

An “Englishwoman’s Private Theatrical”: Helen Maria Williams and the New Female Citizen*

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Abstract

Helen Maria Williams’s writing moves beyond boundaries of different kinds. Williams’s eight-volume *Letters from France: Containing Many New Anecdotes Relative to the French Revolution, and the Present State of French Manners*, for example, is a combination of several genres, including travel narrative, letters, and her first-hand reports of the events in France between the years 1790 and 1796. This is a study of the first volume of *Letters Written in France* (1790), comprising twenty-six letters. In this paper, I will endeavour to show the ways in which Williams moves beyond a national frame and employs the epistolary form to provide a trans-

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national outlook at the French Revolution. I will argue that Williams's *Letters from France* is an important form of cultural and literary participation that enables the reconfiguration of modern nationhood and cosmopolitanism, and allows a new definition of female citizenship to emerge.

Key Words: Helen Maria Williams, national identity, universal benevolence, cosmopolitanism, female citizen

Helen Maria Williams (1759-1827) first established herself as a well-loved poet of sensibility in England. After the storming of the Bastille in 1789, Williams became a fervent supporter of the French Revolution and an active member of the London Revolution Society. She travelled to Paris to witness the events and began to write a first-hand eyewitness account of the proceedings. Williams later decided to settle in France until her death in 1827, and throughout her life remained undauntedly supportive of republican principles. Her writing later led to the publication of the eight-volume *Letters from France: Containing Many New Anecdotes Relative to the French Revolution, and the Present State of French Manners* between the years 1790 and 1796, and she has become “perhaps the most important, British interpreter of the French Revolution” (Craciun & Lokke, 2001: 4).¹ *Letters from France* significantly influenced her contemporary writers including William Wordsworth, William Godwin, Samuel Coleridge, and William Hazlitt, among many others, and to this day remains one of the most noted records of the proceedings of the Revolution.

The situation in the revolutionary France, particularly after the outbreak of war between England and France in 1793, alarmed many of Williams’s friends.² Urging Williams to leave Paris at once, her friend and fellow writer Anna Seward published a public letter in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1793. Calling the new French Republic a “land of carnage” which “instead of diffusing universal love, content, and happiness, lifts every man’s hand against his

¹ In her monograph *Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution*, Kennedy carries out a chronological study of Williams’s works produced during her forty-five-year writing career.

² In the early phases of the Revolution, politicians, intellectuals, and writers alike took sides with the Revolution, and the revolutionaries were generally optimistic about the reforms. However, political atmosphere in Britain started to change after 1793, and disagreements over the proceedings of the Revolution rose drastically. There was an increasing uneasiness and reservation about the Revolution. It was at this time that many of Williams’s former friends and allies who once advocated revolutionary principles began to withdraw or tone down their support.

brother” (1811: 208), Seward hopes to persuade the “amiable, the benevolent” Williams (204) to return to Britain at once. But Williams was far from convinced by Seward’s observations of the new Republic. Indeed, revolutionary France provided Williams with a particularly suitable opportunity to imagine a new female citizenship, for the Revolution consolidated an atmosphere and culture of openness building on top of the newly established system of liberty and equality.

This is a study of Williams and her *Letters Written in France, in the Summer 1790, to a Friend in England*, the first of the eight-volume *Letters from France*. As critics have noted, Williams “never wavered from her faith in the principles” (Fraistat & Lanser, 2001: 16) celebrated in the first volume, even after revolutionaries gradually dampened their early enthusiasm and optimism. Focusing my discussions predominantly on the first volume that came out in 1790, I trace the phase of her universalist ideas from its earliest days and argue for the uniqueness of Williams’s participation in the revolutionary debates. Williams has attracted some scholarly attention in the wave of the reappraisal of British women writers during the last few decades, and has gradually taken her place in literary history as a poet, novelist, and political commentator of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, previous studies of Williams were largely confined to her revolutionary politics and radical comments on the French Revolution.³ Therefore, I am less concerned with her radical politics (she is almost undeniably recognised as an ardent radical republican) than with the ways in which Williams refashions

³ For Williams’s radical politics and sensibility, see C. Jones (1993: 135-159), and Deborah Kennedy’s (1994) article “Spectacle of the Guillotine: Helen Maria Williams and the Reign of Terror.” For the relations between gender and politics, see Claudia Johnson’s (1995) book *Equivocal Beings: Gender, Politics, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* and Lisa Kasmer (2013), *Novel Histories: British Women Writing History, 1760-1830*. For a discussion of women writers and cosmopolitanism, see Adrianna Craciun (2005), *British Women Writers and the French Revolution: Citizens of the World*.

universalist terms and deploys the epistolary form to justify her interest and enthusiasm for the Revolution, and her concern for her country Britain. I will endeavour to show how Williams employs the epistolary form to consolidate a new space for the redefinition of readers’ relation to the writer and text, and also the ways in which she moves beyond a national frame to provide a trans-national outlook at the Revolution. Williams’s *Letters Written in France* is an important form of cultural and literary participation that enables the reconfiguration of modern nationhood and cosmopolitanism, and allows a new definition of female citizenship to emerge.⁴

Born in London in 1759, Williams was friend of a great number of contemporary thinkers and cultural figures, including Sir Reynolds, William Godwin, John Moore, Robert Burns, and prominent women writers including Mary Wollstonecraft, Frances Burney, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Joanna Baillie, and Anna Seward, among many others. The salon she developed when residing in Paris served as the regular meeting place for literary celebrities and French political thinkers such as Lazare Carnot and Henri Grégoire. Her salon was also frequented by Britons who visited Paris during the Revolutionary years.⁵ Williams wrote *Letters Written in France* (the first volume of *Letters from France*) in 1790, the year immediately following the anniversary of the outbreak of the French Revolution

⁴ Although this paper focuses on Helen Maria Williams and her writing in the early 1790s, this is not to say that male writers took on less important roles during the reconfiguration of states and nations at the turbulent times. Instead, it is precisely because men have written widely on their roles and places in the public world, and their notions have been carefully crafted and embedded in texts that their domination has long been the focus of previous scholarship, that this paper wishes to depart from these points of view. In so doing, scholarship could make way for a consideration of women’s voices and contribution to the development of national and cosmopolitan worldview.

