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4 Radical Literary Women

4.1 Women's Circles

I have been arguing that there was a more plural and disjointed character to a great deal of London's cultural and social life in the 1790s and 1800s than we often recognise. People had their social locations, defined in large part by family and status and by their own or their husband's trade or profession. They knew something about some people outside these orbits, but often did not know them or much about them. While a good deal of effort went into managing one's social relationships, the pools from which one might draw were to a considerable extent given.¹

We can see this with respect to Marianne Ayrton and her pre-marital list of friends, when compared to those she sees on a regular basis after her marriage. Essentially, while her family remained a focal point, those earlier friendships (which were predominantly made up of older people who were friends of her parents) had very little influence over her circles post-marriage, which derived largely from Ayrton's connections. Similarly, Eliza Soane clearly brought some friends and relatives to her marriage, but most of the central members of her circles came from links with her husband's professional interests.

In the case of the dramatist, novelist and sometime actress Elizabeth Inchbald, while we are missing a substantial part of her diaries, it is clear from those that do exist that her connections were largely a mix of theatrical and familial connections. The bruising exchange between her and Godwin in the wake of Mary Wollstonecraft's death makes clear that she did not see herself as having anything like a 'circle' – certainly, she did

¹ That does not mean they women in such positions were 'non-political' – much would depend on family and connections. But it adds a component to the analysis of more middle class women's participation that is not always attended to. Work on middle class circles of women, especially in relation to Dissent, can be found in the early chapters of Kathryn Gleadle's *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender, and Political Culture in Britain, 1815–1867* (Oxford: British Academy/Oxford University Press, 2009); see also Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially the opening sections of chapter 6.

not see herself as orchestrating one. Referring to the refusal of Inchbald's close friends the Twisses to accept Wollstonecraft after her marriage to Godwin on the grounds that she had presented herself as married to Imlay, he depicted them as 'sacrificing to what they were silly enough to think a proper etiquette'. In contrast, he portrayed Inchbald as 'a person so out of all comparison their superior' who should have 'placed her pride in acting upon better principles ... They could not (they pretended) receive her onto their precious circles. You kept no circles to debase & enslave you'.²

Yet, in the immediate wake of the French Revolution, and with a rising tide of pressure for Parliamentary reform, many scholars believe that there was something like a confluence of a number of serious literary women in London who looked for progressive social change and who challenged the limits of the education of women and their subordinate place in society.³ Certainly, it was a period of intense literary production for women – we might list, for example: Fanny Burney, Catherine Macaulay, Anna Barbauld, Joanna Baillie, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Inchbald, Mary Robinson, Mary Hays, Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Hamilton, Elizabeth Fenwick, Amelia Alderson, Mrs Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, Harriet and Sophia Lee, Hannah More, Sarah Trimmer and so on. Moreover, it is clear that there was active participation of women in the debating life of London, with all-women debating societies before 1788 and continued involvement in certain societies thereafter.⁴ It is also clear that a range of women participated in publishing and print-making and contributed to the literary world, either on their own account or in support of their husbands (such as Thelwall's wife Susan) or other members of their family.⁵

² *Letters of WG*, i, p. 241. See also Roger Manvell, *Elizabeth Inchbald: A Biographical Study* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), pp. 98–108. Manvell suggests that Godwin proposed to Inchbald in 1793, based on an entry in the diary (although this claim actually rests on Ford K. Brown and Charles Kegan Paul's biographical work on Godwin rather than on the diary itself). The reference is probably 16 September 1793, 'Call in Inchbald, talk of marriage'. This more likely describes a topic rather than a proposal!

³ A suitably cautious claim for this is made by Arianne Chernock, *Men and the Making of Modern British Feminism*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 3.

⁴ Donna Andrew, *London Debating Societies, 1776–1799* (London: London Record Society, 1994), pp. xi–xii.

⁵ See Mee, *Print, Publicity and Popular Radicalism*, pp. 53–60. For the early nineteenth century see Christina Parolin, 'The "She-Champion of Impiety": Female Radicalism and Political Crime in Early Nineteenth Century England', in *Radical Space: Venues of Popular Politics in London 1790–1845* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2010), pp. 83–103; and Iain McCalman, 'Feminism and Free Love in an Early Nineteenth Century Radical Movement', *Labour History* 38 (1980), 1–25. For engraving circles see David Alexander, *Caroline Watson & Female Printmaking in Late Georgian England* (Cambridge: The Fitzwilliam Museum, 2014).

Sharing an activity does not make a social circle. Moreover, the writing of novels and pamphlets is not in itself an especially *social* activity and, while plays probably may have involved some playwrights in various aspects of production in the theatre, this usually involved people who were not themselves writers. Men with literary ambitions had opportunities to meet with their fellow toilers through their 'apprenticeships' in the reviews, periodicals and newspapers, but these opportunities were rarely extended as frequently or as inclusively to women.⁶ And aspects of the wider elements of this male culture of deliberative sociability, in the form of meetings in coffee houses, taverns, booksellers, clubs and societies, were only exceptionally open to women. Joseph Johnson's support for Mary Wollstonecraft was certainly unusual. Mary Hays relied on a certain amount of advice from Wollstonecraft, but never secured the same kind of inclusion that Wollstonecraft did. The sense that we get from studies of the art world is that it was, at heart, a highly masculine culture, which condescended to a number of women artists (Angelica Kaufman, Clara Wheatley, Mrs Flaxman, etc.); but these women did not get to operate in the same way as men, either on the wider public stage or in the more professional art world. They were tolerated, sometimes encouraged, but not fully integrated, especially in areas associated with the professional world which were highly masculine – such as dinners, drinking and managing institutions linked to the arts. And this was a world which, unlike medicine, Westminster politics, government offices, law, science and engineering, etc., actually did admit and recognise, up to a point, the contribution of women as participants in the field. In many respects, within the arts, it is the fine arts, literature and, perhaps above all, the theatre and concert performance, that women could attain some potential public status and role, but in each case never quite to the degree or with the same social consequences that were afforded to men.

Nonetheless, we might think that the shared literary concerns and political interests and affiliations of several of these literary women would have encouraged them to associate with each other and to seek such connections as they could make. Moreover, in what many of these women wrote, they pointed to forms of female solidarity and aspired to membership of a more rational and egalitarian form of social order that would, in itself, require a different mode of operation.

⁶ While it is important to recognise that women had a public voice, as Anne Mellor does in *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England 1780–1830* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), it is equally important to recognise that this is a constrained inclusion.

Nonetheless, the evidence supports a sense of an emerging collective identity and of a female group of deliberative friendships only to a very limited extent, and then in relation to just one sub-group of these writers in London. This is the group with evidence of iterated interaction around Mary Robinson, Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, Amelia Alderson and Eliza Fenwick. This analysis rests principally on Godwin's diary, complemented by Inchbald's diary and by the surviving correspondence of these women (which is inevitably incomplete). Nonetheless, these materials allow us to construct something of a picture of these literary women's interaction in London.

Many connections were by no means intensive. I have not included Helen Maria Williams in this discussion because she left for France early and did not return.⁷ Wollstonecraft met her in France – and reported to her sister 'I shall visit her frequently, because I *rather* like her, and I meet French company at her house. Her manners are affected, yet the *simple* goodness of her heart continually breaks through the varnish, so that one would be more inclined, at least I should, to love than admire her.'⁸ There is nothing substantive in Mary Hays's letters in relation to Helen Maria Williams, but Hays's correspondents do talk about Williams in the 1810s. In a letter in December 1813, Penelope Pennington refers to Hays's superior abilities, but says that she herself has been accustomed 'to the intimate Association of some of the first Literary, and Talented Characters of the Age' and enumerates 'as my *more* particular Friends, the celebrated Mrs Piozzi, – Miss Seward, – Hannah More, – Helen Maria Williams, the late ingenious Dr More, Mrs Siddons's &c &c'.⁹

That is a somewhat surprising list. More, Seward and Thrale/Piozzi and one suspects others on it would not have thanked Pennington for the link to Williams.¹⁰ In the 1790s Thrale had noted with regret Williams' fall:

⁷ Although there are some rather puzzling references that seem to be to Williams being in Britain on 8 March and 7 April 1795 in Godwin's diary, for which there is no further evidence.

⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Janet Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), Letter 118, 24 December 1792, p. 215; see also p. 225; 229 where she refers to Mrs Stone (John Hurford Stone's wife, displaced by Helen Maria Williams – although Wollstonecraft does not comment on that); 248, which relates that Williams had encouraged her to burn her manuscript on the French Revolution; and there is a reference in a note to Godwin, from July 1797 (p. 430), who seems to have been wanting to send a letter to HMW.

⁹ Mary Hays, *The Correspondence (1779–1843) of Mary Hays, British Novelist*, edited by Marilyn L. Brooks (Lampeter, Wales: Mellen Edwin Press, 2004), p. 508.

¹⁰ As noted in Chapter 3 and discussed further in this and the next two chapters, the contemporary clustering of women by others often linked people whom we see as diametrically opposed in principles, but who contemporaries saw rather differently and as similar in certain respects.

