

## REWRITING AND REINTERPRETING: GODWIN'S *MEMOIRS*OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

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Godwin's *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*<sup>1</sup> have been traditionally read as a moving portrait of the beloved dead wife. It is at some points, but not so many as most critics have maintained. My study of this revealing work points at certain adjustments Godwin's prose and evaluation required. These adjustments were due basically to the author's being unaccustomed to handling the conventions of Romantic writing, but also to the immensely complex task of depicting a challenging, pioneering woman from a point of view of Dissenting sincerity, truth and dispassionateness.

THE MEMOIRS OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT acquired notoriety the moment they were published. Since then, they have attracted the interest of scholars for their distinctive relevance in the history of Romanticism, their status as an unprecedented frank biography, and the charisma of their very subject matter —Mary Wollstonecraft, the originator of modern feminism, and skilled travel and romance writer.

My interest in this relatively minor production, however, falls on its author, William Godwin, the cold philosopher of anarchism and the theory of society's improvement through the exercise of private judgement of the agitated 1790s. Godwin later in the decade, however, veered towards a reformulation of priorities. This expression attempts to encompass the rather complex process by which Godwin progressed from his position of Radical Dissent in politics and religious thinking to one of Deism and pre-Romanticism by the end of the eighteenth century and certainly by the time he was composing the *Memoirs*.

Godwin's reformulation coincided in time with —and very likely was boosted by—his most tragic experience, the loss of his wife, a trauma he attempted to unravel by turning Mary into the subject of the *Memoirs*. Thus his biographical exercise combines a variety of condiments that turned what in other circumstances would have been just one more *Life* into an exercise of mourning, tribute and biography, but also of interpretation, reevaluation and manipulation. The last three terms may imply a deep distrust of Godwin as a biographer. We must bring to mind here the fact that a biography is an exercise of recapitulation, and this particular case, Godwin's recounting of Mary Wollstonecraft's life includes himself, too, as a direct protagonist. Thus, very much like Rousseau in the *Confessions*, a work and genre for which Godwin felt an obvious admiration, Godwin reinvents not only his wife's character, but his own, too, so it becomes an engaging exercise to disentangle the author from the narrator and these from the character.

An overview of Mary Wollstonecraft's life would show that there may have been too much emotional intensity for Godwin to handle in a biography written from a perspective

The edition used is Mark Philp's (see Works Cited below). References will be incorporated in the text specifying page number only. The word 'Variants' appears when the cite belongs to the Memoirs' second edition.

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like his —faithful to detail, truth and sincerity, but even more relevantly, anxious to explain all her moves as products of deliberation and rationality. Mary's vitality and rejection of societal straightjackets was different from Godwin's philosophical outlook on life. This is not to disregard his courageous defence of friends around the time of the 1794 Treason Trials, for instance, but by the time they met, Mary had already been to Terror-ridden Paris on her own, conceived an illegitimate child and attracted public opprobrium by such unsightly initiatives as a menage-a-trois and repeated suicide attempts. Perhaps fortunately for her, such initiatives were unsuccessful. Godwin, by contrast, had travelled peacefully around the country visiting friends and at first trying to secure himself a religious position like his father's, won himself Pitt's Cabinet's animadversion with the production of *Political Justice*, and listened to the flattering conversation of cultured Radical ladies of his milieu.

Given this situation, Godwin the biographer understandably encountered a core of events that he could not narrate without incurring in dishonesty towards the memory of his deceased wife or towards his own Dissenter's sense of exactness. This explains the existence of a second edition of the *Memoirs*. Godwin not only did not succumb to the accusations of immorality and callousness by retracting his views, but always ready to provide a precise account of truth, added phrases and replaced words which he thought had been misinterpreted. Three passages are extensively rewritten: the Fuseli episode, Godwin's own view of the matrimonial compromise, and Mary's final psychological portrayal. The last two I shall leave aside now. I am concerned with Godwin's use of real-life sentimental effects in his *Memoirs*, a literary exercise from which his ulterior fictional work would benefit. To this effect, the Fuseli and Imlay chapters are particularly pertinent.

