poem, and RFP (and by extension lyric) then reveal the tensions governing the work.

Godwin primes the reader to look for the gaps in his preface, addressing the reader’s required imagination in contemplating “these sketches of what, *if they had been filled up in a manner adequate to the writer’s conception*, would perhaps have given a new impulse to the manners of a world” (Wollstonecraft 155; italics added). By pondering what the work would look like had it been “filled up,” Godwin gestures to an elusive, finished *Maria*. Amy Bonnaffons notes a tendency for “casting the lyric essay,” and I would add the other aforementioned genres dependent on gaps (i.e. RFPS, prose poetry, etc.), “as diminutive;” however, she explains that the gaps actually “give rise to a different kind of amplitude.” These gaps, rather than serving as a sign of the form’s fragility, paradoxically assures its durability. As we can recall, Marjorie Levinson also considers the effect of absences in Romantic Fragment Poems and comes to a similar conclusion, noting that “because the reader cannot but see the extent to which his engagement with the fragment actualizes the work for him, he cannot experience the work as an object waiting his consumption.” Accordingly, “a work that is never consumed can never be exhausted” (Levinson 214-5). Godwin seems to recognize the “amplitude” that can be achieved from gaps, as he postulates in the pseudo-epitaph to *Maria* that, “in reality, these hints [of *Maria*], simple as they are, are pregnant with passion” (Wollstonecraft 287, italics added). These gaps allow the reader to step into the text and to construct their own narrative. Despite *Maria*’s seemingly frail and crumbling structure, Godwin’s publishing assures that these writings can never truly be lost or “exhausted,” as long as there exists an audience to read and fill them.

The position of the reader then becomes one of utmost importance. As Starr succinctly describes the relationship between reader and text is “at the heart of the success of the novel” and is “also key in romantic lyrics” (Starr 7). Counter to the over-simplified definition of lyric – a “fairly short poem, uttered by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling” (Abrams and Harpham 202) – lyrics do not necessarily represent an isolated expression of feeling. Rather, they often engage in a larger social network, as discussed in chapter two. Again, aligning myself with Zimmerman, I question the “equation of the mode with persona as opposed to the social” (ix). While these consciousnesses are often presented in opposition, they are nevertheless presented simultaneously. While Abrams and Harpham’s definition of lyric does emphasize a “process of perception,” which tangentially refers to the process of creation, it does not adequately account for tensions that are integral to the form. Lyrics, according to Starr, often “announce the constructedness of the worlds we read and of the experiences they represent” (Starr 124). Starr further contends that lyrics emphasize this construction in order to encourage the reader to “reconstruct these worlds for ourselves and submit them to the political and social critiques of novelistic discourse” (Starr 124). This binary between the construction of creation and perception can also be found in novels, which frequently call attention to the “permeable divide” between readers and characters/authors through what Starr class the “genre-specific machinery, like the editor-narrator correspondent,” the “figure of permeability” (Starr 110). In *Maria*, Godwin is that figure. He draws our attention to the reader’s dual role as a constructor and receptor of the text that parallels his own. We too become a permeable figure, crossing the boundaries of made and unmade, public and private.

### **Ending *Maria* in Collapse**

In its blend of genres, embrace of gaps, and reliance on the reader, *Maria*'s composition acts in unison with the lyric essay. Although *Maria* does not exactly fit the criterium that lyric essays "forsake narrative line, discursive logic, and the art of persuasion," as *Maria* is arguably Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* under the guise of a novella (Tall and D'Agata), the shared elements between *Maria* and lyric essays bring them into necessary conversation and help us understand Godwin's editing of the text's conclusion. The lyric essay "sets off on an uncharted course through *interlocking webs of idea, circumstance and language* – a pursuit with no foreknown conclusion, an arrival that might still leave the writer questioning" (Tall and D'Agata, italics added). While the majority of *Maria* maintains a regular narrative arc, with only occasional gaps indicated by Godwin's editorial inserts, the ending certainly fits Tall and D'Agata's representation of a lyric essay. *Maria* falls into collapse after the Advertisement, which immediately follows chapter fourteen. In his advertisement, Godwin gestures to the "missing volume" previously mentioned. We are thus poignantly reminded of the gaps that have constituted the text all along. At this point in the narrative, Godwin repeats some of the claims mentioned in the preface. Anticipating readerly rejection, Godwin imagines the ideal reader as one with an imagination able to "find gratification, in contemplating sketches, which were designed in a short time to have received the finishing touches of her genius [.....] but which for now forever remain a mark to record the triumphs of mortality, over schemes of usefulness, and projects of public interest" (Wollstonecraft 272). Here, Godwin's use of "projects" can be treated as a noun and verb, meaning a "draft, plan, or scheme" as well as "to extend outward beyond something else." The dual meaning behind project points to both the process behind the creation as well as the reader's requirement to project, or imagine, the ideal complete version of the text that can never be fully realized on the page. Like the earlier paratexts mentioned at the beginning