Helen Maria Williams is on the Point of Sacrificing her Reputation to her Spirit of Politics. She went from England with Mr Stone a married Man who left his Wife here, but *She* would go to *France*: a foolish Thing some People thought, but I said there had been always an old Classical Connection between *Helen* and *Paris*.¹¹

Thrale made no reference to Wollstonecraft, but her connection with Williams was longstanding. Then, in the early Autumn of 1794, she noted:

I have heard from Helen Williams again, tis just two years since She wrote last, & beg'd an Ansr but I was fretting about Cecilia Thrale's Health & thought little of any other Concern but that. I had however discretion enough not to correspond with a /895 profess'd Jacobine resident at Paris, tho' She requested a Letter very sweetly indeed, & with much appearance of true Regard for *me*: my refusal to answer such a Request from such a Writer put me in mind of the brutal housekeeper in *Clarissa* ... This was exactly the reason why I did not write to her then, but now She is escaped from Paris poor Soul! I think I may congratulate her on having had Power & Will to leave the Wretches: but I fear *Reputation* has been left behind somehow – I *fear* so; tho' perhaps no real harm has been done. One could not write *then*, because there was no way of conveying a Letter but through some French Man ... but now one may send a Letter by the Post, I think I will send a Letter. Helen Williams is a very fine Genius.¹²

Her suggestion that 'Reputation has been left behind' is coupled interestingly with the thought that 'perhaps no real harm has been done'. Then in February 1795 she noted: 'Helen Maria Williams has totally lost her Character – as a *Woman*, she lives with Mr *Stone* who has a Wife alive – Mr Chappelow says comically that She is *petrified*: we once as he observed thought her *nemini secunda*.'¹³ She then relates a story of John Philip Kemble attempting to rape a Miss De Camp in the Green Room at the theatre,¹⁴ and his being given the cold-shoulder by audiences as the story spread, which she found somewhat heartening – she concluded that:

no Sin but *one* seems punished by the World's Disapprobation ...; and there is *some* Idea, – a *faint* one, – about the Point of Honour amongst Women too; Helen William's Friends are all ashamed of *her*. When Stone's *real* Wife followed her Husband to Basle in Switzerland, wither He had fled with his newer Connexion, fair Helen, – leaving the first poor Soul behind; in hope She would be Guillotined

¹¹ Hester Thrale, *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs Hester Lynch Thrale (later Mrs Piozzi) 1776–1809*, edited by Katharine C. Balderston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. II, 1784–1809, p. 848 (October–December 1792).

¹² Thrale, *Thraliana*, vol. ii, pp. 894–895.

¹³ 'second to none', *ibid.*, p. 910 (February 1795).

¹⁴ See the depiction in BMS8730, *The Rape of Proserpine, A Dramatic Tail* (Aitken), 15 February 1795.

by the Terrorists: *his* Conscience smote him, and he would at least have behaved *civilly*, but the second Lady stormed and cried, and obliged him to drive Mrs Stone from his Door, at which she intreated for Bread – Oh Tempora! Oh Mores!

Yet in a footnote, she added: ‘I have a Notion however that Helen will lick herself clean after all.’ And that did indeed seem to be the case. She remained a favourite with radicals – Mary Robinson praised her and Lady [Emma] Hamilton in the same breath, saying that they exemplified the fact that ‘an English woman, like a prophet, is never valued in her own country. In Britain they are neglected, and scarcely known; on the continent, they have been nearly IDOLIZED.’¹⁵ Williams welcomed John and Amelia Opie and Anne Plumptre when they visited Paris in 1802–1803 and introduced them to several eminent friends of freedom, including the Polish patriot Count Tadeas Kosciusko.¹⁶ When Henry Crabbe Robinson had been in company with her in Paris in February 1815 he reported that, although ‘I was not prejudiced in her favour ... she rose in my esteem. She has no un-English feelings, And retains her original love of liberty.’¹⁷ Nothing was said of her domestic arrangements – as Thrale predicted, she seems in part ‘to have licked herself clean’ – or, at least, clean enough for visitors to Paris.

I have also not included Elizabeth Inchbald as a figure in this circle, since she seems a clear case of someone who did not altogether relish the idea of a coterie of literary women – the evidence we have suggests that Godwin introduced her to Mary Wollstonecraft and that they met three times at the theatre, but not otherwise. Certainly, there was no great affection between them. In contrast, Inchbald and Alderson did have some history. In Brightwell’s *Memorials* of Alderson, there is a letter from Alderson to her friend Mrs Taylor in which she reported that on the 26 August 1794, during her visit to London, she and Mr J. Boddington (a family friend) had called on Godwin, who said he had talked of her to Inchbald, who had recollected her and expressed a wish to see her. They later paid her a visit, finding her ‘... as pretty as ever, and much more easy and unreserved in her manner, than when I last saw her’.¹⁸ They later developed quite a close relationship, but the evidence we have suggests that this was not until after Alderson’s marriage to Opie, and was probably more in the 1800s than the 1790s (the diary for 1807 shows the first sign of intimacy, although we lack many of the earlier diaries). In this later

¹⁵ Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England*, p. 65.

¹⁶ Celia Lucy Brightwell, *Memorials of the Life of Amelia Opie, Selected and Arranged from Her Letters, Diaries, and Other Manuscripts*, 2nd ed. (Norwich: Fletcher and Alexander 1854), pp. 98–114.

¹⁷ Hays, *The Correspondence*, correspondence 577. ¹⁸ Brightwell, *Memorials*, p. 43.

period Inchbald called on (by then) Mrs Opie, on several occasions during and after the final critical phase of John Opie's illness (suggesting that they must have seen something of each other in the preceding years). These connections are also evident in James Boaden's *Memoirs of Inchbald* concerning the meeting with Mme de Stael in 1813; and from Inchbald's later diaries of 1814 and 1820). In the 1790s, two of the three recorded contacts between Alderson and Inchbald (in Godwin's diary) took place at the theatre and one of these is unclear as to whether Godwin's contact with them in the same venue involved them being with Godwin at the same point in time (such are the vagaries of Godwin's use of 'adv' to indicate having seen someone, but where doing so could be at any point in the visits he paid that day). Also, Wollstonecraft refers apologetically in a letter to Amelia Alderson for having spoken rather sharply of a certain lady (Inchbald) in Alderson's presence and Janet Todd suggests that she did so because Inchbald was already a friend of Alderson's and had acted as her chaperone in her first visit to London.¹⁹ Evidence for this is hard to find and implies a visit to London some time prior to her stay with Boddington and her first London encounter with Godwin. Moreover, if we are to believe Inchbald's own strictures, voiced with respect to Wollstonecraft ('I did *not* know her – I never wished to know her – as I avoid every female acquaintance who has no husband, I avoided her') it makes it unlikely that she would have played quite that role (although see the further discussion of Inchbald later in this chapter).²⁰

According to Godwin's diary, Inchbald also met Maria Reveley and Harriet Lee, but again largely at the theatre, and neither appears in her own diary for 1793. There is no evidence of any contact between Inchbald and Mary Robinson, the Fenwicks or Hays.²¹ Alderson was not central to any London circle as a visitor, although she is an interesting outsider who forged a set of relationships across a number of divisions that those living in the city were more likely to respect. Other visitors to or temporary residents of the city include Charlotte Smith, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Anne Crisall and Anne and Belle Plumptre (whom Alderson knew from Norwich, and the fact that Belle had accompanied Alderson

¹⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, no 321, 11.4.1797, pp. 408–409.

²⁰ Godwin, *Letters of WG*, i., p. 238; see also Guest, *Unbounded Attachment*, p. 83, and Inchbald's letter to John Taylor reflecting on her 'nervous apprehension' of new acquaintances, 'Especially if they are of my own sex' (MS Eng. Misc. e 143, fols 25v–26, 32r–v).

²¹ Although, in the last case, there is an entry in her diary for 1820 that she 'Heard that Miss Hays's boarding house is broke up and she is imprisoned for debt'. This does not seem to be Mary Hays, and even if it was, it scarcely counts as 'acquaintance'. Inchbald, *Diaries*, p. 241.

on a visit to Godwin's 'cousin', Mrs Southren,²² suggests that Godwin also probably knew the Plumptre sisters from before this).²³ Although it is difficult to be certain it seems probable that Godwin introduced Wollstonecraft to the Plumptres, having met them in Norwich at least a year earlier; that Barbauld was also someone with whom he had had previous contact²⁴; and that Anne Cristall might be someone Wollstonecraft knew already (since Godwin met her at tea at Wollstonecraft's, her poetry was published by Joseph Johnson, and there is correspondence between Wollstonecraft and Anne's brother Joshua in 1790).²⁵

Charlotte Smith met Godwin at John King's in May 1797, having just come back into circulation in London. He then took Wollstonecraft to meet her and that seems to have been their first meeting (certainly, he did not refer to a previously existing acquaintance with Wollstonecraft in his letter to Smith after his wife's death in October 1797). Evidence of connections between Charlotte Smith and Mary Hays comes from collaborations between them in the 1800s, together with a letter to Hays from Smith (responding to one of hers) in July 1800. In that letter Smith refers to having made the acquaintance of Elizabeth Fenwick – 'Of several new acquaintance, I know none for whom I am more interested than Mrs Fenwick.'²⁶ There seems to be no evidence of any links between Charlotte Smith and Amelia Alderson or Maria Reveley. In contrast, Smith sent Inchbald a complimentary volume of *Elegiac Sonnets* in May 1797 and referred to a discussion with her about the income they had made from their novels (in slightly bitter comparison to Burney and Radcliffe) in June 1797.²⁷ Mary Robinson is invoked only in a letter about the portrait of Smith for *Elegiac Sonnets*, v. 2., when Smith referred to 'Mrs Mary Robinson & other Mistresses whom I have no passion to be confounded with.'²⁸

The core of something like a London literary group of women seems to have emerged briefly early in the second half of the 1790s and to have

²² Alderson to Godwin, 28 August 1795, MS. Abinger c. 2, fol. 108r.

²³ Godwin's '1796 List' identified the years in which he first met people whom he regarded as significant: Barbauld (1781); Williams (1787); Inchbald (1792); Radcliffe (1794); Siddons (1795). In a second list, Wollstonecraft (1791), Reveley (1793), Mrs Robinson (1796), Mrs Smith (1797) and Harriet and Sophia Lee (1798) make the cut, but then so too do the Kingsman sisters in 1798 and 1799. Hays, Alderson and the Plumptres do not.

²⁴ Godwin's '1796 List' suggests he had contact with Barbauld from 1781, although whether Mr &/or Mrs is unclear.