⁵ For discussions of the cultural significance and function of the salons in Paris, please refer to Elisabeth Jay’s (2016) *British Writers and Paris: 1830-1875*, especially Chapter 7 and Nigel Leask’s (2001) chapter “Salons, Alps and Cordilleras: Helen Maria Williams, Alexander von Humboldt, and the Discourse of Romantic Travel” in *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700-1830*.

and published it in epistolary form, replete with letters addressing an imaginary friend in England of the events that took place in Paris. It begins with Williams's joining the French spectators at the Fête de la Fédération, a festival celebrating the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, and her enthusiastic description of the procession that marched to the Champ de Mars.

On the score of the uneasiness of women's participation in the public world of politics, Williams's reportage of events in France was seen as an uncomfortable foray running counter to socially prescribed feminine roles and spheres. This is further complicated by the fact that, traditionally, nationhood is incontrovertibly linked to manhood, and this was especially so in the Revolutionary period. Men have been widely considered the primary participants in wars and conflicts, acting as defenders of nations and honours. Women, on the other hand, are assigned supplementary and supportive roles. Therefore, an unsettling ambivalence was widely expressed towards women's position and action in the male-dominated political sphere of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. One of the most notable examples is Richard Polwhele's poem *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem* (1798), a vicious attack on women writers of the late eighteenth-century Britain. Polwhele refers to writers including Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Ann Yearsley, Charlotte Smith, Williams, and the others as "a female band despising NATURE's law" (467; emphasis Polwhele's).⁶ There are consequences of violating this law: punishment will be inflicted, and women's "softer charms" be "smother[ed]":

I shudder at the new unpictur'd scene.
Where unsex'd woman vaunts the imperious mien;
Where girls, affecting to dismiss the heart,
Invoke the Proteus of petrific art;

⁶ References to Richard Polwhele's (1798) *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem* are to *The Broadview Anthology of Literature of the Revolutionary Period 1770-1832*. Subsequent references from this work will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

With equal ease, in body or in mind,
To Gallic freaks or Gallic faith resign’d, . . . (467)

The dubbing of these women as “the unsex’d females” has a wide and lasting influence, as can be seen in contemporary and later conservative propaganda’s representations of radical women.⁷ It has since become an anti-Jacobin brand name for women who supported revolutionary politics and radical reforms. Another example is Hannah More, an Evangelical writer and polemicist who published widely on women’s education and roles in society. Unlike Polwhele, More avoids such direct insults, but does not refrain from publicly voicing her concern. In her influential *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, she writes:

I am not sounding an alarm to female warriors, or exciting female politicians: I hardly know which of the two is the most disgusting and unnatural character. Propriety is to a woman what the great Roman critic says action is to an orator; it is the first, the second, the third requisite. A woman may be knowing, active, witty, and amusing; but without propriety she cannot be amiable. Propriety is the centre in which all the lines of duty and of agreeableness meet. It is to character what proportion is to figure, and grace to attitude. (1799: 6)⁸

Here, More announces a strict demarcation of the sexes, through pointing out the importance of female propriety and how women’s participation in the public world of politics disregards conventional

⁷ For discussions on women writers and Polwhele’s *The Unsex’d Females: A Poem*, see William Stafford’s (2002) book *English Feminists and Their Opponents in the 1790s: Unsex’d and Proper Females*, particularly Chapter 1, and also Susan Wolfson’s (2010) *Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action*.

⁸ Following her discourses on female propriety and manners, more reproachfully refers to Mary Wollstonecraft as “The German suicide Werter,” who offers “a direct vindication of adultery” and asserts that “adultery is justifiable, and that the restrictions placed on it by the laws of England constitute one of the *Wrongs of Women*” (More, 1799: 48; emphasis More’s).

gendered roles. The primary object of education should be, in More's words, to instruct women to become "good daughters, good wives, good mistresses, good members of society, and good Christians" (1851: 566).

Nevertheless, an increasing number of women from all social backgrounds, and even across national boundaries, were engaging in public affairs and involved in shaping the political culture of this period. Women were by no means confined to home; in fact, quite a few of them related their patriotic feelings and openly shared their experiences and feelings of partaking in war activities.⁹ One prominent example is Marguerite Pinaigre's petition to the National Assembly to request a pension for her contribution to the Revolution. Pinaigre was a French washerwoman who helped her husband storm the Bastille in France in 1789 and "worked equally hard with all her might" (Levy, Applewhite, & Johnson, 1980: 30). In fact, it was Pinaigre who "ran to several wineshops to fill her apron with bottles, both broken and unbroken, which she gave to the authorities to be used as shot in the cannon used to break the chain on the drawbridge of the Bastille" (30). What is revealed here is the extent to which common women in reality see themselves as defenders, rather than beneficiaries, of the Revolution. French female citizens' engagement in and enthusiastic commitments to the Revolutionary cause are also described in *Letters Written in France*. Williams portrays the participation of women in the reform after the fall of the Bastille:

⁹ It would require a separate study to describe women's engagement in the political world and to explain how they responded to anxiety and controversy over women's role and position in this period. For Irish women's participation in national affairs, see for example *Reading the Irish Woman: Studies in Cultural Encounter and Exchange, 1714-1960* (Meaney, O'Dowd, & Whelan, 2013), particularly Chapter 2 on women and the public life (1770-1845). For French women's involvement in the French Revolution, see Levy et al. (1980), especially pp. 36-42 for Stanislas Maillard's description of women's march to Versailles in October 1789, and also Deminique Godineau's (1988) book *The Women of Paris and Their French Revolution*.