of this chapter, the Advertisement proves useful as it again prepares us for the ensuing debris of chapters that conclude the novella and our role in collecting it.

Godwin recognizes the ideal and real text, and the reader's job to imagine both in tandem, first with the simple designation, "fragment." In the preface, Godwin concludes by repeating this claim about the necessity to "fill" these "sketches," but now directing it toward Wollstonecraft's preface, which is "not a preface regularly drawn out by the author, but merely hints for a preface, which, *though never filled up in the manner the writer intended*, appeared to be worth preserving" (Wollstonecraft 156; italics added). Presenting only a sketch of *Maria*, Godwin leaves the "harmonious shading" to be completed by the reader, placing the interpretive responsibility on their shoulders (Wollstonecraft 155). Because the fragment is tenuously attached to an elusive Platonic ideal that, by its very nature, can never be actualized, it is similarly elusive. It is *fluid*. Godwin returns for the last time to the text's "fullness" in the pseudo-epitaph to Wollstonecraft at the end, acknowledging that readers might be surprised by how many pages were "filled" from "these slight sketches" and arguing this time that "in reality, these hints, simple as they are, are *pregnant* with passion." Godwin then compares Wollstonecraft and her sketches to the "refuge of barren authors" who "crowd their fictions with so great a number of events" (Wollstonecraft 287; italics added).<sup>23</sup> Returning to Rajan's note on Godwin's poeticism, the spaces paradoxically make the text fuller, as they are charged with a potentiality that holds infinite possible narratives as opposed to a fixed one determined by the author. Therefore, we can observe a shift in Godwin's justification of these fragments: first

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<sup>23</sup> Godwin's use of "pregnant" and "barren" seem especially poignant as Wollstonecraft wrote the majority of *Maria* while pregnant with Mary Shelley (née Godwin). His language also furthers the collapse of text and body mentioned throughout this paper.

arguing for their critical significance on par with complete works and finally contending for their superiority over the denser fictions produced by “barren authors.”

It is here that I want to offer a brief discussion of the aesthetic implications inherent in positioning the novel as incomplete, yet nevertheless “pregnant with passion.” In Isobel Armstrong’s book, *Romantic Women Writers*, she briefly considers the gendered divide between the sublime and the beautiful as established by Edmund Burke in a *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. While the beautiful is smooth, polished, feminine, the sublime is hard, rough, and masculine. I argue that *Maria*’s very roughness, both with respect to its “crude” language and construction, appeals to the sublime aesthetic as opposed to the beautiful. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the sublime as “of a language, style, or a literary work: expressing noble ideas in a grand and elevated manner,” a definition which initially appears to contradict *Maria*’s notorious linguistic simplicity. However, if we first consider Edmund Burke’s definition of the sublime, especially as he compares it to the beautiful, important parallels emerge. From *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Burke contends that, “beauty should be smooth and polished [...] beauty should not be obscure, the great [i.e. the sublime] ought to be dark and gloomy.” *Maria*’s ruggedness and ambiguousness, which both stem from its status as unfinished, arguably align it with that aesthetic. Returning to Godwin’s imagined ideal reader, who will use their imagination and find “a melancholy delight” in perusing these “unfinished productions of genius” (Wollstonecraft 155), Godwin describes an experience of confronting the sublime. As readers only receive a fragment of the work, it is as if they are kept from a grand secret, metaphorically left in the “dark and gloomy” to speculate on the text’s complete form. Godwin therefore predicts readers’ sense of awe in contemplating something they cannot completely

grasp. It is this other intangible version of the text (a concept the fluid text and RFP emphasize) that can be likened to the “elevated manner” (that is, to the extent of being inaccessible) of a work that *Maria* projects and that the OED definition also identifies.