²⁵ Hays, *The Correspondence*, no. 98.

²⁶ Charlotte Smith, *Collected Letters of Charlotte Smith*, edited by Judith Phillips Stanton (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 350.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 279–280. ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25 April 1797, p. 268.

involved Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson and Elizabeth Fenwick.²⁹ There was also some contact between some of this group and Amelia Alderson, Charlotte Smith and the Plumptre sisters, although this does not seem to have been especially intense in this period. These relationships were all relatively new in 1795–1796, except in the case of Hays and Wollstonecraft who had corresponded and possibly met in the autumn of 1792, before Wollstonecraft's departure for France in December 1792. Their correspondence resumed when Wollstonecraft returned in 1795 and, if they had not met in person before, they were brought together at dinner at Johnson's in the autumn of 1795, shortly before Hays invited Godwin to meet Wollstonecraft in January 1796. It seems likely that Hays met Mary Robinson through Mary Wollstonecraft in January 1797, either at dinner with Godwin at Robinson's on Sunday 22 January 1797³⁰ or shortly before at tea with Wollstonecraft.³¹ Wollstonecraft and Godwin coincided at Mary Robinson's on 1 June 1796, Godwin having met her regularly since February of that year, which suggests he may have made the introduction.³²

It is unclear when Mary Hays met Elizabeth Fenwick.³³ Given Fenwick's involvement in the Godwin household after Mary Wollstonecraft's death, the falling out at this time between Godwin and Hays and the absence of any recorded contact prior to October 1798, it is possible that they did not know each other long before. Fenwick seems to have been introduced to Mary Robinson and spent some time staying at Robinson's cottage in the Summer of 1800 (although Robinson privately confessed

²⁹ It is striking that Godwin's diary suggests that Helen Maria Williams's circle from the late 1780s to May 1791 involved very few women, and none regularly – although it may be that he systematically under-recorded those present in this early phase of his diary keeping.

³⁰ Hays, *The Correspondence*, p. 305.

³¹ Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, no. 296, p. 392.

³² The most interesting coincidence, however, might be the publication in 1798–1799 of Robinson's *A Letter to the Women of England*, Mary Hays' *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain on Behalf of Women* (1798), edited by Eleanor Ty, 2nd ed. (Toronto, Canada: Broadview Press, 1998), and Mary Anne Radcliffe's, *The Female Advocate, or an Attempt to Recover the Rights of Women from Male Usurpation* (London: Vernor and Hood, 1799). Each of the three expressly cite Wollstonecraft and, while there is no evidence that Mary Ann Radcliffe knew her or the others, the publication of three such tracts suggests a wider movement of positive action. It was also the year of More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* and these follow the Rev. Richard Polwhele's *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem*, addressed to the author of *The Pursuits of Literature* (London: Cadell and Davis, 1798), for discussion of which see later in this chapter.

³³ And neither Lissa Paul, *Eliza Fenwick: Early Modern Feminist* (Neward, DW: University of Delaware Press, 2019), nor Wedd's edition of Fenwick's correspondence to Mary Hays is really illuminating on that question – such is the serendipity of surviving resources. Annie F. Wedd (ed.), *The Fate of the Fenwicks; Letters to Mary Hays (1798–1828)* (London: Methuen, 1927).

to being in despair at the noise that Fenwick's children made and at the over-attentiveness of Eliza to her young son, Orlando).³⁴ There is no doubt that Hays and Fenwick became very close and Hays did much to support and help her friend, but it seems likely that this element in their relationship developed around 1798. It also seems likely that Godwin introduced Hays to Alderson on 5 June 1796,³⁵ but there is no recorded contact between Alderson and Mary Robinson (and while Alderson in December 1795 relates to Godwin something Mary Robinson said in a letter to one of Alderson's acquaintances,³⁶ this does not indicate any other form of contact). There is also little to suggest much interaction between Alderson and Fenwick, apart from three meetings over a seven-year period (the first and last being at the theatre) and in October 1798 Fenwick was asking Hays to talk to Alderson about the prospect for starting a school in Norwich, suggesting any 'tie' would be very weak.³⁷ It is also around this time that the Plumptre sisters wrote to Hays asking her to come to tea with them and Alderson before Alderson left town in March 1798 and, then again, without Alderson, in November 1798.³⁸

We should also acknowledge that in most cases these women were authors before they came into contact with each other and prior to the more intense period of their interaction around 1796–1799. Wollstonecraft was publishing from 1787; Hays from 1791; Alderson from 1790; Robinson was publishing poetry from the 1770s and her first novel *Vancenza* appeared in 1792. The exception is Elizabeth Fenwick, whose first novel, *Secresy*, was published in 1795. (The outliers are similar: Smith was well established as a novelist and poet by the end of the 1780s; Inchbald's plays were popular from the end of the 1780s and her first major novel, *A Simple Story*, was published in 1791).³⁹ This is not to say that their work was entirely independent from each other – Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1796); Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796) and *The Wrongs of Woman*, or *Maria* (pub posthumously and incomplete in 1798); Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), all convey a somewhat shared agenda, while (I shall suggest) Alderson's *Adeline Mowbray* (1805) represents something of a retrospective reflection on the interaction of some of these

³⁴ See Sharon Setzer 'Original Letters of the Celebrated Mrs Mary Robinson', *Philological Quarterly* 88(3) (June 2009), 305–336, Letter 5, 20 August 1800.

³⁵ See Hays letter to Godwin in *The Correspondence*, 6 June 1796, p. 459 and *The Diary of William Godwin*, 5 June 1796.

³⁶ Bodleian MS. Abinger c. 3, fol. 2r. ³⁷ Hays, *The Correspondence*, p. 319.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

³⁹ Elizabeth Inchbald, *A Simple Story* (1791), edited by J. M. S. Tomkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

writers a few years later.⁴⁰ But, while there is a good deal of productivity, there was not a great deal of interaction.

One reason that this interaction was limited in its frequency (if not its intensity) was that the norms and conventions of wider female society were in operation within the circles in which these women participated. Mary Hays comments in a letter to Godwin dated November 1795, in the course of a discussion of *My Fair Penitent*, in which the heroine has a lover who is not her intended husband,

... what humane & benevolent man, uninfluenced by selfish considerations, would wish to subject the woman whom he thought deserving of the highest species of friendship (for this ought marriage to be) to the world's scorn? Supposing that she might have sufficient magnanimity (though the circumstances which attend female education render this improbable) to trample on that scorn – still, she must suffer, & sharp wou'd be the conflict, the arduous struggle: besides which, she is not only shunn'd, as if infected by some contagious disorder, by, even some of the best & worthiest part of society (such has been the controul of prejudice) but, if she possess not an independent fortune, she loses, with the worlds respect, in many cases, the very means of procuring a subsistence ... These reflections recurred to me with additional force from a conversation that recently took place in a company when I was present. The connexion of Mrs Woolstonecraft (sic) with Mr Imlay (which, it is said, has not received a legal sanction) was the subject of discussion. Some ladies present, most amiable and sensible, & worthy, women, expressed their concern on a variety of accounts, & especially lamented that it would no longer be proper for them to visit Mrs W.⁴¹

Hays, of course, went to her friend's defence, insisting it would not interfere with her own visits. But the women pointed to her lack of experience of society and its tendency to see a single woman associating with someone of this character as someone who would be tempted to make the same mistake.⁴² This was about six weeks before Hays brought Godwin and Wollstonecraft together for tea, for their first meeting since the latter's departure for France in 1792.

There was also clear conflict between Wollstonecraft and Inchbald over precisely this issue – and when Godwin upbraided Inchbald for her coldness, she answered frankly if not wholly precisely: 'I did *not* know her – I never wished to know her – as I avoid every female acquaintance

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Inchbald, *Nature and Art*, vol. 2 (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1797); Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), edited by Tonne Brekke and Jon Mee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary and the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), edited by Gary Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796); Amelia Opie, *Adeline Mowbray* (1805), edited by Anne McWhir (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2010).

⁴¹ Hays, *The Correspondence*, p. 408. ⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 408–409, 20 November 1795.

who has no husband, I avoided her – against my desire you made us acquainted – with what justice I shunned her, your present note evinces, for she judged me harshly; *she first* thought I used her ill, or *you* would not.⁴³ Never satisfied, Godwin wrote back, dismissing the Twisses who cut Wollstonecraft on their imagined grounds of ‘proper etiquette’, and telling Inchbald, as we have seen, ‘I think you chose a mean & pitiful conduct, when you might have chosen a conduct that would have done you immortal honour. You had not their excuse. They could not (they pretended) receive her into their precious circles. You kept no circles to debase & enslave you.’⁴⁴

Godwin clearly had a point: Inchbald had little in the way of a ‘circle’; her contacts were mainly family friends and connections to the theatre. But he also underestimated how her relative isolation would have made her more dependent on the support of the friends and wider acquaintance that she did have. What he failed to do was to bring her into membership of his circles (indeed, the evidence suggests that she resolutely resisted such inclusion). He assumed she would identify with him because of her talents and her apparent support for progressive ideas – she was clearly unwilling to put at risk what she already had and knew that she could rely on to do that.

Mary Hays, while she defended Wollstonecraft, also had reservations about the conduct of those she met. For example, she expressed herself reluctant to engage with those who took a brighter view of the world than she did:

I thank you for introducing Miss Alderson to me – her spirits appear unbroken – she does not look at if sorrow ever/touch’d her heart. I am not sure her manners entirely pleased me – I mean to say that I have some unfashionable & obsolete notions & prejudices – I love the retiring delicacy that sometimes shrinks from observation. – Assured, fearless & self-satisfied, Miss A must have long since forgotten to blush or to hesitate –.⁴⁵

Alderson, then, was not quite as a young woman should be for Hays. Yet Alderson herself had much respect for *Emma Courtney* – ‘I am delighted with Miss Hays’s novel! I would give a great deal to have written it.’⁴⁶ And in a letter to Godwin of 27 December 1795 she told ‘General Godwin’ that he had ‘a very skilful aide de camp in Captain Mary Hays – I felt two or three almost irresistible impulses while reading *Emma Courtney* to take up my pen and send her my blessing directly, but did not, for I thought it would seem conceited (as if I thought my praise of

⁴³ Godwin, *Letters of WG*, i., p. 238. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁴⁵ Hays, *The Correspondence*, pp. 459–460.