The women too, far from indulging the fears incident to our feeble sex, in defiance of the cannon of the Bastille, ventured to bring victuals to their sons and husbands; and, with a spirit worthy of Roman matrons, encouraged them to go on. Women mounted guard in the street, and, when any person passed, called out boldly, ‘Qui va là?’ (1790: 75)¹⁰

Williams forcefully contends that “women have certainly had a considerable share in the French Revolution,” for they “often act in human affairs like those secret springs in mechanism, by which, though invisible, great movements are regulated” (79). Although Williams’s juxtaposing women’s seeming invisibility with the “great movements” seems to depreciate women’s values and thus subordinate them to patriarchy; nevertheless, this can be counteracted by her repeated emphasis on the active participation of women and their influence on the Revolution (Smith, 2013: 117-118). In so doing, she is able to write in recognition of women who contribute to the Revolutionary cause, while providing a truthful account of the Revolution in Paris.

Women writers of the 1790s were identified as “particularly threatening” for “the outspoken claiming of their ‘rights’ shortly after and coinciding with the events in France that culminated in the revolution” (Ty, 1993: 4). Charlotte Smith, one of Williams’s contemporaries, had to defend her decision to write a political novel about the French Revolution. She explains her motive to write *Desmond: A Novel* and stoutly defends women’s involvement in political discussion: “But women it is said have no business with politics. —Why not? —Have they no interest in the scenes that are acting around them, in which they have fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, or friends engaged!” (1792: 45). In her discussions of women’s difficult position in the 1790s, literary critic Chantal Thomas observes that “[t]he women of 1789 were set before a classic double bind: remain women, but deny themselves all exaltation and all

¹⁰ “Qui va là?,” according to Williams’s note, can be translated as “Who goes there?.”

heroic action, or else attain the sublime, but transgress the ideal reserved for their sex” (1989: 69). In this sense, “[t]here was consequently something of the outlaw, something transgressive in the few women who, in this male-permeated atmosphere, succeeded in making themselves illustrious” (69). One of the most notable assaults on Williams and her *Letters Written in France* is Laetitia Matilda Hawkins’s didactic *Letters on the Female Mind*. In this outspoken onslaught on the impropriety of women mingling in politics, Hawkins declares that “politics are a study inapplicable to female powers by nature, and withheld from [women] by education” (1793: 26); therefore, “every *female* politician is a *hearsay* politician” (24; emphases Hawkins’s).

The repeated blame and accusations levelled at Williams for participating in the political world continued to haunt her into the early nineteenth century. Williams was clearly aware of the fact that her accounts of the proceedings in France might appear imprudent or even flagrant in others’ eyes, and that she could be accused of being unpatriotic and unfeminine. This prompted Williams to profess in the preface of her *Sketches of the State of Manners and Opinions in the French Republic, towards the Close of the Eighteenth Century* (1801): “I am aware of the censure which has been thrown on writers of the female sex who have sometimes employed their pens on political subjects; nor am I ignorant that my name has been mentioned with abuse by journalists, calling themselves Anti-Jacobins” (1801: 6).¹¹ Engaging in the era’s perhaps most vicious partisan culture wars, it was clear to Williams that her venturing abroad and deliver a heartfelt observation of the Revolutionary events in Paris was likely to create an unpatriotic image of her. In the beginning of Letter IX in *Letters Written in France*, she writes:

¹¹ Helen Maria Williams’s *Sketches of the State of Manners and Opinions in the French Republic, towards the Close of the Eighteenth Century* encompasses more of her concepts of patriotism and national subjectivity.

Yesterday I received your letter, in which you accuse me of describing with too much enthusiasm the public rejoicings in France, and prophesy that I shall return to my own country a fierce republican. In answer to these accusations, I shall only observe, that it is very difficult, with common sensibility, to avoid sympathizing in general happiness. . . . I wish that some of our political critics would speak with less contempt, than they are apt to do, of the new constitution of France, and no longer repeat after one another the trite remark, that the French have gone too far, because they have gone farther than ourselves; as if it were not possible that the degree of influence which is perfectly safe in the hand of the executive part of our government, might be dangerous, at this crisis, to the liberty of France. (1790: 91-92)

When *Letters Written in France* came out in 1790, most of the reviews remained largely positive about Williams’s style and design of the work. *The Critical Review* commends Williams for “giv[ing] a pleasing picture of the solemnity of the federation; and her description of different parts of France is picturesque and animated” (Anonymous, 1791a: 117). In a similar vein, the reviewer of *The English Review* comments that “the style of [the letters] is neat, lively, and correct; often animated, and in many places elegant” (1791b: 21). But there are reviewers that were hostile to her overt sentimentalism in the work, accentuating its “characteristically ‘feminine’ defects” (Kelly, 1993: 79). *The Analytical Review* points out that Williams’s “reflections on the French Revolution are truly *feminine*, and such an air of sincerity runs through the descriptive part of her letters” (Anonymous, 1790: 431; emphasis mine), suggesting that this work shows the female intellectual limitations in her venture into political discussion. *The Gentleman’s Magazine* goes further and directly quotes Williams’s words in its refutation to her accusations: “We must be allowed to fear that ‘the French have gone too far;’ not ‘because they have gone farther than ourselves,’