Isobel Armstrong complicates this idea of the sublime with an important gender critique. She summarizes Burke’s contention that the sublime is a condition that relates to reason, the infinite, and phallic power. She claims that, “Burke speaks of the ‘swelling’ triumph associated with appropriate the power of the sublime object” (Armstrong 18). I would like to draw Burke’s “swelling” and Godwin’s use of “pregnant” together in order to circumvent the tendency to read the sublime as masculine. In Wollstonecraft, we see swelling of another sort, as something distinctly linked to the maternal. And just as we see Wollstonecraft link writing to maternity, Godwin positions motherhood with the sublime. In a similar vein, Kelly wonders if maybe the sublime is actually “a uniquely female experience:” “This joy [coming from motherhood] is represented as a uniquely female experience of the sublime, the recollection of which again interrupts [Maria’s] narrative,” further making it rough, fragmented, and sublime (216). Here, I want to complicate my earlier reference to Godwin composing (or rather “corposing”) a “Frankenstenian” lyric novella, as it now carries a new resonance. Perhaps it is not Victor Frankenstein who marks the text as fluid, but rather the missing mother figure. Just like *Maria*, *Frankenstein* is a novel that similarly centers what is missing. It is ultimately Wollstonecraft, the absent mother-author figure, who confirms the text as fluid; and it is Godwin, or Victor, who reinforces that fluidity through composing and decomposing materials.

Returning once more to Godwin’s editing of the conclusion, we find that rather than ending *Maria* with its most complete chapter, chapter seventeen, Godwin chooses to fasten “detached sentences,” “scattered heads,” and a final passage to the more finished ending

(Wollstonecraft 285). All of these additional fragments appear under the title “Conclusion, By the Editor,” reaffirming Godwin’s hand in their making (and its sublime composition). These “hints” deconstruct the ending to a collection of phrases. The “scattered heads” are perhaps the most intriguing as they consist of plot points, some more abstract than others, tied together with (or perhaps separated by) hyphens. The final string of “scattered heads” reads, “Divorced by her husband – Her lover unfaithful – Pregnancy – Miscarriage – Suicide” (Wollstonecraft 286). The hyphens formally represent the “webs of idea, circumstance and language” previously mentioned with respect to the lyric essay. However, Godwin does not end the novel with this “web.” Instead, he chooses to include what appears to be Wollstonecraft’s drafted conclusion. Because of its fragmentary nature and the fact that its conclusion conflicts with many of the other endings represented in the preceding fragments, the reader is left questioning, left to wonder whether *Maria* ever receives the happy ending of which she dreams.

While the lyric essay does not perfectly describe *Maria*’s structure, it does open the text up to new considerations, particularly the notion of a “web of ideas.” Although the aforementioned “scattered heads” represent the strongest connection to this phenomenon, the entire novella can (and should) be read as such. I would also argue that Godwin’s editing brings the text in conversation with the prose poem. Applying Stonecipher’s concept of the “built environment” of the prose poem as it operates in a city-scape, we can observe how Godwin’s editing merges the “lived city” and the “concept city” into one (Stonecipher 8). While the first half of the novella reads more like poetic prose, allowing for the reader to follow the characters, Maria, Jemima, and Darnford, as they narrate their life stories, the latter half considers the novella from a higher vantage point which shifts the narrative into prosaic poetry. Returning to the “scattered heads,” these detached phrases represent the abstracted novel at work. Although

Godwin positions them at the end of the novella, making them appear as hypothetical endings, an argument can be made that Wollstonecraft wrote these to use as a roadmap for the entire novella. When considered from a distance above, the novella is distilled to a string of plot points represented in these “scattered heads.” Thus, Godwin, much like Wollstonecraft, presents the reader with two opposing views of the novella, one lived and one abstracted, in his editing of *Maria*. By including this “web” at the end, as opposed to the beginning, Godwin encourages a circular reading that has us inserting and revising the ending with every scattered head. Further, by ending the novella with an unfinished chapter, Godwin presents the real ending of *Maria* as far off. As there is no real conclusion, the novella remains in continuation just as much as it is in decline.