⁴⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, p. 393; n.828 MS. Abinger c. 41, 18 December 1796.

consequence to her) – so I breathed “blessings not loud but deep”.⁴⁷ Moreover, in November 1796 she was asking Godwin to pass her good wishes on to ‘Miss Hayes’ – while expostulating ‘Fye upon her’ for fleeing from the field in response to criticism from Towers.⁴⁸ Moreover, Alderson had a degree of awareness as to the dangers she was courting in associating with this group of women, whose reputations were somewhat under siege. And we get a sense that they knew and appreciated this – Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, addressed her ‘My dear Girl’, a term of endearment not used to others.⁴⁹ Godwin introduced Alderson to Wollstonecraft (as Mrs Imlay) on 9 June 1796, taking her to tea at Hays’s where Wollstonecraft was present – Hays’s reaction was, as we have seen, lukewarm; Wollstonecraft, in contrast, spent the evening with her on 4 August 1796 with some pleasure – ‘Elle est très jolie – n’est pas?’⁵⁰

Two further women are significant in this nexus, one a partial presence, the other an absence. The partial presence is Maria Reveley, who had had an indulgent continental upbringing by her father (who had abandoned her mother and kidnapped their daughter) and whose education was described in the following terms by Mary Shelley: ‘Having no proper chaperone, she was left to run wild as she might, and at a very early age had gone through the romance of life.’⁵¹ She married Willey Reveley, whom she met in Italy when she was eighteen, and they struggled financially when her father disowned them. Godwin and Maria had a close friendship that developed an independence from his acquaintance with Willey Reveley, and that prompted his proposal to her in the summer of 1799 after her husband’s sudden death. All of which receives the fuller attention it deserves in Chapter 7. But her significance here is that she is one of the few women outside of literary circles who (as far as we can tell) came into regular contact with the core group of Wollstonecraft, Hays, Fenwick and Robinson that I have been discussing.

Godwin could have done us a better service if he had been more scrupulous in his diary in distinguishing when Reveley referred to Maria and when to Willey, and in being more precise as to when ‘meet’ entries after a visit means that he met people at that visit or met them after – but

⁴⁷ MS. Abinger c. 3. fol 2r . ⁴⁸ MS. Abinger c. 3. fol. 41r.

⁴⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, p. 408, 11 April 1797.

⁵⁰ Alderson referred to Wollstonecraft as Mrs Imlay in a letter dated 17 August 1796 (MS binger c.3., for 33–34). Wollstonecraft’s assessment of Alderson is in *Collected Letters*, no 225, p. 345, 4 August 1796.

⁵¹ Kegan Paul, *William Godwin*, 1.82. See also Edward Pope’s paper on William Godwin, The Reveleys and the Jenningses of 8 February 2012 on his website exploring the Godwin circles.

it looks as if Maria Reveley met and knew, at least slightly, all the women in this group – including Inchbald (possibly) and Alderson – with the exception of Mary Robinson (in part because her residence was rather out of town), although Reveley certainly seems to have met Robinson's daughter (at a theatre outing). Contact with Hays seems to have been slight; contact with Fenwick in the aftermath of Wollstonecraft's death and in the beginning of 1798 was more intensive; and contact with Wollstonecraft, although certainly not fully recorded in Godwin's diary, seems to have blossomed into a more substantial friendship – to the point that Wollstonecraft was able to share some gentle mockery of Godwin in a conspiratorial note to Reveley. The note implies that they both knew of his tendency to write in French in relation to affairs of the heart and it suggests they had both experienced Godwin's susceptibility to enthusiastic female admirers of his work. Godwin had missed a previous dinner, when he was away from London visiting Parr and Thomas Wedgwood in Etruria, and Wollstonecraft wrote to Reveley to say that the same group was to be re-united just after his return: 'Pray come or he will be *in despair* (that ought to have been said in French) at not being able to keep his engagement with you). Your coming to this party is not to prevent you from paying me a visit *hap-hazard*, alone, when I will shew you one of Mr Godwin's epistles, I mean one addressed to him, from another Fair in intellectual distress – But this *entre nous*.'⁵² There were also notes about visits involving their respective children (Fanny Imlay and Reveley's son Henry). Similarly, the links with Eliza Fenwick became strong: Fenwick was with the Reveleys when Willey Reveley was taken ill in the summer of 1799 and she stayed to provide support for Maria following his death. In the case of both women, there is clear evidence of a friendship and set of connections that goes beyond the record in Godwin's diary.

The second person, notable by her absence, is the novelist Ann Radcliffe. Her husband was a professed sympathiser with democratic principles, and they were certainly in London in March–May 1794 and in May and August 1795, since they met Godwin on a number of occasions, but there is no record of them mixing more widely – indeed, barely any trace of them even in Farington.⁵³ There is no correspondence

⁵² Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, no. 334, pp. 424–425, 26 June 1797.

⁵³ Farington, *Diary*. Radcliffe's literary output in this decade is prodigious: Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), edited by Alison Milbank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), edited by Chloe Chard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), edited by Bonamy Dobrée and Terry Castle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); *The Italian* (1797), edited by Nick Groom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Yet these texts are largely devoid of political sentiments – and remain widely embraced by respectable literary culture.

(even with Godwin: we know he wrote to her, but no letters survive). Like Fanny Burney, but without her political views, Radcliffe was not part of this particular slice of literary London and seems to have had no interest in exploring it further – although the control exercised by her husband over her legacy after she died suggests that he may also have had fairly firm views of the importance of maintaining propriety.

What I have tried to do thus far is to take a careful look at the evidence we have for interaction between the women writers whom we associate with support for France and for reform in Britain in the 1790s. The results are not very encouraging. Many of these women seem to be rather isolated; they move in their own circles; a few interact with each other with any intensity only briefly (around 1796–1798) and then in different groups from around the 1800s. Part of this rather fragmented picture may well be to do with professional jealousy and competition (see, for example Charlotte Smith's letter to Thomas Cadell, in which she mentions speaking to Inchbald, and in which she complains about the price received for her work in comparison to her competitors).⁵⁴ Some is a matter of domestic circumstances: Smith, Fenwick, Robinson and Wollstonecraft had responsibilities for children while desperately trying to make a living; and those who were (or had been) married (Robinson, Inchbald, Smith and Fenwick) rarely found being so a source of solace. It is also clear that Inchbald and Smith, at least, were conscious of a need to avoid reputational damage if they were to sustain an audience for their work and if they were to maintain the coterie of friends and acquaintance in which they were supported and valued. They were also very clear about their vulnerability to a hostile press, who reached for the easy trope of incontinent sexual conduct as a way of tarnishing their reputations.⁵⁵ The major drop in subscriptions from 817 to 283 for Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* between the 1784 edition and the 1797 edition is indicative of some of the damage done to her reputation by her political leanings. In contrast, Mary Robinson had little to lose in terms of reputation or with respect to women's acceptance and she relied on a group of predominantly male admirers from her past – although the predatory behaviour of her lover Colonel Tarleton towards her daughter speaks eloquently to her consequent vulnerability. As for Wollstonecraft, she was clearly not prepared to produce a second child out of wedlock if she could avoid it and had no choice but to brace herself for the reaction to the collapse of her standing as Mrs Imlay as the lesser of two evils.

⁵⁴ Smith, *Collected Letters*, pp. 279–280.

⁵⁵ see Kenneth Johnston, *Unusual Suspects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pt 2, pp. 113–116.

In wider circles Hays was simply mocked and vilified – despite her having what were, on her own account, rather old-fashioned notions of propriety and decorum ('I am not sufficiently French in manners ...').⁵⁶ In many respects, then, this was an increasingly hostile environment for women who strayed from the norms of propriety and/or who sought to speak out in relation to politics in the wider public culture (where that transgression was often reacted to with insinuations implying manifold others). They faced political reaction and ridicule, aspersions were frequently cast on their personal lives and conduct and they faced reaction from within their own circles insofar as their conduct was perceived to be unorthodox.

One irony here is the extent to which the linking theme across a great deal of their work was the critique of contemporary manners and social conventions. And their interest in Godwin was often in the idea that private judgement and involvement in deliberative discussion should guide conduct and that societal prejudices and norms should be criticised and set aside in favour of the fuller and freer expression of – indeed the living out of – their ideas, principles and commitments.⁵⁷ In particular, as women, they were conscious of the greater constraints that operated on their sex and they were also articulate about the extent to which women themselves were often responsible for the exclusion and isolation of other women. But it is also true that they did not need the stimulation of the febrile political atmosphere of London in 1794–1799 to be conscious of this since they would have had myriad earlier experiences of the oppressively restricting order of society that women encountered. The developing hostilities in the political press towards those who questioned the social and political order nonetheless forced them and their associates to make decisions about sides and about how far they wanted to appear to their public in ways that might bring considerable costs. The French Revolution may well have encouraged their explicit articulation of these views, but they were hardly responding to a new experience. Insofar as they had a sense that there might be a more enlightened age dawning, it must also be said that, in practical terms, they critiqued boundaries more often than they transgressed them (save when in France – as with Wollstonecraft and Helen Maria Williams – which was also a wider trope – mistresses and unfaithful wives of the élite tended to use the continent for their amours and to give birth to their illegitimate offspring). We do not, for example, find much evidence in the correspondence of

⁵⁶ Hays, *The Correspondence*, p. 444.