but because they have gone beyond every principle and axiom of practical government” (1791c: 63). Finally, the review concludes bitterly with this insinuation: “with this good lady there is no country, no language in the world, equal to that of France. She has worn the scarf of Liberty, ‘that noble scarf,’ which no English woman that wore the English bandeau of 1789 should exult in” (63). Indeed, the fact that *The Gentleman’s Magazine* seeks to distance Williams from British values and traditions, and to make her appear as a Francophile and custodian of French values, could stir up lively controversy, for women have been frequently held responsible for national instability and social crises. Williams seems to claim a safe place for her to write as she argues in *Letters Written in France* that “[m]y love of the French revolution, is the natural result of this sympathy, and therefore my political creed is entirely an affair of the heart; for I have not been so absurd as to consult my head upon matters of which it is so incapable of judging” (1790: 91).

Letters Written in France is much more than simply a travel narrative or reportage of the French Revolution; perhaps more importantly, it shows Williams’s commitments to develop a deliberate and powerful reimagining of world citizenship. This is further complicated by her desire to promote a universalist model through this work. Describing the scene in the Champ de Mars, Williams points out that “in the Champ de Mars the distinctions of rank were forgotten; and, inspired by the same spirit, the highest and lowest orders of citizens gloried in taking up the spade, and assisting the persons employed in a work on which *the common welfare of the state* depended” (1790: 65; emphases mine). Later, when she witnesses the sublime spectacle of the Fête de la Fédération, she remarks that “this was not a time in which the distinctions of country were remembered” (69).¹² This is much

¹² In this paper, references to Helen Maria Williams’s *Letters Written in France* are to the Broadview Press edition. Subsequent references from this work will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number only (without further indication of the author and year of publication).

more than simply a celebratory event for Williams; the extraordinary scene before her eyes is a universal experience shared by a wider community. This is made explicit in the passage where Williams refers to this event as “the triumph of human kind,” in which “man asserting the noblest privileges of his nature; and it required but the common feelings of humanity to become in that moment a citizen of the world” (69). The choice of words here—“universal,” “community,” “human kind,” “common,” “a citizen of the world”—allows Williams to envision being a part of a wider universalist movement which aims to attain communal good through political events in a particular region. Deborah Kennedy similarly notes that it is indeed Williams’s “internationalist position” that enabled her to observe “without national prejudice, the improvements for humanity in another country” (2002: 56).

During this turbulent period, British radical supporters and loyalists alike “fought to control the definitions of universalism and the contours of patriotism” in the face of impending threats overseas (Duthille, 2012: 33). The concept of universal benevolence in the late eighteenth century has its root in an earlier period in the history of moral philosophy, exemplified and complicated by works of Voltaire and Oliver Goldsmith, among many others.¹³ By the late

¹³ In particular, the concept of universal benevolence has been discussed and featured predominantly in many of Oliver Goldsmith’s works, such as *The Citizen of the World; or, Letters from a Chinese Philosopher, Residing in London, to His Friends in the East* (1762) and his play *The Good-Natur’d Man* (1768). However, since this lies beyond the current scope of this paper, further exploration will not be carried out here. For a discussion of Goldsmith’s idea of cosmopolitanism, see Mary Elizabeth Green’s (1980) article “Oliver Goldsmith and the Wisdom of the World” and Mary Helen McMurrin (2013), “The New Cosmopolitanism and the Eighteenth Century.” In his essay, “Revolutionary Writing, Moral Philosophy, and Universal Benevolence in the Eighteenth Century,” Evan Radcliffe (1993) traces the debates about the idea of benevolence among moral philosophers from Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Jonathan Edwards, David Hume, Adam Smith, Richard Price to, finally William Godwin. He contends that these philosophers hold diverse opinions of whether benevolence should or could be extended beyond the limits of an individual nation.

eighteenth century, universal benevolence itself became, in Rémy Duthille's words, "a political catchword" (2012: 33). The concept of universal benevolence, in radical interpretations and in the tradition of dissenters in Britain in the 1790s, is commonly associated with patriotic sentiment. It was in fact "the relation of love of country to universal benevolence that set off the British debate about the French Revolution" (Radcliffe, 1993: 228), and universal benevolence has become a concept highly interrelated with discourses of patriotism.¹⁴ One prominent thinker who testifies the extent to which these philosophical debates fuelled the political divisions is Richard Price (1723-1791), a preacher and an avid supporter of the French Revolution. As early as the mid-eighteenth century, Price stresses that "public happiness" (1758: 263) is "of essential and unchangeable value and importance" (263) and that "there is not any thing which appears to our thoughts with greater light and evidence" (263) in *A Review of the Principal Questions and Difficulties in Morals*. Indeed, there is the need to "labour particularly to be useful to mankind, and to cultivate to the utmost the principle of benevolence to them" (264). Thirty years after, Price (1790) delivered *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, a sermon addressed The Revolution Society in November 1789 to commemorate the Glorious Revolution of the late seventeenth century.¹⁵ In the second half of *Discourse*, Price offers an

¹⁴ Opponents of the French Revolution argued against the idea of universal benevolence. Their representations and understanding of universal benevolence prompted them to portray it as a devastating principle that would bring unfavourable consequence to society. Since this is beyond the scope of this study, conservative response to the idea of universal benevolence will not be treated properly, as it should be, in this paper. For those interested, see for example Radcliffe's (1993) article, "Revolutionary Writing, Moral Philosophy, and Universal Benevolence in the Eighteenth Century," especially pp. 233-238.

