Sheffield Hallam University

Like Nobody Else: Women and Independence in the Novels of Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft

KRAMER, Kaley <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0394-1554>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

https://shura.shu.ac.uk/29601/

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

KRAMER, Kaley (2023). Like Nobody Else: Women and Independence in the Novels of Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft. In: CARROLL, Rachel and TOLAN, Fiona, (eds.) The Routledge Companion to Literature and Feminism. Routledge Literature Companions . London, Routledge, 29-41. [Book Section]

Copyright and re-use policy

See http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html

Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive
http://shura.shu.ac.uk

Like Nobody Else: women and independence in the novels of Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft

Kaley Kramer

One of the most frequently quoted remarks from Mary Wollstonecraft's blazing and foundational *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is her assertion that she does 'not wish [for women] to have power over men, but over themselves' (1995: 138). As with many such quotations from her complex exploration of British middle-class women's experience at the end of the eighteenth century, extracting it from the text silences the critical dialectics that inform all of Wollstonecraft's work. In this specific case, she is responding to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's insistence that educating women 'like men' would be detrimental to women as 'the more they resemble our sex the less power they will have over us' (quoted in *Vindication* 1995: 138). As Martina Reuter argues, Rousseau is not simply a flourish in the *Vindication*; her criticism of his writing, particularly *Emile, Or Treatise on Education* (1762) is 'an essential component of [her] feminist argument' (2014: 925). It is against his gendered concept of freedom and independence that Wollstonecraft articulates her radical vision of equality and rights. Wollstonecraft's desire for women to have power over themselves is inextricable from – and indeed is in many ways a reiteration of – her understanding of freedom as a 'capacity to act in one's own name without requiring permission or the goodwill of others' (Coffee 2014: 910). This power, for Wollstonecraft, both emerges from and guarantees individual freedom and that independence that is the 'basis of every virtue' (Wollstonecraft 1995: 67). Crucially, for Wollstonecraft, independence is not incompatible with the mutual reliance that exists between individuals for social and community life. Thus, while Rousseau insists rather on self-sufficiency as the condition for liberty, Wollstonecraft's independent and free woman participates in relationships governed by equality (the foundation of civil independence) and virtue (the foundation of independence of mind) (Reuter 2014: 926; Coffee 2014: 913). Having power over themselves enables women to *choose* how they will participate in civil society while remaining free of arbitrary control.

Wollstonecraft's equality, which produces civil independence, requires community, a condition evident in Wollstonecraft's metaphor for equality: friendship between equals based on sympathy, mutual respect, and common ambitions, 'not a stand-off between equally powerful but hostile or mutually indifferent agents' (Halldenius 2007: 94). Yet, there is in Rousseau's determined self-sufficiency an

attractive rejection of any external control and an absolute justification for individual desire. In *Confessions* (1782), Rousseau sets out his project by insisting on his divinely-granted uniqueness: 'I am not made like any that I have seen; I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist. If I am not more deserving, at least I am different' (2008: 5). This extreme assertion of individuality finds odd echoes in the fictional work of both Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Smith, both of whom explore through fiction the restrictive and ultimately damaging conditions of women's lives. Drawing on Wollstonecraft's first novels, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) and Charlotte Smith's first two novels, *Emmeline, Or The Orphan of the Castle* (1788) and *Ethelinde, or, The Recluse of the Lake* (1789), this chapter argues that women's independence was most radically tested in fiction through women's attempts to assert their autonomy. In these novels, the eponymous protagonists demonstrate through a variety of circumstances that, on one hand, women are expected to demonstrate independent reason in making decisions while, on the other hand, they are also required to sacrifice independence to social expectations of polite femininity. Most often, these issues coalesce around marriage, the institution that dominated women's lives and enacted exactly this paradox: in entering marriage, women had to freely accept a condition that erased their individuality. '*Coverture*', as William Blackstone explains in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, refers to the 'union of person in husband and wife':

> By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs every thing…her condition during her marriage is called her *coverture*. (Blackstone 1765-9: 443)

The apparent equivalence of 'being *or* legal existence' is telling: without legal existence, women's actual being in the world could be called into question. While more explicitly Gothic authors foreground this legal fiction (Sophia Lee's *The Recess* is an excellent example), writers like Smith and Wollstonecraft nonetheless negotiate the same contortions expected of women by legal and cultural discourses. Indicting the conventions of genre as well as cultural discourses of gender and sensibility, Wollstonecraft and Smith's novels sketch the need for the kind of revolution in female manners that the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* demands.

Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is titled in the singular (the rights of *woman* unlike her previous justification for the rights of *men*), and 'woman' throughout allows her to address a wide readership while

simultaneously creating a specific kind of 'woman' whose rights she seeks to vindicate. The introduction sets out this creature more specifically: 'I pay particular attention to those in the middle class, because they appear to be in the most natural state' (Wollstonecraft 1995: 76). 'Woman' is thus simultaneously all *women* and a discrete group: it does not include 'ladies', for example, or those already spoiled by sensibility and false education. It is part of Wollstonecraft's utopian project that the 'Woman' of the title emerges by the end of her treatise as the promise of what will come when the rights she has outlined are vindicated more widely: Rousseau, she claims, 'exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally; a crowd of authors that all *is* now right: and I, that all will be right' (1995: 82, italics in original). Wollstonecraft's independent woman is the future, fit not for the current state of civilization but for a post-revolutionary culture of equality. Rousseau's individual, on the other hand, was more at hand, not least for Rousseau himself in his *Confessions* (1782). The opening gambit of Rousseau's daring autobiography establishes the author as the product of experience, rational self-reflection, and independence. Rather than a model for emulation, Rousseau introduces himself as '[m]yself alone. As to whether nature did well or ill to break the mould in which I was cast, that is something no one can judge until after they have read me' (Rousseau 2008: 5). This solitary and unique individual introduces the autobiography, which will detail its formation, and it is also the object of inquiry. Thus, Rousseau's individual is antecedent to social interaction as much as it is shaped by and through such interactions. Where the desires of the individual differ from those of society, Rousseau's individual remains free to choose. Though consequences may attend individual action, his *Confessions* establishes the individual as a 'unique subject who can only be understood on his terms' (Herbold 1999: 334). *Confessions* thus provides a model of independence based on an innate individuality through which desires can be articulated and against which there is very little recourse.

Claiming the kind of independence that Wollstonecraft called the 'grand blessing of life' (1995: 67) and which Rousseau takes for granted presented considerable challenges for women throughout the eighteenth century. Wollstonecraft opens the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* with a dedication to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, formerly the Bishop of Autun and a revolutionary whom she saw as an ally in the early 1790s, in which she sets out her valuation of independence by asserting that she would 'secure' it 'by contracting my wants, though I were to live on a barren heath' (1995: 67). This dramatic gesture captures – perhaps unintentionally – the extent to which independence demanded extreme

sacrifice from women and points precisely to one of the central problems for women's independence: that it threatens women with social and cultural isolation. Legally non-persons in most respects, women lacked legal autonomy, political representation, or the franchise and could only exercise limited control in public and semi-public spaces. Female individuality was most often detectable through exceptionality or infamy. A woman could stand outside of 'women' and become a notable or worthy *woman,* or she could be notorious for the wrong reasons. Anthologies of 'women worthies', such as *Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752) and *The Female Worthies* (1766), provided lists of exceptional models of femininity; *The Newgate Calendar* (appearing from the mid-century onwards) offered tantalising details of infamous women. In either case, such individuality entailed an independence that manifested itself in separation from community, rather than emerging from self-determination that might enable or enhance inclusion. As Bonnie Latimer notes, both John Locke and Mary Astell conceive of an individual that '*potentially* stands in relation to others, but *necessarily* enjoys a relation to God and to itself' (italics in original, Latimer 2013: 11). The sheer amount of conduct literature that agonises over women's responsibility for ensuring that polite society was enticing to men suggests that the choice remained *for men* who could, at least philosophically, *choose* to reject society. Men's disinterested participation in political and civil life as an effect of their independence, finds expression by the end of the century in the ideal citizen, a figure epitomising the importance of the individual as part of the community. But the independent man also had options: the Romantic-period wanderer held out the promise of a splendid and admirable self-imposed isolation. The figure of the independent woman, however, remained vexed. As Kathleen Wilson notes, sensibility, politeness, and even conjectural histories such as William Alexander's *A History of Women* (1779), centred women as the 'key to refinement, elevation, polish, and support of their men' (2003: 23). Yet, these discourses depended on connecting women's virtue with 'subjugation and passivity', a 'false morality' against which Wollstonecraft rails and which Smith subtly exposes (Halldenius 2007: 78).