⁵⁷ Or, as Mary Hays emphasises in *The Victim of Prejudice* (London, 1799), edited by Eleanor Ty (Toronto, Canada: Broadview Press, 1998), what they saw as central was 'independence'!

these women of a willingness to reach out to the silent female cohabitants that littered London, even if in their novels they were prepared to defend those who fell victim to masculine desire.⁵⁸ If we reflect on our earlier discussions of the disinterested friendships among men and the place of gossip in monitoring and shaping the behaviour of women in their circles and familial settings, we can see some of these women as gesturing to the former and as trying to establish a different kind of relationship based upon intellectual interests and affinities, but these possibilities seem to be dramatically more curtailed for women than for men and more consistently subjected to the discipline of being talked over by others.

These women were certainly not entirely conventional. Wollstonecraft and Robinson were far from being so; Hays put some practical commitment behind being taken seriously by men of her acquaintance; and it is difficult to know quite how unconventional Maria Reveley had ventured to be. Above all, they were tolerant of each other and their choices and could see the grounds for their unconventionality. Indeed, even those who look most committed to the protection of reputation and conformity to traditional norms were not uniformly so. In Inchbald's diary for 1793, she records dining with her old actor friends Mary Lane Whitfield and her husband John on a regular basis, usually at the Whitfields. Boaden reported that 'Mrs Whitfield seems to have occupied the first place (of her female friends) most decidedly this year (1787): they could hardly pass a day apart, and they lived near each other.'⁵⁹ Then on 8 July Inchbald recorded 'Heard Miss Whitfield was gone off with a gentleman'; on 10 July 'Heard what had befallen Miss Whitfield'; and on 14 July 'dined at Mr Babbs, Miss Whitfield there'; on 16 August 'Mrs Whitfield and Miss Whitfield dined here'; and on 7 September 'Witnessed Miss Whitfield's articles'. This succession of events is pretty cryptic but nonetheless suggestive. The Whitfields were two of Inchbald's oldest friends from her theatrical past – who had eloped together to France in 1771 in the same year Inchbald went to London and first met her husband. She was alive to their interests and would have been anxious for their daughter and concerned that the issue be resolved satisfactorily – as it seems to have been, through something like

⁵⁸ As in Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman* (1798), Hays' *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1796), Mary Robinson's picaresque novels on speed, *The Natural Daughter* (1799), edited by Sharon M. Selzer (Toronto, Canada: Broadview Press, 2003) and *Walsingham, or the Pupil of Nature* (1797), edited by Julie A. Shaffer (Toronto, Canada: Broadview Press, 2003), and Alderson's *The Father and Daughter* (1801), written as Amelia Opie.

⁵⁹ James Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs Inchbald, Including Her Familiar Correspondence ...*, 2 vols. (London: R Bentley, 1833), v. 1, p. 251.

a cover-up and her signing-up to an apprenticeship. She did not have a problem with seeing the girl, probably because she was effectively 'family', perhaps also because the event was one which might be disguised and forgotten, and almost certainly only because the girl must have proved repentant and tractable. But it is clear that Inchbald would have responded differently to someone who sought to vindicate their conduct, unless the elopement issued in marriage. Miss Whitfield was not a reputational threat to Inchbald, but she perceived an association with Wollstonecraft to pose precisely that problem.⁶⁰

Perhaps more surprising was the presence of Mary Wells (1762–1829) in Inchbald's diary, even though she was living with and had three children by Edward Topham,⁶¹ who subsequently abandoned her, taking the three girls.⁶² Again, Wells and Inchbald went back a long way. But Inchbald also knew that she was taking some reputational risk. Boaden says that, in 1787:

Her next favourite was Mrs Wells, who stood her ground notwithstanding the discreditable mode of her living with Topham. They (Inchbald and Wells) sometimes proposed a separation; and it often, we confess, surprised us to hear of the connexion: it could proceed from no impure sympathy, or even indifference to worldly maxims, on the part of Mrs Inchbald. She was above all suspicion herself, and her friend greatly below it.⁶³

⁶⁰ BL, diaries, 1793 RP 2266, 1782 RP 4730.

⁶¹ See Charles Pigott, *The Jockey Club* (London, 1792), pt II, pp. 91–93; pt III (1793), pp. 93–96. Both comment on Topham's relationship to Wells.

⁶² Inchbald's diary for 1783 records a developing familiarity between the two women (Wells came to London in 1781), which was still well established in the 1788 diary (and on 23 June 1788 Wells called on Inchbald with her child (by Topham)). The only references in 1793 are 10 May 1793 – 'Yesterday heard Mrs Wells in a mad house' – and 10 September 1793 – 'Mrs Wells call'd _refused to see her'. In 1807, 10 July, 'Spoke with Mrs Wells in the streets'; and in 1808, 23 March, 'Mrs Wells called _ I would not send her money. She asked for a subscription. Mrs Wells called below'. Topham also has a number of entries in the diary (in 1788 only), but several of the entries indicate that he stays 'some time'. There is no record of her seeing Wells and Topham together and on the one occasion she calls on Topham she mentions drinking tea with Charles Este. (Farington has no entries on Wells, and Topham is mentioned only in relation to his employment of Heriot on the *World*; his criticism of Turner in 1804; and his attendance at a boat race in 1807). Farington also barely mentions Inchbald, although he noted in 1798–1799 that she had recently spent much time with Lady Abercorn, who eloped with a Captain Copley (Lord Abercorn's brother in law by his first wife), with Farington implying that Inchbald had been coaching her in a theatrical part (concerning the manner of leaving her children – although the *Ipswich Journal* of 17 November 1798 (page 3 – doubtless drawing on one of the London papers) described the Marchioness as 'wholly incapable of disingenuous artifice'). There's no evidence that Inchbald knew the Marchioness and neither Abercorn or Copley appear in her diaries (although we do not have them for those years), so it may all be entirely unsubstantiated, possibly malicious, gossip!

⁶³ Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs Inchbald*, p. 251.

If there is a consistency here it seems to be that Inchbald was loyal to those in her past who had befriended and helped her in her theatrical career; that she herself sought to protect her own reputation; and that she was averse to relationships that involved new risks. She was also not a risk taker in venturing abroad: when she wrote to John Taylor about his writing a preface for a play she had written she wanted him to be clear about what she felt was of value in it:

Urge but with due modesty the Simplicity and also the Unity of the story. Then plead as my excuse for not giving greater variety of character in my habits of retirement, my sex, which forbids me the resorts of busy men – She (ie: Inchbald) cannot walk the Royal or Stock Exchange, feast at a Tavern Dinner, peep into a Coffee house &c. All her pretensions are sometimes to find a Window to the heart. Where as she takes a stolen glance she/ beholds passions seen in embryo small as an atom – others full grown; and so varied, mingled, Riotous and contentious as near to burst the tender habitation. They are passions then, she undertakes to paint not manners.⁶⁴

Moreover, it might also be that the changing political atmosphere of the 1790s, the ready recourse by loyalist writers to slurs of sexual incontinence and French ideas (see, for example, Hannah More's and John Bowles' claims that women were being corrupted by an imitation of French manners) had added greatly to the risks associated with becoming a public character linked to those known to be sympathetic to reform.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, Inchbald did not take the attitude to Mme de Staël that Fanny Burney took.⁶⁶

We might characterise Inchbald as socially and professionally 'risk averse' and Hays perhaps as a risk-taker, at least in what she wrote, and also, to some degree, in the way she tried to live, given her friendships with William Frend and subsequently with Charles Lloyd. Inchbald was contained; Hays seems anything but. And yet, if we look at the sources we have for how Hays in fact behaved, there was little with which people might take exception. The vast majority of her contact with Godwin was conducted at her lodgings or at another person's home. She has tea at Godwin's twice, he has tea with her over twenty times; he calls on her nearly fifty times, she calls on him on fourteen occasions (which might

⁶⁴ Bod Lib. MS Eng Misc e 143 Letter book of James Northcote, fol 28r-v.

⁶⁵ More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, p. 100. John Bowles, *Remarks on Modern Female Manners, as Distinguished by Indifference to Character and Indecency of Dress* (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1802).

⁶⁶ Burney, *Diary and Letters*, p. 237. Compare Boaden, *Memoirs of Mrs Inchbald*, v. 2, pp. 190–191. But Burney seems to be extremely risk-averse – which might be a function of her sense of the insecurity of her position, perhaps because she had connections to the court but was of relatively low status.

well mean merely that she dropped off a letter). We know from her correspondence that she had a landlady and a servant who may have operated in the character of chaperones,⁶⁷ and she reported that she was not accustomed to receiving visitors before mid-day or when dressing. She also said that she would be pleased if she and Godwin could meet one day with Mr Holcroft 'when there is not too much company. Mr H need not trouble himself to procure ladies to meet me, his daughter is sufficient, I am more used to, and therefore more at ease in, the company of men.'⁶⁸ All of which suggests that she was as concerned about the proprieties of how they met as much as other women were concerned about their reputations and social acceptance. And when Hays was pilloried it seems to have been largely (initially) by men – until the publication of *Emma Courtney*. Although Elizabeth Hamilton, who took Hays' review of her *Translation of a Hindoo Rajah* badly, took her vengeance in the character of Bridgetina Botheram in her *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800).