¹⁵ *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* has been widely seen as one of the first British response to the French Revolution. The sermon form was seen as an appropriate vehicle to discuss issues such as patriotism in the eighteenth century. Rémy Duthille notes that between the years of 1700 and 1800, "70 published books had titles containing the phrase 'love of country' (or very close variants),

unvarnished criticism of patriotism, through distinguishing between “love of our country” and the rivalry among nations. Patriotism has often been considered as, in his words, “a love of domination; a desire of conquest, and a thirst for grandeur and glory,” and that it has been “a blind and narrow principle, producing in every country a contempt of other countries” (1790: 9). Price criticizes patriotism for its exclusive form of benevolence, and argues that it is crucial for people to extend their love and interest of their own countries:

we must remember, that a narrower interest ought always to give way to a more extensive interest. In pursuing particularly the interest of our country, we ought to carry our views *beyond* it. We should love [our country] ardently, but *not exclusively*. We ought to seek its good, by all the means that our different circumstances and abilities will allow; but at the same time we ought to consider ourselves as *citizens of the world*, and take care to maintain a just regard to the rights of other countries. (14; emphases mine)

Here a sense of superiority of universal benevolence over patriotism is implied, for universal benevolence is “an unspeakably nobler principle than any partial affections” (11-12). For Price, only when love of country can be extended to love of mankind, can true patriotism be exercised.

A comparison between Williams’s and Mary Wollstonecraft’s concepts of universal benevolence reveals interesting correlations and similarities between their discourses. In the early years of the Revolution, many British writers and thinkers who visited France had been to Williams’s house, and Wollstonecraft was one of the many. Wollstonecraft writes an affectionate account of Williams in a letter to her sister after her visit: “Miss Williams has behaved very

and of those no fewer than 54 were sermons” (2012; based on data from the *English Short Title Catalogue [ESTC]* database). In his meticulous study, Duthille locates Price’s concept of patriotism within the context of the American War in an attempt to trace his theory of patriotism and map out the ways in which Price helped to shape debates in the 1770s and 1780s.

civily to me and 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” (as cited in Kennedy, 2002: 96; emphases Wollstonecraft’s). This praise is followed by the avowal: “Authorship is a heavy weight for female shoulders especially in the sunshine of prosperity” (96).¹⁶ While this passage shows Wollstonecraft’s praise for Williams’s manner and hospitality, there is a sense of the potential predicament faced by eighteenth-century woman writer. As one of the most eloquent writers and polemicists in the late eighteenth-century Britain, Wollstonecraft has been highly critical of how women were treated in society and consistently questioned their positions and roles. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she argues that universal benevolence could be achieved through a careful reconsideration of women’s characters and roles. She describes women as “often amiable; and their hearts are really more sensible to *general benevolence*, more alive to the sentiments that civilize life, than the square-elbowed family drudge; but, wanting a due proportion of reflection and self-government, they only inspire love” (1792: 138; emphasis mine). The benevolence Wollstonecraft praised in women was later extended to love of mankind. As a caring individual and an affectional mother, Wollstonecraft can be regarded as, in Margarita González’s words, “the perfect champion of universal benevolence” (2013: 232). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published as an immediate

¹⁶ Wollstonecraft’s first written account of the Revolution in its early years is the letter, “Introductory to a Series of Litters on the Present Character of the French Nation” (dated February 1793). However, this letter remained unpublished until her death. Karen O’Brien suggests that Wollstonecraft may have planned to produce a work very much like Williams’s *Letters from France*. See Chapter 5 of O’Brien’s (2009) monograph, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. For discussions of revolutionary feminism in this period, see Gary Kelly’s (1992) *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft*, in particular Chapter 6.

response to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Wollstonecraft (1790) writes against Burke’s idea that universal benevolence is but “a philosophical abstraction” that has “great power to destroy . . . what civilization depend on” (Radcliffe, 1993: 234).¹⁷ She argues for universal benevolence over private, familial relations and affections: “[t]he perpetuation of property in our families is one of the privileges you most warmly contend for; yet it would not be very difficult to prove that the mind must have a very limited range that thus confines its benevolence to such a narrow circle, which, with great propriety, may be included in the sordid calculations of blind self-love” (Wollstonecraft, 1790: 21).¹⁸ What Wollstonecraft envisions is an improved and better society, where “true happiness” can only be found in “friendship and intimacy” and charity become “an intercourse of good offices and mutual benefits, founded on respect for justice and humanity” (9). This is also elaborated in her later work *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*: “I anticipated the future improvement of the world, and observed how much man had still to do, to obtain of the earth all it could yield” (1796: 68).¹⁹ The fact that “Wollstonecraft frequently used the argument that women (or anyone) can be virtuous and perform their duties to society only when their interests are broad and include ‘the love of mankind’” (Radcliffe, 1993: 231) would help to consolidate her

¹⁷ For discussions of the relationship between Britain and the French Revolution, and the intellectual debates about revolutionary ideas (especially those between radicals and loyalists), please see Clive Emsley’s (2000) monograph, *Britain and the French Revolution* and Amanda Goodrich’s (2005) *Debating England’s Aristocracy in the 1790s: Pamphlets, Polemics and Political Ideas*.

¹⁸ Quotations from both Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) come from the modern Oxford edition edited by Janet Todd in 1993, and will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number only (without further indication of the author and year of publication).