Sensibility – for both men and women – sat uneasily alongside the Lockean concept of the fundamentally rational individual. Since the mid-century, sensibility had provided specific configurations of socially and morally valued behaviour for women. This 'guidance' appeared in literature, conduct books, and periodicals from a bewildering range of sources, most famously, Samuel Richardson, whose 1740 novel, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* established many of the key tenets of sensibility. Rather than

prescribe, sensibility – particularly in fictional texts – seemed to *describe* and promote behaviour through characters offered to readers as models for emulation or appropriate criticism. Sensibility celebrated a refined capacity for feeling exhibited through autonomic physical responses to external stimuli. This seemed initially to value the individual and their pre-rational, intuitive, and *feeling* reactions to the world. Quickly, however, this feeling individual was codified into a set of expectations associated firmly with gender (women), class (middle class), and race (white). Women's ability to claim individuality based on their emotional responses was curtailed: their sensibility would be recognized through predictable, repeated actions and behaviours. Moreover, women's awareness of their own sensibility threatened to destabilise its sincerity: their natural and highly valued connection to feeling came at the expense of reason. If the individual was understood as a 'continuous, indivisible, conscious self who participates in society by means of rational thought and the ability to give consent to this engagement', the woman of sensibility faced nearly insurmountable challenges to claiming such a status (Latimer 2013: 11). Masculine reason could and did explain, illustrate, and pathologize feminine feeling; female reason, on the other hand, was suspect. Critical awareness of their own 'natural' and emotional responses in a woman implied that sensibility, even if it was a natural and innate set of responses, could also be manipulated and performed to further self-interest, rather than disinterested moral virtue. Where women could be suspected of consciously working to satisfy their own desires, development, or gain, they were often represented as cunning rather than rational. Henry Fielding's *An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews* appeared in 1741, less than a year after Richardson's *Pamela*. Fielding's work reinterprets Richardson's new model of feminine virtue as a threat to private and public morality by making her consciously perform her 'instinctively' moral responses in a calculated attempt at social mobility. Crucially, her affected performance of sensibility is indistinguishable from Pamela's sincere responses to the male target, her wealthy master, Mr B---. The rapidity of Fielding's response to Richardson's novel indicates the extent to which the suspicion of sensibility emerged nearly in tandem with its cultural rise.

Writing at the end of the century, both Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft inherited a discourse at once culturally pervasive and riven with contradictions. These novels explore the challenges women faced in articulating and asserting their independence, whether financial, philosophical, or social. Despite her claim in the *Vindication* that a 'crowd of writers' insists that 'all *is* now right', Wollstonecraft

writes out of a sharp and clear understanding of the *wrongness* of women's circumstances in her present time period (1995: 82, italics in original). For both, sensibility remained a troubling discourse: on one hand, it offered women moral power and authority, but on the other hand, it demanded women's almost total surrender of rational thought. Wollstonecraft's first novel, *Mary, a Fiction* (1788) promised a new kind of heroine: 'neither a Clarissa, a Lady G---, nor a Sophie' (1998: xxxi). The daughter of the 'tyrannical and passionate' Edward and his 'mere nothing' of a wife, Eliza, the eponymous Mary demonstrates from childhood a propensity for 'sublime ideas' and philosophical speculation (1998: 5, 3). Her 'sensibility' – a 'quickness of sensation; quickness of perception' as Wollstonecraft would limit the concept to in *Vindication*, following Samuel Johnson's mid-century definition – is distinct from her rational faculties and leads her to a dangerous enjoyment of 'tales of woe' through which she salves the 'exquisite pain' of her parents' neglect (1998: 6). Married hastily to 'quash' a litigation affecting her father's estate, Mary's persistent efforts to assert her independence inform the novel's trajectory. Unlike Smith's heroines, however, Mary never verbalises her independence in the novel. Wollstonecraft's style focalises so intensely through the eponymous character that her independence is unquestioned: as she would later write of her approach in the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft employs her efforts in her novel on 'things, not words!' (1995: 77). Mary exercises what independence she can as a married woman to alleviate the poverty of those in her immediate community, including her dear friend, Ann. The narrative keeps her husband firmly in the background, but crucially, his permission is sought and received for Mary's decisions. Despite following Mary's independent travels and her individual development, the novel concludes with her husband's return and a promise exhorted from Mary to live with him for one year—during which, the narrator records, she can bear neither his physical touch nor his protestations of love, longing only for a world '*where there is neither marrying*, nor giving in marriage' (1998: 68, italics in original).