While Hays' letters were extended expressions of her feelings and beliefs and would have been imprudent written to many men, Godwin respected her privacy – and he was somewhat engaged (if in a very self-disciplined way) with the problem she posed to him – namely the achievement of a more philosophical perspective on the pressures, inequalities and resulting contradictions and turmoil of women's social and thus emotional worlds. She treated him as an authority, but also as an equal; she was deeply critical of his rationalism and yet looked to it as a way of disciplining her emotional life and reconciling her to her lot. She believed that he sympathised with her predicament and her sorrows. Indeed, following the meeting she arranged with Mary Wollstonecraft in January 1796, Hays pointed to Wollstonecraft's new recognition of Godwin's sensibility and goodness of heart, which, 'tho' a dear friend, the other evening, affected to rally you upon it, she has told me, that it has raised you greatly in her esteem'.⁶⁹ At the same time, she seems to have presumed too much of Godwin in expecting him to respond to her needs and we can see their relationship coming under increasing strain before Wollstonecraft's death. Godwin may have thought he could reason her out of her condition, but it became clear that she believed that that was inappropriate and that she was looking for sympathy and

⁶⁷ Hays, *The Correspondence*, p. 444.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 443. Inchbald wrote to John Taylor 'though I prefer the society of men to that of my own sex, and would dine with any one or even two gentlemen in company – Yet for even the return of youth and beauty I would not encounter above two men at one dinner, and they must both be old acquaintances.' Bod Lib. MS Eng. Misc. e.143. fol 55r-v.

⁶⁹ Hays, *The Correspondence*, p. 422.

support, more than guidance. His response, as in one of his letters, seems to be that, just because doing so would be useful is 'no sufficient reason. I must not only do things useful, but out of the various utilities select the best'.⁷⁰

Were men similarly scrutinised and influenced? They seem to have been much less so. They had wider circles of acquaintance, were less likely to be examined or condemned for irregular personal conduct (unless – as we have seen in Chapter 2 – they thrust it in the public domain in the way Godwin did in his *Memoirs*), and they had stronger professional connections and contacts that they could rely on (or thought they could rely on) into the future. William Beloe, for example, commented

Generally speaking, in London at least, there is great liberality among literary men, a ready disposition to interchange communications, which may be mutually useful, to accommodate one another with the loan of books, to point out sources of information, indeed to carry on, by sort of common treaty among one another, a pleasant, friendly and profitable commerce.⁷¹

This speaks to the distinction drawn earlier between strong and weak ties. Men had many more weak ties by which they were also connected to a wider world and they worked some of their weaker ties and encounters up to become deeper, disinterested, intellectual relationships. They were both more in the moment and seemed more protected from it by their connections.

Nonetheless, it is worth reflecting further on what men might have been looking for in their relations with others. There is much to be said for the view that they were not primarily interested in acquaintance as a way of serving their interests, but were looking for friendships founded on sympathy, mutual understandings and disinterested commitment. Certainly Godwin, Holcroft and a number of their close associates were often barely reliant on family connections and, in the first seven or eight years of the 1790s, seem primarily concerned to establish close intellectual and deliberative relationships. They saw themselves as pushing back the darkness of political, religious and social institutions, through the exercise of reason and judgement in discussion. That ambition does not seem to have been as widely evident among women, although it was an ambition that at least some manifested in the form of contributions to public, printed debate. But with respect to personal deliberative

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 462.

⁷¹ William Beloe, *The Sexagenarian: Or the Recollections of a Literary Life*, 2 vols. (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1817), i, p. 196.

relations, this was for the most part a question of a type of relationship conceived of by men as something that they sought with other men. Moreover, as we have seen, several women (such as Hays, Robinson and Williams) shared rather negative expectations of other women while themselves wanting a seat at a largely masculine table of discussion. At least among these writers there was not a strong sense of a desire for a deeper form of female solidarity that excluded men. But this raised a further set of issues: How far was it possible for more egalitarian relationships to function between men and these women? How clearly could the boundaries of intellectual relationships be established without risk of being seen as evidence of unorthodox social or sexual relationships? And how far was this a case of conforming to an extremely masculine discourse at which they would inevitably be at a disadvantage? We can see from Kathryn Gleadle's work on British youth at the time of the French Revolution⁷² that there was an intense sense of a cultural shift (at least in some places, such as Norwich) that was registered even (perhaps especially) by the young and that led them to expect (and sometimes to demand) more egalitarian treatment from their elders and associates. And it is clear that this was also true for at least some of the women who interacted with Godwin's circles in the 1790s – such as Sarah Anne Parr, Amelia Alderson, Nan Pinkerton and others. We can begin to grasp some of the complexities of these relationships by considering Godwin's relationship to several of these women in particular.

There is, however, a supplementary question, in the light of the discussion of this chapter and Chapter 3, about how far these women – whom I have argued were for the main only very loosely connected – were responded to by loyalists and those committed to moral reform. Was theirs an individual or collective public profile, to what extent was it one that was anathematised and how was that done?

4.2 Identifying the 'Unsex'd'

In William Beloe's, *The Sexagenarian: Or the Recollections of a Literary Life* (1817), Alderson was lumped together with Wollstonecraft, Hays, Helen Maria Williams and Ann Plumptre (and to a much lesser extent Elizabeth Inchbald) for a collective telling off, with some personal jibes thrown in for good measure. Alderson was described as follows: '... the flattering attentions she received from her childhood, so far spoiled her,

⁷² Kathryn Gleadle, 'The Juvenile Enlightenment: British Children and Youth during the French Revolution', *Past and Present* 233 (November 2016), 143–184.

that whatever she does, or says, or writes, is somewhat tinged with vanity and self-conceit, and that perhaps no more perfect picture was ever exhibited in society, of a *Precieuse*.⁷³ And the collective picture was sharply dismissive:

Oh for the good old times! When females were satisfied with feminine employments, with cultivating their minds so far as to enable them to instruct their children in useful learning only, and to regulate their families with judicious economy; to learn those graces and that demeanour, which obtained and secured love and esteem, nor suffered the Laban images of foreign vanities to contaminate their tents. Daughters of England, be not beguiled; be assured that the study of politics is not essential to female accomplishments, that the possession of this Machiavellian knowledge will neither make you better mothers, wives, or friends; that to obtain it, a long life, severe study, and the most laborious investigation are indispensably necessary.⁷⁴

Beloe's view was retrospective, as were the memoirs referring to Inchbald written by James Boaden and John Taylor. As such, it does not seem to have been quite as obvious to men and women at the time that this was a group that was at the heart of a new morality. One basis for thinking that they were seen as a group comes from Richard Polwhele's *The Unsex'd Females* (1798), which combined a wide and varied group for satiric condemnation – Wollstonecraft, Hays, Barbauld, Ann Jebb, Mary Robinson, Helen Maria Williams, Charlotte Smith, Miss Aikin, Angelica Kaufmann, Emma Crewe, and Ann Yearsely – implying a strong sense that there was a group of women writers and painters who were to 'Gallic freaks or Gallic faith resign'd'.⁷⁵ That text drew most heavily on three sources: George Dyer's *Poems* (1792); the fourth part of T. J. Mathias's *Pursuits of Literature* (1797) and Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author*.⁷⁶ Dyer's Ode VII 'On Liberty' refers directly to Wollstonecraft's second *Vindication* and claims that 'the most sensible females, when they turn their attention to political subjects, are more uniformly on the side of liberty than the other sex', explaining this by their need to resist the tyranny of

⁷³ Beloe, *The Sexagenarian*, p. 415. ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

⁷⁵ Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females*. See William Stafford's detailed analysis in *English Feminists and their Opponents in the 1790s: Unsex'd and Proper Females* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), chapter 1; Eleanor Ty, *Unsex'd Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790s* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1993); and Katherine Binhammer, 'The Sex Panic of the 1790s', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6(3) (January 1996), 409–434, although it is not clear that the decade is especially unique.

⁷⁶ George Dyer, *Poems* (London: J. Johnson, 1792); Thomas Mathias, *The Pursuits of Literature: A Satirical Poem in Dialogue. With Notes. Part the Fourth and Last* (London: T. Becket, 1797); William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: J. Johnson and G. G. and J. Robinson, 1798).

custom. He went on to mention Ann Jebb, Helen Maria Williams, Mrs Laetitia Barbauld, Mrs Charlotte Smith and Miss Hays ('an admirer and imitator of Mrs Charlotte Smith'). T. J. Mathias provides the epigraph and title for Polwhele's poem – 'Our unsex'd female writers now instruct, or confuse, us and themselves, in the labyrinth of politics, or turn us wild with Gallic frenzy',⁷⁷ and he had earlier referenced 'Mrs Charlotte Smith, Mrs Inchbald, Mrs Mary Robinson, Mrs &c. &c., though all of them are very ingenious ladies, yet they are most frequently *whining* or *frisking* in novels, til our girls' heads turn wild with impossible adventures, and now and then are tainted with democracy – not so the mighty magician of the MYSTERIES OF UDOLPHO.'⁷⁸ The most extensive satirical comment in Polwhele's poem was reserved for Wollstonecraft, and she, and Godwin's *Memoirs*, provide the rising crescendo to the work, but it is striking how little precedes this in terms of identifying a coterie of women.⁷⁹

Indeed, although there were barbs in various places against individual women writers in the early and mid-1790s, when *The Decline and Fall, Death, Dissection, and Funeral Procession of his most contemptible lowness the London Corresponding Society, &c.* (1796)⁸⁰ was published it contained a satiric reference to 'Six virtuous female citizens, All clad in white, walking two and two' and singing 'the following patriotic lines in praise of modesty:

Brightest gem upon the earth,
 Mother Windsor gave thee birth;
 Sister of chaste Dian's train,
 Like our *Armstead*, without stain.
 O! though *Luna* of King's Place,
 Joy of *Copenhagen Race*;
Jones's bronze and *Thelwall's* eye
 Heave, O! heave, a heavy sigh;
 For the London Corresponding Society is for ever gone,
 And all the *Modesty* of REBELLION is undone.'

⁷⁷ Mathias, *Pursuits of Literature*, p. 238.

⁷⁸ *Pursuits of Literature*, First Dialogue (London, 1794), p. 58.

⁷⁹ It also, as Stafford points out, drew on George Dyer's *Poems*, in which Dyer identified the most sensible women, who are on the side of liberty, as Macaulay, Wollstonecraft, Barbauld, Jebb, Williams, Smith and Hays. See the discussion of Mathias and Polwhele in Amy Garnai, *Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Inchbald* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2009), pp. 5–6, 71, 81–82.