¹⁹ Quotations from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* are taken from its modern Oxford edition, edited by Tone Brekke and Jon Mee in 2009.

belief that universal benevolence could, in fact, “serve the purposes of reform” for her “feminist cause” (231). In a similar vein, Williams’s writing about the Revolution and developing her discourses of universal benevolence could be seen as aiming at a similar cause—to bring women to the forefront of major philosophical debates and political struggles. Women writers, including Williams, Wollstonecraft, and many others, seemed to be participating in a collaborative project that enabled continuing conversations and helped to develop a universalist, cosmopolitan view of the future state.

Williams’s interpretations of universal benevolence and the concept of world citizenship further shaped the ways in which national consciousness and identity were constructed in the late eighteenth-century Britain. Amidst her comments on politics and events in France there lies an emergent sense of national consciousness and an earnest desire to reform British society. It was in this atmosphere that Williams published the poem *A Farewell, for Two Years, to England*, a year after *Letters Written in France* came out. As its title suggests, this poem signals her imminent departure for France, “where new-born Freedom treads the banks of Seine / Hope in her eye, and Virtue in her train!” (1791: 5). Whilst witnessing the events alongside French citizens, Williams was in fact conscious of her own national identity and tradition. She justifies her revolutionary enthusiasm and passion for the Revolution in the following passage:

Who, if one wish for human good expand
Beyond the limits of their native land,
And from the worst of ills would others free,
Deem that warm wish, my Country! guilt to thee.
Ah! Why those blessings to one spot confine,
Which, when diffus’d, will not the less be thine? (1791: 7)

Whereas Williams unapologetically defended her keen interest in the Revolution in France, she would be pleased to see liberty and freedom spread beyond the borders of Britain. Such “warm wish,”

she implies, does not diminish the love for her country. The political and social events unfolded in France, in this sense, served as a poignant reminder of the tensions and difficulties one would encounter on the way to create a national community. In Williams’s description of Britain, she writes: “*She* can never be deprived of the most glorious preeminence among the children of freedom; *she*, who cherished in her bosom the noble sentiments of liberty, when the nations around her were sunk in the most abject servitude. If those nations now find the path of freedom, it is by pursuing the track which England first explored” (1792: 114-115; emphases Williams’s). Her pride in the systems in England is explicitly expressed here. Following a declaration of her confidence in the superiority of English system, Williams provides an imagining of a reformed English society:

May England rectify the abuses and corruptions which have crept into her government by wise and temperate reformation—may she avoid those storms and convulsions which are only necessary to purify the moral, as well as the physical world, from any mighty and fatal contagion. While France has been obliged to correct *her* government by holding in one hand her philosophic declaration of rights, and grasping her unsheathed sword in the other—may England effect the same august purpose with no other arms than those of reason—may she, without interrupting her national prosperity, employ the most effectual means of securing its continuance—may she direct that full tide of wealth which rolls through the land, to visit it in more equal streams. (115-116; emphasis Williams’s)

Shifting her accounts from France back to homeland, she articulates a sincere desire to reform and improve society in her homeland. It can therefore be argued that it is, at least partly, this national “Other” that enabled Williams to find the authority to comment on matters at home and to construct a sense of national identity.²⁰

²⁰ For the influence of the French Revolution on the emergence of national

Williams's concept of universal benevolence and her ingrained nationalism and patriotism, inform us that women writers were no less engrossed in conversations about politics and society, and that national identity during the Revolutionary period functioned in much complicated ways. What is particularly interesting in Williams's concept of universal benevolence lies in her perceptions of the relationship between patriotism and benevolence. For Williams, patriotism can indeed generate benevolent actions and love for the "Other." Once people recognise their moral responsibility, universal benevolence would subsequently be in display. Situating *Letters Written in France* in the doctrines of universal benevolence and reading her discourses alongside women's commitments to world citizenship allows us to move the study of Williams's writing beyond a national frame, and to situate her in the literary contribution to ideas of universal benevolence and cosmopolitanism.

Having decided to report on the situation in France, Williams's choice of the epistolary form served her well.²¹ The letter was commonly used to strengthen credibility in news and sources, as can be seen in Harriet Martineau's *Letters from Ireland* (1852).²² In Elizabeth H. Cook's study of epistolary fictions, she has found that

consciousness, see for example Walter Benjamin (1973), *Illuminations* and Partha Chatterjee (1986), *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*.

²¹ For a discussion of epistolary fictions in the Romantic period, see for example Mary A. Favret (1993a), *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters*, especially Chapter 3 on Helen Maria Williams and letter writing, and Elizabeth Cook's (1996) *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters*. For a discussion of epistolary tradition, see Thomas O. Beebee (1999), *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850*, Elizabeth J. MacArthur (1990), *Extravagant Narratives: Closure and Dynamics in the Epistolary Form*.

²² Harriet Martineau's *Letters from Ireland* is a collection of a series of letters she wrote for the Daily News in 1852. These letters provide important information of the post-famine Ireland and call for a political and social reform of Ireland. See Logan (2012, especially Chapter 1), for discussions on Martineau as a correspondent for Daily News and a collection of her writing during this time.

the letter carried “two contradictory sets of connotations” in the eighteenth century. First, it was considered “the most direct, sincere, and transparent form of written communication” (1996: 16). The characteristics of epistolary form Cook observes here is exploited and clearly displayed in *Letters Written in France*. Williams opens *Letters Written in France* with the scene she saw upon arriving in France in 1790:

had I not reached Paris at the moment I did reach it, I should have missed the most sublime spectacle which, perhaps, was ever represented on the theatre of this earth. . . . I am well aware how very imperfectly I shall be able to describe the images which press upon my mind. It is much easier to *feel* what is sublime than to paint it; and all I shall be able to give you will be a faint sketch, to which your own imagination must add colouring and spirit. (1790: 63; emphasis mine)