The minor changes, however, are often as revealing as those that have attracted the concern of the Godwin and Wollstonecraft scholar. These seemingly irrelevant variations which Godwin introduced in this second edition evidence his discomfort in the face of public censure, but also, on a deeper level, his search for a better tuned kind of vocabulary that defines personal relationships in more realistic, but nevertheless intimate terms. For instance, Mary's friendship for Fanny is 'warm' in the second edition, not 'fervent' as in the first, and their introduction is no more like that between Werther and Charlotte.

At the same time, Godwin attempted to interact more fluently with his reading public, whom he had taken for his direct adversary. Thus Mary was the subject of 'malignant' misrepresentation in the first edition, but the adjective then changes to 'thoughtless'. Owing to the same purpose, in the second edition Godwin omits the references to specific individuals, who in some cases had taken offence at the author's explicitness —or maybe at the supposition that they would become associated in the reader's mind with such a notorious pair as the Godwins. Mary's brothers and sisters in their current occupations, the Gascoyne brothers. Mr Allen and the Wedgewoods, the Cottons and Sir William East all saw their names or references disappear from the alarming text.

Godwin was maybe not aware of the explicitness of the vocabulary until the reaction hit him. He corrects the image of Mary 'panting' for a personal relationship, and so her connection with Imlay is one that provokes pain and sorrow (i.e. emotional effect) rather than one entered into to soothe an unsatisfied sexual appetite. Also, he makes it very clear in a parenthetical aside that Mary and Imlay's connection had been 'formed, on her part at least, with no capricious or fickle design' (p. 116). Indeed, it had not. She had been putting her *Rights of Woman* teachings in jeopardy, for in staying by Imlay, she meant 'to cling [to] the elm by which I wish to be supported.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The cite to which this excerpt belongs appears below.

Godwin makes comparatively few corrections in the Imlay intrigue because the subject matter is itself propitious for the exploration of emotion and the use of good sentimental prose. Exactly the same happens when looking at the respective proses of Mary and Godwin. The evaluation of her mistakes and successes is easier by virtue of her deeply communicative and emphatic prose. Mary's is a problem of balance, and of grammatical construction, but on the whole she communicates emotion with a brilliance and agility that Godwin could appreciate, but not appropriate.

It is true that the second edition tends more towards sentiment than the first, particularly through the addition on 'individual attachments' which Godwin felt so proud of that he included it in the preface to *St Leon* and then in the *Reply to Parr*. However, it is worth remembering that such a clarifying paragraph, quoted below, comes in to reinforce the idea of Mary's attachment for Fuseli —not Godwin. When Godwin comes to talk of their own love, a number of gaps open in his discourse. I would like to point out that the following is precisely one of the choice texts for those critics who maintain Godwin's revolution towards sentiment in the *Memoirs*. However, closer inspection reveals some inconsistencies. First comes a use of vocabulary hard to sympathise with, if not altogether too cold:

It would have been impossible for the most minute observer to have said who was before, and who was after . . . I am not conscious that either party can assume to have been the agent or the patient, the toil-spreader or the prey, in the affair (p. 128)

This is one of the genuinely tender paragraphs in the work, one which does have the ability to create an image of love in the reader's mind, yet Godwin in the second edition withdraws into coldness, perhaps hurt by previous public criticism. The lyrical 'Mary rested her head upon the shoulder of her lover' (p. 129) gets unceremoniously brushed aside and replaced by a typically Godwinian, Latinate, wordy description:

The sort of connection of which I am here speaking, between persons with whom the intercourse of the mind, and not sordid and casual gratification, is the object proposed, is certainly the most important choice in the departments of private life (Variants, p. 155)

It is actually when Godwin deals with Mary's liaisons with Fuseli and Imlay that his prose explores innovative channels. Although the Fuseli passage was substantially rewritten, Godwin sounds unusually frank in both texts, first because of his analysis of Mary's physiological needs —'the state of celibacy and restraint in which she had hitherto lived' (p. 111) —, then because of his appeal to the language of sincere emotion:

The delight she enjoyed in his society, she transferred by association to his person. To understand this, we have only to recollect how dear to persons of sensibility is the exercise of the affections. A sound morality requires that «nothing human should be regarded by us with indifference;» but it is impossible that we should not feel the strongest interest for those persons, whom we know most intimately, and whose welfare and sympathies are united to our own. True wisdom will recommend to us individual attachments (Variants, p. 151)

At the same time, Godwin replaces in an explanatory way, those 'celibacy and restraint' with 'celibacy and seclusion,' but all the same 'the sentiments which Mr Fuseli excited in her mind, taught her the secret, to which she was so long in a manner a stranger' (p. 152).