⁸⁰ Anon, *The Decline and Fall, Death, Dissection, and Funeral Procession of his Most Contemptible Lowness the London Corresponding Society, &c.* (London: George Cawthorn, 1796), pp. 22–23.

The six virtuous females are

Citizen Armstead,	Citizen Benwell,
Citizen Windsor,	Citizen Malton,
Citizen Maynard,	Citizen <i>Lady Brown</i> .

This was satire that relied on a knowing and élite audience. It mentioned some of the reformers late from the Treason Trials (including Tooke, Thelwall, Holcroft, and Joyce) and also Citizen Lee, but when pillorying women it produced none of those we now associate with radicalism in the capital. Instead, we have Fox's mistress Mrs Armistead (by then his wife, but undeclared); a reference to Nancy Parsons, then Lady Maynard, who had a long career as mistress to members of the élite and as a prostitute, before marrying Lord Maynard with whom she then conducted an open marriage⁸¹; Mrs Benwell who was probably an actress (and was attacked for her size in the *Morning Herald* on 1 March 1793 and linked with Nancy Parson at Brighton in August (29) 1798 by the *Oracle and Public Advertiser's* gossip columns; and Mrs Windsor (whom Vic Gattrell describes as a 'bawd'⁸²). The reference to Malton may have been to the wife of the architect and engraver – although that remains puzzling.⁸³ And Mrs Brown may have been a reference to the estranged natural daughter of Lord Thurlow (by Polly Humphries – who ran Nando's Coffee House), who married a man with what her father regarded as no education or conversation. For all Thurlow's support for Pitt, he was in his later years (around this time) also very close to John Horne Tooke. This looks like an attack on Fox and his friends (who are represented as including the treason trial defendants) and on the fashionable 'ton' – but this choice suggests that the links between the reform organisations and their agenda and women's literary circles were not obvious to contemporaries, perhaps until Godwin's *Memoirs* gave satirists a richer vein to exploit, which they did in part by widening the scope of the attack to other authors (and artists) and from whiggish politics and élite blue-stockings to a wider swathe of contributors to the literary world.

Nonetheless, it is worth being cautious in assuming that 1798 marked some form of conclusive turning point. Hays, Robinson, Smith and Inchbald continued to produce work and, as we have seen, there are indications that the degree of intimacy between Hays, Fenwick and Robinson increased at the end of the decade. And there was something

⁸¹ See ODNB, and Pigott's *The Jockey Club*, Pt 1, pp. 9–11 and *Female Jockey Club*, pp. 124–125.

⁸² Gattrell, *City of Laughter*, pp. 406, 408, 688.

⁸³ The Mrs Malton we have encountered in Chapter 3, who was a close associate of Eliza Soane.

of a resurgence in 1798–1800, with a number of (now much less well known) novels coming from this group and a cluster of pamphlets on women's rights by Hays, Robinson and Mary Ann Radcliffe.

The other thing to consider is that the attacks on these women were not, for the most part, distressingly invasive (whereas Godwin must have felt that the reviews of his *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft were). Indeed, if we look at the caricatures of the period, we can find very few references to this group – and references are often merely allusive. Many historians tend to treat the graphic satires of the period as a commentary on the times that would have been legible to a wide audience, leaving no indiscretion unmasked, but it is striking how narrow its representations were.

Although Polwhele's *Unsex'd Females* was a product of Anti-Jacobin circles which employed Gillray, there was almost no visual representation of the majority of these women.⁸⁴ The one exception was Mary 'Perdita' Robinson, who was represented in some forty-two caricatures produced between 1780 and 1812. But the vast majority of these come from between 1782–1784 and concern her relationships with the Prince of Wales and Fox, and most of the later prints include her in relation to either or both these men. The one print to cite her writing was Gillray's monumental *New Morality; – or – the Promis'd Instalment of the High Priest of the Theophilanthropes, with the Homage of Leviathan and his Suite* (July 1798), which depicts a cornucopia spewing forth radical texts, one of which bears the title of her novel *Walsingham, or the Pupil of Nature* (1797). That print swept up a wide range of reference to radical – or merely unconventional – thought: and it encompassed Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams and Mary Wollstonecraft. But none of them were personally caricatured – rather we can identify them only because of reference to their books. Moreover, Gillray included only four of the women on Polwhele's list. There was an earlier print where Barbauld and Williams appear together along with Macaulay – '*Don Dismallo Running the Gauntlet*' (1790), but that was the only occasion on which a group of radical women were personified. And most radical men were not treated so differently – Godwin appears as a braying ass reading *Political Justice* in '*New Morality*', but his subsequent appearances are entirely in the form of references to his books: as in BMS 9286 (1798) [*Frontispiece from an Unidentified Pamphlet*]; BMS 9371 (1799) *The Night Mare*; BMS 9522

⁸⁴ Using the indexes and cataloguing in Dorothy George's compendious *Catalogue of Prints in the British Museum*. The collection is not complete, but it is very extensive and I have found no exceptions in the 2,000 or so British prints that are held in the *Bibliothèque National de France* or in those held in the John Johnson and Curzon collections in the Bodleian.

(1800) *The Apple and the Horse Turds*; and BMS 11941 (1812) *The Genius of the Times*.

This relative paucity of representation should give us pause. It seems probable that satirical prints and caricatures were largely designed for an élite rather than a wide popular audience, that they relied heavily on representing people in ways that would be legible to people in the know, and they were deeply entangled in the world of contemporary parliamentary and court politics. The sweeping up of the odd literary radical in a print was a way of casting slurs on the *litterati*, but there was no real point in representing them – not least because they were not widely known and would not be recognisable. Theatrical women like Robinson (who was constantly in the centre of society in the 1780s) would be recognised by élite males, who doubtless enjoyed the representation of her apparent availability. In contrast, Inchbald's only appearance in caricature is a walk-on part in BMC 9086 (1797) *A theatrical candidate*, in which Sheridan objects to his stutter and the candidate replies 'So did Mrs Inchbald'. The other radical women were not known in this way – and the representation of Williams, Barbauld and Macaulay/Graham in *Don Dismallo* relies on a near explicit identification in the print (Miss H M W__s; Mrs B____d; Mrs M__y G____m) and on their reputation as respondents to Burke's *Reflections* rather than by their being 'recognisable'.

For the buyers, renters and viewers of prints, reference to these women's work could be carried merely by allusion to their writing and, despite the invitation to salacious representation that Godwin offered in his *Memoirs*, there was no real interest in taking that up. How then to understand Polwhele's little barb? We probably need to think of it as having a different type of circulation – a jeu-d'esprit in literary terms (or a set of nasty patronising male jibes) directed to a classically informed and élite audience intended to ridicule its targets and entertain its readers. Not so different from prints, perhaps, save that the literary form allowed greater licence and more express identification and thereby recognition.⁸⁵

The lack of much interest in representing the literary radicals can also be seen in relation to male radicals. Seen from the perspective of the satires and prints, the struggle was largely a parliamentary one, and it relied on a familiar cast of characters, often with references (such as to their flings with Mrs Robinson) dating back many years. And it is worth

⁸⁵ The different circles of circulation are also indicated by the fact that seditious writings were prosecuted throughout the decade, whereas, as M. Dorothy George says in the Introduction to vol. VII of the *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum* (London: The British Museum, 1942), vol. vii, p. xvi: 'Purely political proceedings involving graphic satire seems to be limited to the case of Peltier, prosecuted at the instance of Napoleon.'

noting how gradual the assimilation of new characters was. Entering politics in 1793–1794, George Canning makes two early appearances, where his identity relies on a report he is carrying of the (wholly unrelated) trial of Betty Canning and in a third he is represented as a schoolboy. His first real personification is in December 1797 in Cruikshank's *The Victorious Procession to St Pauls. Or Billy's Grand Triumphal Entry*, some four years into his parliamentary career.

Similarly, the representation of male radicals was strongly skewed to the parliamentary and historical. Horne Tooke has a long history of appearance that was exploited; but Hardy was referred to rather than represented until *A. Alan. Gardiner*. (BMC 8814) in June 1796; and while Thelwall features more widely, it is difficult to detect a settled representation and most versions included references to his lectures to identify him. There were three or four portrayals of a wider array of radicals by Robert Newton: *A Peep into the State Side of Newgate*, *Soulagement en prison* and *Promenade on the State Side of Newgate* were commissioned as group portraits by Holland, but they are not caricatures.⁸⁶ When popular radicals were caricatured it was usually in forms that did not rely on recognising them as individuals, but as types: see, for example, *London Corresponding Society alarm'd*. The prints suggest that the audience does not know them and does not need to know them – the type is enough.

Indeed, if there is a moral panic in this period in relation to female conduct, it seems as much directed against the élite and what they wear rather than against the literary radicals. The caricaturing of women's fashions seems to have had a resurgence after 1796, with critiques of a 'Directory style', that favoured loose clothing and the exposure of décolletage, and occasionally more, coupled with suggestions of a growing laxity in public morals, also derived from the French and supported by the modern system of infidelity and modern philosophy – that

holds up gratitude to contempt and which despises the sacred impulses of paternal love and filial piety ... a Philosophy which inculcates to every individual that his own casual and capricious notions of right and wrong are to supersede those ancient rules, which are taught by divine wisdom, or established on the basis of human experience, and which have hitherto been regarded with reverence, and considered as the tests and bulwarks of morality ...⁸⁷

⁸⁶ See Iain McCalman, 'Newgate in Revolution: Radical Enthusiasm and Romantic Counterculture', *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22 (February 1998), 95–110; Mee, *Print Publicity and Political Radicalism*, chapter 4; and David Alexander, *Richard Newton and English Caricature in the 1790s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 36–38.