In this first letter, Williams sets out her writing style for all eight volumes. Her voice is straightforward, honest, sometimes colloquial, and for the first few volumes at least, enthusiastic. In the passage quoted above, Williams attempts to defend her outspoken enthusiasm and emotions for the Revolution. Williams openly states her intention behind this work: to provide a sketch of France under revolutionary reforms, even though it might be “a faint sketch” at best. She was conscious of the impossibility of describing the events in words. Relating the story of her French friends, she is overcome by intense melancholy that her “mind is overwhelmed with its own sensations” and her paper “blotted by [her] tears” that she “can hold [her] pen no longer” (119). When she feels overwhelmed by the scale of events, she invites readers to take over: “How am I to give you an adequate idea of the behaviour of the spectators? How am I to paint the impetuous feelings of that immense, that exulting multitude? Half a million of people assembled at a spectacle . . . which addressed itself at once to the *imagination*, the *understanding*, and the *heart!*” (64-65; emphases mine). Her direct appeal to

readers' "imagination" and "heart," grants readers proximity to the events across the Channel, and the letter form promises immediacy and directness that prompt intimacy between the writer and the specific public. This allows Williams not only to transmit knowledge about the Revolution in France to British readers at home, and also to directly share her feelings and elicit response from readers at home. This continually forcing the readers to engage in the establishment and dissemination of narratives redefines the communication between authors and readers, and between historical facts and personal experiences. Sharing a position with her readers, Williams can weave her ideas and arguments into her reportage of the Revolution. Williams's frequent use of "I" in her letters, an epistolary rhetorical stance often taken by women, further enables an emphatically female voice to appear. This process displays her concern for a female narrative authority and her ability to forge a strong authoritative voice of women in the realm of politics. For instance, even though Williams is "but a sojourner in their land," she "rejoiced in their happiness, joined the universal voice, and repeated with all my heart and soul, 'Vive la nation!'" (73). Rather than settling on other agents, Williams rejects the absence of her own narrative voice and uses features of the epistolary form to advance her cause.

Although the letter has the capability to effectively and directly enlist readers' feelings, the other connotation of the epistolary form, in Cook's words, is that it is also "the most playful and potentially deceptive of forms, as a *stage* for rhetorical trickery" (1996: 16; emphasis mine). In *Letters Written in France*, Williams explicitly questions the possibility of providing authentic representations of a scene, especially large-scale grand event like the Revolution. She opens the second letter of with this acknowledgement: "I [p]romised to send you a description of the federation: but it is *not to be described!* One must be *present*, to form any judgment of a scene" (1790: 64; emphasis mine). This demonstrates the potential of epistolary form to function in-between the authenticity/duplicity

binary; this also makes it possible for Williams to employ the letter to engage in deceptive practices and to further exert control over her readers’ knowledge, judgement, and feelings. If we look at responses to the Revolution in the 1790s, representations of the events are frequently conceived as a kind of performance. One prominent example is the anti-revolutionary orator and writer Edmund Burke. Relating his feelings about the Revolution in a letter to Lord Charlemont in August 1789, Burke exclaims: “What *spectators*, and what *actors*! England gazing with astonishment at a French struggle for liberty, and not knowing whether to blame or to applaud” (as cited in White, 1994: 62-63; emphasis mine). In a similar manner, Williams sees the Champ de Mars as “an immense amphitheatre, round which were erected forty seats” (1790: 65). In her letters, Williams consistently refers to events in France as a “great drama” in her work, and sees herself as a “spectator” of such performance, who is “placed near enough the scene to discern every look and every gesture of the actors” (1796: iii, 2).²³ Williams further interweaves characteristic features of theatre performance into her representations of the scenes. Describing the procession that marched towards the Champ de Mars, she writes: “crowds of women surrounded the soldiers, and holding up their infants in their arms, and melting into tears, promised to make their children imbibe, from their earliest age, an inviolable attachment to the principles of the new constitution” (1790: 67); “the people lifted their eyes to heaven, and called upon the Deity to look down and witness the sacred engagement into which they entered” (69).

However, the difference between the discourses of the conservative Burke and revolutionary Williams needs examination and re-thinking. The stark contrast between their representations can be observed in Edward Jerningham’s poem published in *The European Magazine* in 1790, in response to reading *Letters Written in France*:

²³ This is quoted from the first letter of the third volume of *Letters from France*.

While Burke, equip'd for daring fight,
 Steps forth a literary Knight,
 In folds of ancient armour drest,
 And boldly rears his feudal crest;
 Waves high in air his brandish'd lance,
 And his huge gauntlet throws at France;
 Near the stern Chief, a lovely Maid
 Comes in simplicity array'd:
 The flowing robe in which she moves
 Wove by the Graces and the Loves;
 She tries no formal refutation
 Of his elab'rate speculation,
 No raves of Governments and Laws,
 For she to Nature trusts her cause;
 Makes to the heart her strong appeal,
 Which all who have a heart must feel;
 Bids the quick tear of pity roll,
 And seizes on the vanquish'd soul. (472)