In leaving the text incomplete, Godwin reinforces Wollstonecraft’s overall message. The social structures that govern the lives of eighteenth-century women are not sustainable, so much so that the text crumbles under the pressure from them. Maria cannot live in these social structures that are explicitly set up against women, and so the novel form cannot appropriately accommodate her. Returning to Levinson on Romantic Fragment Poems, fragments tend to “represent imaginatively (which is to say, syncretically) a disintegrating mind and social system, developed from a position within that mind and that system” (Levinson 142). We see just that in Wollstonecraft’s *Maria*. Following the lyric impulses of Maria’s consciousness as they are engaged with the social world, we stand witness to her collapse. I contend that we should extend Levinson’s description of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Posthumous Fragments* to *Maria*, for both act as “reactionary work[s] in effect if not by intention, for [they both] [express] through [their] formal development not just the futility of political responsiveness but the malignant effects of such engagement on the individual” (Levinson 149). To rely on another simplified binary,

Wollstonecraft and Godwin illustrate the corruptive influences of English society on the individual, and more specifically, on the English woman by uniting the lyric (subjective and individual) with the novel (social). While the text represents a revolutionary consciousness, we do not see revolutionary action, as Gary Kelly reminds us. Instead, “it is left to her readers to turn the lesion of the text into appropriate action in ‘real life’” (Kelly 214). What may be seen as a failure, a lack of action, then becomes the reverse. In effect, the reader again acts as the mediator between the fictional and real world, called to pick up the novella where Wollstonecraft and Godwin left it.

## CODA

When considering Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin's efforts in composing (and decomposing) *Maria*, it becomes clear that they engage in experiments with genre, resulting in a fluid text, one that might be named a "lyric novella." As *Maria* eludes standard classifications, it is necessary to create a new term that maintains flexible boundaries and accordingly allows for the aforementioned tensions. Much like prose poetry, the lyric novella offers competing perspectives and houses the same tensions between individual and community that consequentially arise. The forced union of the two otherwise standalone terms, "lyric" and "novella," conveys those tensions filling the space in-between. Further, the terms' relatively uncorrupted appearance points to the text's emphasis on its composition, on its parts over its whole. The most important characteristic of the lyric novella is its embrace of a multiplicity of texts. In *Maria*, we receive multiple versions of the work, some tangible and others not, that both Wollstonecraft and Godwin accentuate. Although genre presents certain limitations, using a term like lyric novella to define *Maria* allows the text a certain flexibility. Similar to the effect of Godwin's editing of the novella, the term lyric novella supports the complexity of the text rather than simplifying or obscuring it.

Because Godwin publishes *Maria* in its "preparatory state," to reuse Tilottama Rajan's phrase, his editing initially appears as the dominant force driving the reading experience. However, as this thesis argues, Wollstonecraft and Godwin are working in tandem, constructing a fluid text reading experience. Far from serving as a corrective to Wollstonecraft's writing philosophy, his editing reinforces it. Their joint interest in creating a work composed of

fragments leads to an active reader, who reads in accordance with the guidelines Wollstonecraft and Godwin embed in their writing and editing of the novella. Along with the author and editor, the reader actively engages in composing the text in hand. In “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One,” Stanley Fish argues that “all objects are made and not found [...] they are made by the interpretative strategies we set in motion.” I contend that both Wollstonecraft and Godwin recognize this phenomenon as they accordingly emphasize interpretation over event and action. We are privy not only to the heroine’s thinking mind but to our own, as well. Wollstonecraft and Godwin’s recognition that objects “are made and not found” also complicates the aforementioned gothic trope of found manuscripts discussed in chapter one. Wollstonecraft and Godwin reveal the implicit agency involved in reading, as nothing is ever found or read just as it is.