⁸⁷ John Bowles, *Reflections on the Political and Moral State of Society at the Close of the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Rivington, 1801), p. 127. It is at this point that Bowles praises Mackintosh's lectures on the Law of Nature and Nations.

The arch loyalist John Bowles saw concerns with luxury and matters of dress as indicative of corruption. 'Cultivated manners are calculated chiefly to make an impression on cultivated minds; but dress is more exclusively an object of sense, and it is, therefore, most fitted to operate on the mass of Society.'⁸⁸ And, in his later *Remarks on Modern Female Manners* (1802), which was partly drawn from the earlier publication, he launched an unrestrained attack on contemporary female fashion. For Bowles, 'Female modesty is the last barrier of civilised society. When *that* is removed, what remains to stem to torrent of licentiousness and profligacy.'⁸⁹ He accused the new fashions of supporting 'indecent modes of dress, which are more and more prevalent among women of all classes ... evidently invented for the purpose of exciting sensuality, and of inflaming passions that stand in the greatest need of restraint'.⁹⁰ Moreover, Bowles saw this as a practice developed amongst the *élite* and spreading through their influence throughout society, especially to 'those ranks, where it can be but little counteracted by education or reflection, [and] must inevitably prove an inexhaustible source of prostitution and debauchery ...'⁹¹ Much the same line was taken by Nicholas Wraxall in reflecting on the change in customs, etiquette and form in the 1790s, and who identified a sea-change in attitudes around 1793–1794:

... though gradually undermined and insensibly perishing of an atrophy, dress never totally fell till the era of Jacobinism and of equality in 1793 and 1794. It was then that pantaloons, cropped hair, and shoestrings, as well as the total abolition of buckles and ruffles, together with the disuse of hair-powder, characterised the men; while the ladies, having cut off those tresses which had done so much execution, and one lock of which purloined gave rise to the finest model of mock-heroic poetry which our own or any other language can boast, exhibited heads rounded '*à la victim et à la guillotin*', as if ready for the stroke of the axe. A drapery more suited to the climate of Greece or of Italy than to the temperature of an island situate in the fifty-first degree of latitude, classic, elegant, luxurious, and picturesque, but ill calculated to protect against damp, colds, and fogs, superseded the ancient female attire of Great Britain, finally levelling or obliterating almost all the external distinction of costume between the highest and lowest of the sex in this country.⁹²

It is always difficult to know quite how to interpret caricature, especially the social satires which combine making fun of their subjects, especially women, with a degree of artistic licence and prurience. But there was a

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 147. ⁸⁹ John Bowles, *Remarks on Modern Female Manners*, p. 16.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11. ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

⁹² Nicholas Wraxall, *The Historical and Posthumous Memoirs of Sir Nicholas William Wraxall 1772–1784*, edited by Henry B. Wheatley, 5 vols. (London: Bickers & Son, 1884), vol. 1 (of 5), p. 99.

spate of satires levelled against women baring their breasts and sallying forth into the public sphere to advertise their revolt against what Bowles regarded as merely natural standards of decency.⁹³ What is clear is that women's dress, which was always a somewhat contested terrain throughout the eighteenth century, was attributed clear ideological associations, in particular in relation to the Directory and subsequently the Consulate and Empire, and that loyalists sought to portray its adoption in Britain as the sure and certain road to French manners and the subversion of all that was decent. And, while that was not a reading that women themselves had much chance to rebut (although they might ignore it), it must inevitably have heightened their awareness of their self-presentation in public, and further fuelled concerns about how far their appearance could be read in ways that would harm their social standing and reputations (and this was, certainly, a double edged sword – to stand condemned for failing to accord with the fashions or for failing to warrant the

⁹³ See for example, James Gillray's *And Catch the Living Manners as They Rise* (H. Humphrey, 1794, BMS 8567); *Ladies Dress as it Soon Will Be* (H. Humphrey, 1796, BMS 8896); *The Fashionable Mama* (H. Humphrey, 1796, BMS 8897); *Lady Godina's Rout, or, Peeping Tom Spying Out Pope Joan* (H. Humphrey, 1796, BMS 8899), and then a series around 1810. Richard Newton adds to the representation in *Shepherds I Have Lost My Waist* (W. Holland, 1794, BMS 8569), *Peep into Brest with a Naval Review* (R. Newton, 1796) (see Alexander, *Richard Newton and English Caricature*); Isaac Cruickshank's more comprehensive set includes *Too Much and Too Little* (S. W. Fores, 1796, BMS 8904) and *The Graces of 1794* (S. W. Fores, 1794, BMS 8571), *Symptoms of Lewdness or a Peep into the BOXES* (S. W. Fores, 1794, BMS 8521), *Dividing the Spoil* (S. W. Fores, 1796, BMS 8880); and *The Rage, or Shepherds I Have Lost My Waist* (S. W. Fores, 1796, BMS 8570) (see Gattrell, *City of Laughter*, pp. 361–375). Rowlandson adds *Buck's Beauty and Rowlandson's Connoisseur* (1799) (in Kate Heard (ed.), *High Spirits: The Comic Art of Thomas Rowlandson* (London: Royal Collection, 2013), pp. 152–153). The fashion was also denounced on the dual grounds of immodesty and Gallic influence by Polwhele in *The Unsex'd Females*: 'Scare by a gossamer film carest,/Sport, in full view, the meretricious breast; ...!' Opie's portraits of Wollstonecraft (1796), and Alderson (c 1800) follow the high waisted, muslin gown fashions, as did the engraving of Lawrence's portrait of Inchbald, so this is not entirely a fashion that the literary radicals repudiated, although none of them came even close to the exposure of décolletage that the prints portrayed. Interestingly, the bare breasted motif was used in depicting Mary Robinson back in 1783 in *Florizel and Perdita* (B. Pownall, 1783, BMS 6266). (There was an earlier spate of prints in 1793 depicting the fashion for false pregnancies and for bulking out various parts of the female anatomy – see Rowlandson's *Cestina Warehouse or Belly Piece Shop* [np, 1793, BMS 8387]; Cruickshank's *The Frailties of Fashion* [S. W. Fores, 1793, BMS 8388]; Gillray's *A Vestal of -93, Trying on the Cestus of Venus* [H. Humphrey, 1793, BMS 8389]; James Aitken's *Female Whimsicalities* [William Dent, 1793, BMS 8390]; *The Pad Warehouse* [Bon Ton Magazine, 1793 – see Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, p. 67]). Of course suggestive nudity would sell prints, but there is also a sense that there was something to caricature here – both in relation to fashion and in relation to dance in the theatre (see *Modern Grace, or The Operatic Finale* [5 May 1796] and the series of prints concerning Mlle Parisot – see Gattrell, *City of Laughter*, pp. 371–374).

respect of others because of one's dress and demeanour). The provincial papers in this period followed their London cousins in reporting in detail the clothes and fashions of London, with often ferocious precision and with a degree of pointedness: for example, the *Ipswich Journal* for 30 January 1796 reported on the elegance of Lady Charlotte Campbell's dress and on the inadvisability of certain women following her example, saying

she was the first, who disregarding the *artificial shape* given by *stays*, Introduced *short waists*. The elegant person of her ladyship appears to most advantage when nature is unrestrained, and therefore her short waist is uncommonly graceful; but the little *Dutch-Built Dames*, who have foolishly adopted the same fashion, look as if they were *peeping out of a puncheon* which had been covered by a petticoat.⁹⁴

The 'short waist' crisis is clear in caricatures from 1794 and became an iterated theme in satires of the fashion world for the next several years. Nonetheless, the most straightforward way of interpreting such satires is to see them aimed at the aristocratic circles around Parliament, with the intent of lampooning those members of the élite connected to fashionable society.

What is a little surprising about Bowles's intervention is that it was hardly in the first flurry of representation, but that may well have been because his concern was primarily prompted by the gradual spread of this fashion and its associated principles down through the social world and by his own sense that those well beyond court circles were being drawn to a flimsiness of costume that was both overly stimulating and sensuous, thereby encouraging immorality – and inadequate as a covering for the climate, thereby encouraging mortality! But this was something that literary radicals also saw as food for critique – Mrs Inchbald made use of the trope in *Nature and Art* where the death of Lady Clementina was reported: ““Yes”, answered the stranger; “she caught cold by wearing a new-fashioned dress that did not half cover her, wasted all away, and died the miserablest object you ever heard of””.⁹⁵

The audiences addressed by prints, satirical poetry and so on were not identical. Moreover, the transparency of reference was often quite restricted and often relied upon an audience in the know. Insofar as the literary radicals were targeted, the audience's 'knowingness' about this group of women writers, as in other cases, relied rather heavily on seeing as intimately connected people who were not in fact so close, sharing little more than the fact that they wrote and claimed some public attention with some sympathy for reform (although attacks did not get the

⁹⁴ *Ipswich Journal*, 30 January 1796, No. 3299.

⁹⁵ Inchbald, *Nature and Art*, XLIV, see also chapter VII.

measure of Mrs Radcliffe, or really of Inchbald, and they often lumped together those favouring a reformation of manners and those looking for a reformation of the position of women and of politics more widely). In retrospect, people developed a stronger sense of a coterie of women literary radicals. In the fray, in 1797 and 1798, different loyalist contributors lashed out in different ways, often relying on traditional associations and old news (as with Helen Maria Williams and Mrs Barbauld). What is surprising is that there seems no comparable visual trope of the artisan democrat to characterise these women writers – and when women were attacked in prints they remained largely aristocratic or related to fashion and fashionable society. As with the artisans, there is no need to know them beyond their works – unlike the beautiful, fallen women of the theatre who are portrayed, they lack allure and interest. Nonetheless, there does seem to be a case for seeing Godwin's *Memoirs* as especially ill-timed, and as encouraging the loyalist press to scoop together a wide range of women whom they disliked on one count or other so as to tar them with Gallic sympathies, infidelity and immorality.