In the passage quoted above, Williams is portrayed as a “lovely Maid” in a robe “[w]ove by the Graces and Loves,” whose narratives appeal to the “heart” to feel and to shed tears, while Burke is depicted as a “Knight” with “ancient armour drest,” symbols of ancestry, and his discourse as “huge gauntlet throws at France.” Unlike Wollstonecraft, who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* as a direct response to Burke (first published anonymously in November 1790), Williams did not directly engage in debates about “Governments and Laws” and tried “no formal refutation” in her work. Instead, the “lovely” Williams wins against Burke for appealing to the British public’s heart her “strong appeal.” For her epistolary narrative, readers’ sympathetic response is prerequisite so events in France could be domesticated and translated into British sentiment; in doing so, Williams clearly shows how the public and private could be at play in the political world. What Williams relies on here is the subversive power of the epistolary form. In her study of letters in novels, Nicolas Watson makes a strong case for the subversive nature of letters. Watson argues that letters “are always

liable to go astray, to engage in duplicity and deception, or to circulate out of control” (1994: 16). Since the epistolary form is both “the most direct, sincere, and transparent” and “the most playful and potentially deceptive” form, it provides a versatile and powerful medium to serve different narrative motives and purposes. Combining the different components of the letter, Williams explores the potential of the letter to function as an effective way of communication in one of the most turbulent and politically dangerous periods in history. In *Letters Written in France*, Williams demonstrates the extent to which the epistolary form can be manipulated to suit her narrative purpose. In this sense, duplicity occurs in both the letter itself (its contents) and also the writer’s manipulation of the form to facilitate a duplicitous rhetoric and a possible social consensus.

For women discouraged or excluded from participating in the political public sphere, it is evident in the fact that the letter form enabled them access to a literary public sphere where they could comment on matters of shared concern. Indeed, epistolary narratives blur the defining boundaries of the public and private, and bring into play questions of gender. In fact, “towards the end of the [eighteenth] century, letters became identified with a radical political agenda” (Cook, 1996: 17). As Williams relates public spectacles in the feminine mode of narrative instead of taking what Caroline Franklin calls the “distanced objective stance” (2006: 495) of many of her male contemporaries, she deploys an approach that in a way resists the conventional private/public dichotomy, challenging Habermas’s ideas of the separate spheres. By domesticating public spectacles, Williams makes the Revolution a stage for “an Englishwoman’s private theatrical” (Favret, 1993b: 278). The fact that *Letters from France* “defies any careful separation of interior and exterior, private and public, sentimental and political” (276) helps to illustrate Williams’s aim of creating this reportage of the French Revolution—to move beyond boundaries of different kinds and to question and unsettle hierarchies of narrative

authority. Williams indeed creates an enabling distance for her interrogation and exchange of public knowledge. While she employs the letter form for her accounts of France and brings into play private feelings and public scrutiny, she argues for the possibility of private individual's self-interestedness and universal benevolence in matters of public concern. There is indeed an optimism lying in *Letters Written in France* about the future of an enlightened republic and women engaging in a public endeavour such as writers or political thinkers. An examination of *Letters Written in France* shows a consistent employment of the letter's connotations of transparency and directness on the one hand, and its intentionality and duplicity on the other. The paradox of the letter form, that it is inherently and properly feminine and its disruptive potential, suits Williams's purpose well. Against the belief that the letter is closely identified with the private, I argue that in *Letters Written in France* Williams expands beyond its prescribed private sector. In this work, the letter is more than an agent to disseminate and exchange knowledge; more strikingly, it provides a generic arena for Williams to contest women's public endeavour and to experiment the thematic material of politics and historiography.

The roles of women during war and the extent to which they were engaged in the forging of national identity were topics of intense debate. What was the influence of these transformations on women living and witnessing the tremendous political and social changes? What was their reaction trying to tell us about women's position within the structure of nations, especially during the transnational conflicts? I believe the discussions have helped us make sense of the link between nationalism, cosmopolitanism, universal benevolence, and women's place in the public world. Williams encourages women to see themselves as "citizens of the world," a new subject position that allows them to claim a space in a wider patriotism and exercise universal benevolence in an age of war, despite their own restrained identity confined by conventional gendered representations. *Letters Written in France*, thus,

functioned as a site to enable readers to imagine the re-writing of nationalist identity and true patriotic spirits, and also to forge a more cosmopolitan identity beyond nationalist boundaries. Women, as Vivien Jones argues, became “simply objects against which national maturity or corruption can be measured” in the 1790s, and hence “the female citizen or enlightened feminine subject remains a structural impossibility” (1993: 301). However, this study shows that Helen Maria Williams is one such woman who defies such account. In her introduction to *Poems on Various Subjects*, Williams confidently declares: “I have there been treading on the territory of History, and a trace of my footsteps will perhaps be left. My narratives make a part of that marvellous story which the eighteenth century has to record to future times, and the testimony of a witness will be heard” (1823: x). While Williams’s accounts and observations of the Revolution may have been partial or even inaccurate, *Letters from France* represents a tireless endeavour to contribute to political debates at the time, and signals a woman writer’s timely intervention in the discussions of the concept of universal benevolence in the Revolutionary era. A consideration of more diversified lines of inquiry in works by women writers in this period will allow us not only to showcase and celebrate their artistic achievement, but also to facilitate a reimagining of literary history.

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一個「英國女性的私人劇場」： 海倫·瑪麗亞·威廉絲與新女性公民

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摘 要

海倫·瑪麗亞·威廉絲的書寫跨越了數個類別和領域，威廉絲於 1790 至 1796 年間陸續出版，終集結成全八冊的《來自法國的書信》即為一例。本文欲探討於 1790 年問世之第一冊《寫於法國的信》，試圖跳出過往學界閱讀此文本的視角，將其脈絡化並置放於書信體敘事和政治論述之傳統，以釐清十八世紀晚期有關女性書寫、國家認同、世界主義間的思想脈絡與爭議。筆者希望藉此重新審視十八世紀末期女性書寫中蘊含的啟蒙思想和意涵，除此之外，也透過探討女性文學中普世仁愛、多元世界觀的可能性，使新女性公民的身分得到開展。

關鍵詞：海倫·瑪麗亞·威廉絲、國家認同、普世仁愛、世界主義、女性公民