Ultimately, what is clear is that this fluid form can only be realized through the joint efforts of Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and ourselves. It is the reader who is responsible for adding the final building block in the lyric novella construction. And to return to Fish’s complication of found manuscripts, he maintains that “interpreters, [such as Godwin and ourselves] do not decode poems; they make them.” In Wollstonecraft’s purposefully unfinished representation of Darnford and in Godwin’s editing of the unfinished novella, we are left with a work in pieces, or “work-in-progress” to use an earlier designation, that we, the readers, must piece together to make a lyric novella. We are required to read beyond the material form and collate the real and ideal versions of the work. As such, I would add that it is imperative that we also consider the paratexts<sup>24</sup> to *Maria*, both those included in *Posthumous Works* and those not. Although *Memoirs* and *Vindication* did not appear in the initial publication of *Posthumous Works*, it is

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<sup>24</sup> Here, I define paratexts broadly, evoking the prefatory material of *Maria* in addition to what is literally gathered in the four volumes of *Posthumous Works*.

clear that Godwin intended for all three to be read in conversation with each other, as he publishes his *Memoirs* almost immediately following *Posthumous Works* (which includes *Vindication* in the title). As our reading goes beyond the borders of the novella, Godwin teaches us how to read and reanimate the political, literary, human figure of Mary Wollstonecraft. In reading *Maria*, we are responsible for giving voice to Wollstonecraft's dying breath.