Godwin's uneasiness about Mary's passion for Fuseli reveals itself in the extensive rewriting to which he submitted the excerpt. Obscurity impairs judgement, first as Fuseli refused to let Godwin read their letters, then after Mary's grandson Percy burnt a corres-

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pondence he must have thought incriminating. Godwin's use of the 'Platonic' terminology probably disguised a more fully developed connection, difficult to account for on these Platonic terms only. Mary's headstrong suggestion to Mrs Fuseli that the three live together, the wife enjoying the man's body, Mary his conversation (Tims: 1976, 167-68), does not provide much support for Godwin's assurance that Mary felt the sacredness of the marriage knot. It also exposes the disparity between writing philosophy and living up to it, which Mary experienced as much as Godwin.

In her Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, published in 1787, the year before Mary and Fuseli met, Mary shows more theoretical coolness in the face of adversity, than she would eventually show herself: 'If there are any insuperable bars to an union in the common way, try to dismiss the dangerous tenderness, or it will undermine your comfort, and betray you into errors' (WMW, 4, 30). Even though she warned that 'nothing can more tend to destroy peace of mind, than platonic attachments' (WMW, 4, 29), she set her mind strongly on one of her own. Later on a different one, presumably to make her hypothesis foolproof? On her decision to suggest tripartite cohabitation to Mrs Fuseli, Godwin says nothing. His only mention is to her impossibility to claim for herself a man that was already another woman's husband. And although he acknowledges her respect for the marriage convention, he rather obscurely says that 'she scorned to suppose, that she could feel a struggle, in conforming to the laws she should lay down to her conduct' (pp. 111-12). Such nonchalance about cultural correctness backfired on Godwin, who mellowed his tone as the following paragraph shows. Anxious to persuade his readership that Mary was not a ravisher of sanctioned marriages, Godwin overdid in his revision his praise for Mary's integrity, as he maintains that

Superior at the same time to the idleness of romance, and the pretense of an ideal philosophy, no one knew more perfectly how to assign to the enjoyments of affection their respective rank, or to maintain in virgin and unsullied purity the chasteness of her mind (Variants, p. 152)

Fuseli's biographer, John Knowles, offers a radically different version of Mary's gesture, which was in his opinion a 'temerity' (Tims: 1976, 167). Considering the situation impartially, one must admit that Tims's and Knowles's judgements are more correct, probably because less biased. Godwin's exercise of self-restraint invites criticism, for in writing about his wife's previous relationships, he must balance her worth with her misdemeanours, both of which she stored to some amount. The fact that he later destroyed the comedy Mary had written about her experiences with Imlay suggests he could not always reconcile himself to her past, and therefore indicates areas of biography Godwin could not explore fully and from an uninvolved position. Writing about his late wife was different from writing about Chatham, or Chaucer.3

Tomalin's view of Mary's bliss:

she saw herself as an Heloïse; her curiosity about the world she had scarcely seen, the grandiose emotions she had scarcely experienced, the art she had not sufficiently studied or appreciated — all could be satisfied by him. He had only to talk, she to listen and worship (Tomalin: 1975, 89).

Both personalities had been subjects of biographies by Godwin. The former had been Godwin's first commissioned work, and the latter a meritorious attempt, in 1803 at regaining his popularity of the 1790s.

contrasts with Godwin's greatest biographer, Charles K. Paul's, on this important incident. Paul not only criticises the inclusion of the Fuseli affair in Godwin's *Memoirs*, but even takes a harder stance in the defence of Mary, to the extent that he re-interprets Godwin's interpretation of the liaison. Paul saw in Knowles's account, Mrs Bishop's remarks, and in the credit which part of the public gave them, an indulgence in 'malignant gossip,' a phrase which reads very much like one of Godwin's strictures on the same behaviour:

Godwin himself, in his Memoir of his wife speaks also of her intimacy with Fuseli, saying that had he been unmarried, he would probably had been the man of her choice. He goes on to declare that the friends were only friends, but his mention of the matter at all is only one of those strange instances of his somewhat morbid habit of dwelling on matters of which it would have been well to take no notice (Paul: 1876, 207)

Paul's vindication of Mary reads like Godwin's, but also, in the closing phrases, his criticism of Godwin's frankness reads like Southey's chagrin at the husband's voluntary dissection of the wife's amours and upsets.