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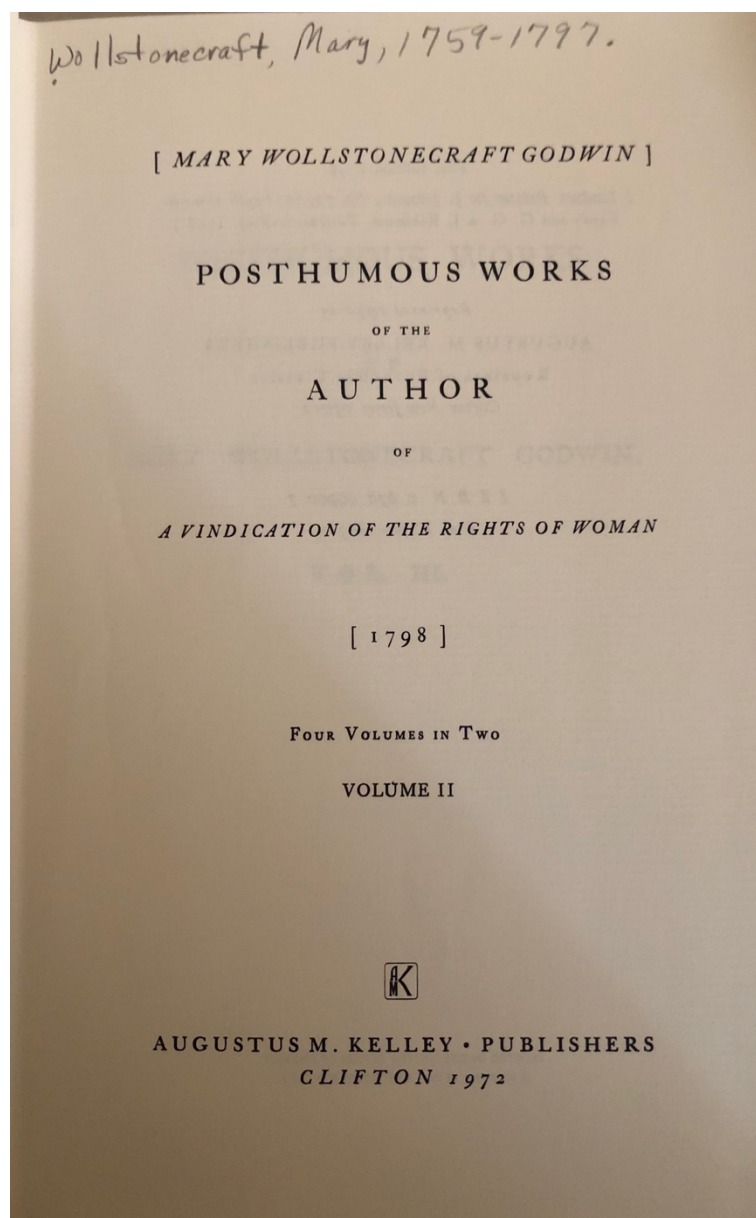
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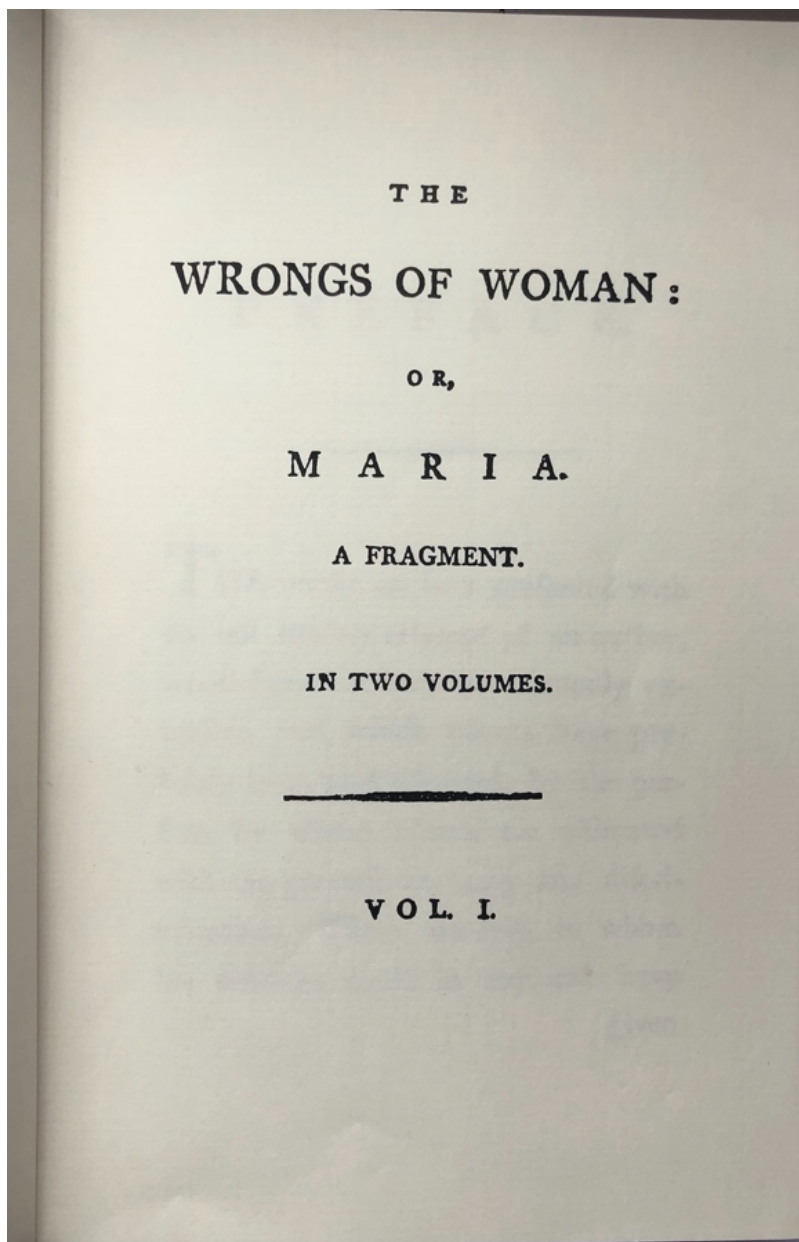
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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A



## Appendix B



## Appendix C

## CONTENTS.

## VOL. I. AND II.

The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria; a Fragment: to which is added, the First Book of a Series of Lessons for Children.

## VOL. III. AND IV.

Letters and Miscellaneous Pieces.