In such passages, Godwin as a biographer requires skills he does not possess. If as a husband he favours the version that Mary was in control of her impasse with Fuseli, as a chronicler of events he must admit it was an emotional *cul-de-sac* for her. This dichotomy favours contradiction on paper, and even with the benefit of revision, the passage fails to provide an overall picture of Mary's mind, let alone Fuseli's. In the Variants to the first edition, Mary was 'chearfully submitting to the empire of circumstances' (Variants, p. 152), an optimistic use of words which again recalls the jargon of *Political Justice*. But originally 'she repined when she reflected, that the best years of her life were spent in this comfortless solitude,' a 'source of perpetual torment' (pp. 113-14). In Godwin's opinion, there is nothing like philosophical jargon to brave unwelcome situations: 'She conceived it necessary to snap the chain of his association in her mind' (p. 114). And so, she leaves for France.

Mary's own words before departing for France after the Fuseli disappointment reflect a playful mood in matters of the heart, although she was trying to convince herself that things were right as they were: 'At Paris, indeed, I might take a husband for the time being, and get divorced when my truant heart longed again to nestle with its old friends' (Tims: 1976, 168). Godwin's picture, however, shows a deeply dissatisfied and lonely Mary, hardly coming to terms with that 'distinguishing' and 'Platonic' affection she had deemed 'both practicable and eligible' to nourish for a conceited, immature, Fuseli: 'She felt herself formed for domestic affection, and all those tender charities, which men of sensibility have constantly treated as the dearest band of human society' (p. 113).

It is in the Imlay theme that Godwin excels as a love-story teller. Godwin was evidently either oblivious of his own jealousy, or not jealous at all. Had he been allowed access to Mary's letters to Fuseli, he would surely have used them in the *Memoirs*. Imlay, by then out of the country, had no control over his letters, and Godwin made use of this valuable first hand material. So much so, that big excerpts of text had to be later removed following public shock. It is important to note, however, that it is that borrowing from Mary's letters that endows these passages with a level of sensibility Godwin was unable to reproduce elsewhere. The text as follows appeared in the first edition; the brackets enclose those bits omitted in the second:

[Her conception of Mr Imlay's «tenderness and worth, had twisted him closely round her heart»; and she «indulged the thought, that she had thrown out some tendrils, to cling to the elm by which she wished to be supported». This was «talking a new language to her»] . . .

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Her confidence was entire [; her love was unbounded]. Now, for the first time in her life, she gave a lose to all the sensibilities of her nature (p. 118)<sup>4</sup>

The closing phrase in the previous quotation is only one instance of the open appeal to sensibility Godwin favours in this work. Also, as mentioned, he considered the domestic affections 'the dearest band of human society' for all the men of sensibility. Unable to project on his own work the standards of the new mode, Godwin reverts to two known authorities. One was Mary herself; the other was Goethe, an archetype to both.

In one of the popular phrases in the *Memoirs*, Godwin equates Mary to Goethe's creation, as he dubs her 'a female Werter.' The equation is almost complete in Godwin's Preface to the *Posthumous Works* of Mary Wollstonecraft when he compares her *Letters to Imlay* with Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*. They differ, in his view, in that Mary's prose has the 'superiority over the fiction of Goethe' and 'the incidents to which they [Mary's *Letters*] relate are of a very different cast' (*WMW*, 6, 367). They are not really. Both works deal with an unfortunate passion, which defies conventions, terminating in suicide, although in Mary's case only attempted. Godwin's assessment carries nevertheless some interest in the very terms he employs: 'They are the offspring of a glowing imagination, and a heart penetrated with the passions it essays to describe' (*WMW*, 6, 367). In his use of such meaningful terms, Godwin certainly acknowledges the sentimental mood that pervades Mary's work. However, acknowledging and practising do not necessarily follow, and Godwin's own *Memoirs* of Mary lies far from claiming the same verdict.

Godwin himself said, contra Hume, that a virtuous action 'must have good consequences, but must also originate in a benevolent intention' (Priestley: 1946, I, 23). Therefore was the writing of the Memoirs a virtuous action, in view of the unfavourable reception and the tide of reaction against Mary Wollstonecraft that has only been overturned in the latter part of the twentieth century? It was not only Mary's reputation, which ended up severely smarted, that Godwin should have considered. As he explains in *The Enquirer*, 'we should consider the production of pleasure or displeasure for all those who observe our conduct in determining the rightness of the conduct' (Clark: 1977, 107). At the time of writing Fleetwood, Godwin had progressed beyond the concern for the opinion of our witnesses, a concern which bears evident links with the 'impartial spectator' theory. He had maintained this view in the second edition of the Memoirs in relation to the convention of matrimony. Marriage was still a hypocritical etiquette he wished to 'negative,' yet he dared not do so against a society unready for such a move, neither through force or unreasoning confidence. However, it was precisely unreasoning confidence that Godwin made consistent use of in his *Memoirs*, as he tried to vindicate the actions of a woman whose mind was either ahead of or against the conventions of her times.

When in 1798 Godwin wrote a note detailing a list of projected works, he specified in the third of four points 'a novel, in which I should try the effect of my particular style of writing upon common incidents and the embarrassments of lovers' (Paul: 1876, 296). Critics have traditionally deemed the quote's relevance to lie in the words 'novel' and 'embarrassments of lovers.' However, I believe that the centre of Godwin's note is that 'effect of my particular style of writing.' He was aware of the chasm that separated his own Dissenter's phraseology and the lavish sensitivity of the fashionable writers of emotive tales. Consequently Godwin's confession indicates a degree of misgiving that such an experiment would ever prove a literary success.

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Excerpts between inverted commas belong to one of Mary's 'Letters to Imlay,' in WMW, 6, p. 382.

Even though it is understood that that novel is *Fleetwood* and those lovers are the eponymous hero and Mary McNeil, it is worth stretching my hypothesis a little further. If for one moment we ignore the literary genre Godwin mentions, then it is just as likely that his 'particular style of writing,' the 'common incidents' told and the 'lovers' they refer to are to be found in the *Memoirs* of Mary Wollstonecraft, the lovers being, of course, Mary and himself. By the time Godwin wrote that little note, the *Memoirs* were either already printed or about to go to the press, but my supposition goes only as far as to guess that Godwin would be just wondering about the possibility of projecting onto a different literary genre the style and affairs he had applied for the first time to the biography of Mary. Although the biographical genre requires on the whole less artistic development than the narrative, it is nevertheless clear that Godwin, as most biographers, intended this memoir to go down in history as part of his literary achievement.

Three aspects invite evaluation in Godwin's writing of the *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft. First is the relevance of Godwin's tradition of Rational Dissent and Radicalism in his work. Such specific diction manifests itself in his prose —Latinate, wordy, analytical—and his prose's content —truth-driven and dispassionate. The latter features relate directly with the second aspect. This lies on the sentimental level, his degree of involvement in the culture Mary hoped to imbibe in him with her loans of books like *La Nouvelle Heloïse* and *Emma Courtney*. Godwin applied in addition his own flare for autonomous research, and read Hume on the importance of sentiment, and works by British and foreign authors of sensibility. Third is the interaction of both preceding aspects in Godwin's skills as a biographer of the quality he sought in the memoir of his deceased wife. As a biographical exercise, it bore little resemblance to the *Lives* of statesmen and established literary personalities he produced before and after.

In The Enquirer Godwin is clear about his assessment of what a biographical enterprise demands: 'The study of individual man can never fail to be an object of the highest importance. It is only by comparison that we come to know anything of mind or of ourselves' (PPW, 5, 292). That is, Godwin appreciates in the writing of biographies the ultimate purpose of a rational individual: the cognition of mind and man. However, there is not indication as yet of his discernment between different objects of study. In the following assertion Godwin makes light of the requirements entailed in the portrayal of a character, in spite of acknowledging the difficulty of prediction: 'To sketch a few bold outlines of character is no desperate undertaking; but to tell precisely how such a person would act in a given situation, requires a sagacity scarcely less than divine' (PPW, 5, 301). As pointed out, Chatham and Mary required utterly diverse techniques, tones and contents in their biographical renderings, a specialisation which Godwin could not foresee at the time of writing his Enquirer. His interaction with Mary on the personal, social and moral levels gave him a wealth of perception as to that specific ingredient his compositions needed if he was to write like her and some of her contemporaries. After her death, in the Reply to Parr his tone has acquired an intimacy, subjectivity and emotion that proves an evolution in his system of morals: 'Without feelings, we cannot act at all; and without passions we cannot act greatly' (PPW, 2, 181). I like to consider his literary works as some of those 'acts', and very especially within these the Memoirs, one that partakes as much of the literary as the intimate. In his recognition of the essential nature of feelings and passions one must see the evolution of the erstwhile ultra-rational author, but that does not imply such change was triggered and completed with the Memoirs and pursued in later productions. I am of the same opinion as Barker-Benfield when he maintains that 'beginning in 1799 his series of romantic novels (one subtitled *The Man of Feeling*) showed Godwin's preoccupation with the avoidance of «effeminacy»' (Barker-Benfield: 1992, 261).

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Features such as his specific diction surface prominently in the Memoirs, a composition traditionally taken as the turning point in his conversion to Romanticism. Even if his adherence to a fixed style was not characteristic enough, neither were his beliefs that drastically overturned. Sincerity and the pursuit of truth vie with dedication and partisanship, and it is this tension that opens the gaps characterised by Godwin's inconsistencies, revisions and glaring omissions. As for a renewal of moral interests, it is not exactly in the Memoirs that one finds a tender account of family life and the need for companionship, be it of friends, children or wife. The very special circumstances in which Mary entered and exited Godwin's life turned her figure under his pen in an idealised icon. The understanding of their minds, and the pleasure they derived from mutual company, as well as their brave pre-marital and conjugal experiment, are indeed portrayed with a degree of touching intensity. Then there is that outstanding passage on the 'domestic affections' dedicated to Fuseli. But the core of this thesis attempts to justify the claim that Godwin is more dependent on his style and moral background than the free expression of his own feelings. The result is that every one of his demonstrations of affection is either painstakingly qualified, burdened with wordiness or amended after social reproach. It is fortunate that we have today access to most of Godwin's personal writings -manuscript letters, drafts, 'confessions' and his journal, that fill the gaps and often refute claims he made in the printed book. The following quote amply serves to explain Godwin's reluctance to brave social censure:

The profoundest passion of my life seems to have been an acute sensibility to the good or ill opinion of others: this it was that generated in me the love of fame that has been the source of my most lively joys and sorrows. It is this that has made me perpetually anxious to present to others the most favourable aspect of the opinion I have of them (CNM, 1, 23)

The confession not only stresses Godwin's 'acute sensibility' but vividly creates an image of the author far from the righteous and independent figure he had prided himself on being around the revolutionary 1790s. His radical outcry in *Political Justice* had pleaded to let every man suffice to himself. Now he admits two revealing facts: his love of fame, fuelled since the days when he lectured his schoolmate from the kitchen stool, owes not to an inmost belief in a superiority of genius, but the need for the neighbour's praise. And worse still —the man who had advocated truth-telling whatever the consequences admits he would embellish his views on the hearer so the hearer will in turn give praise. Not only is truth-telling corrupted, but plain ambition vindicated. Compare with Mary's letter to a friend, where she advocates exactly the opposite to Godwin's caution:

Those who are bold enough to advance before the age they live in, and to throw off, by the force of their own minds, the prejudices which the maturing reason of the world will in time disavow, must learn to brave censure. We ought not to be too anxious respecting the opinion of others. — I am not fond of vindications. — Those who know me will suppose that I acted from principle. — Nay, as we in general give others credit for worth, in proportion as we possess it — I am easy with regard to the opinions of the *best* part of mankind — I *rest* on my own' (Todd: 1997, 266)

It is exactly this contrast between Godwin's cryptic writing and Mary's openness that marks the contradictions inherent in the *Memoirs*: His cautious portrayal of the unafraid wife reveals areas of biography Godwin could neither expose in all their bluntness nor examine with an impartial mind —or heart.

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