The extended exploration of independence under *coverture* sets Wollstonecraft's novel apart from Smith's, in which the heroines must struggle to assert their autonomy *before* marriage. For both, marriage provided the crucible in which women's independence could be tested. Marriage, after all, required that women freely declare their consent to having their 'very being or legal existence…suspended' and subsumed under their husband's (Blackstone 1764-9: vol. 1, 431). Socially, marriage could offer women some, strictly limited, personal freedom. Married women, as Wollstonecraft's Mary illustrates, could enjoy

greater mobility and less scrutiny of their public appearances in terms of their virtue; they could act as chaperones rather than requiring a chaperone themselves. They were, however, also wholly subject to the protection and ultimately the whims of their husband, which is the crashing conclusion of Wollstonecraft's *Mary* and a theme that Smith explores in *Ethelinde*. Given the centrality of marriage to women's lives and expectations, it provided the key issue for questions of women's education, public and civic roles, and their independence. Marriage was *the* analogy for oppression for Wollstonecraft, who saw it as 'legal prostitution' and a form of slavery (1995: 239, 248). Smith's novels hold out the hope that sensibility offered of promoting companionate marriages and the greater cultural and moral good (if in appearance alone) of allowing women to choose their future husband. Smith's first two heroines represent very different familial and financial positions: Emmeline is an orphan, the rightful but displaced heir to a grand fortune; Ethelinde is the youngest child of a once wealthy and now destitute family. Both are the daughters of love-marriages and without, it is implied, due regard for the financial ramifications of disappointing family expectations. Unlike Mary, Smith's heroines must assert their independence without the fortune that Mary both takes for granted and bewails. Their insistence on independence thus develops a less explicit but no less considered exploration of the importance of women's fully informed and independent consent to the foundational institution of social and civil stability.

In *Emmeline, or, The Orphan of the Castle* (1788), Smith's first novel, words are very much the thing. From the beginning, Emmeline is caught between obligation and her own independent desires. The novel breaks with generic conventions in allowing Emmeline to marry not the first, but the second suitor to whom she is engaged. Loraine Fletcher considers Emmeline as embodying 'a fantasy…that a young woman can win devoted love and overcome all difficulties by her personal qualities alone, without the help of family or dowry' (2003: 15). While Emmeline 'wins', however, the novel is not without significant challenges to generic expectations or gender discourse. Twice in the novel Emmeline must emphatically assert her right to independence – both times regarding marriage. Though she manages, as Ethelinde and Mary do not, to find 'a mid-way point between sense and sensibility' (Fletcher 2003: 15), the text nonetheless signals, like Mary, the ways in which sensibility fails to provide language with which to articulate women's independence. *Ethelinde, or, The Recluse of the Lake* (1789) is Smith's second novel and the least well-known in terms of critical scholarship. At five volumes, it is Smith's longest novel; it is also

her most ambitious in many ways. *Ethelinde* offers a scathing critique of male behaviour and the impossible expectations that sensibility placed on women. Its geographical scope is broader than in *Emmeline*, locating characters and circumstances in Imperial machinations in the East and West Indies. It is also far less concerned, as *Emmeline* is, with family history. Property remains a central concern, but the narrative is more interested in the proper performance of ownership vis-à-vis family duty than with consolidating or ensuring the inheritance of a specific contested property. It is also remarkable for the strength of insistence that the eponymous protagonist brings to her declarations of independence. Unlike Emmeline, who must play on models of sensibility and sentimental duty and whose independence stems from her family connections and social position, Ethelinde's claims are founded on her belief that she is 'like no body else' (Smith 1789: vol. 1, 193).

In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong asserts that '[t]he modern individual was first and foremost a woman' (1990: 16). Armstrong's argument foregrounds the importance of cultural authority, positioning the 'new female self' as the product of the rise of the novel and the growth of the middle class in England throughout the eighteenth century. Armstrong's concept of the individual emerges from discourses that rely on fictionality, from Rousseau's creation of an individual who 'exists prior to the formation of any group', to David Hume's recognition that the 'power of consent derives from the fiction of an original contract [between a government and its people] and not from the fact of its enactment', and to Jeremy Bentham's claim that people understand physical life 'in term of fictions of right, obligation, truth, or justice' (Armstrong 1990: 39, 42). Bonnie Latimer points out that while individuality might have opened to women in the eighteenth century, the criteria that underpinned the 'individual' were 'normatively masculine' (2013: 12). The 'debilitating cultural association of femininity with dependence', combined with a traditional conception of women as lacking self-awareness, produced a common trope of the woman as blank (McCormack 2005: 4). Throughout the century, male writers accused women of lacking individual characters, from Pope's couplet in 'An Epistle to a Lady' that there was 'Nothing so true as what you once let fall/ "Most women have no Characters at all" (ll. 1-2) to Tristram Shandy's insistence that while the male Shandys are of 'an original character throughout', 'the females had no character at all' (Sterne 1980: 47). Women were a *type* rather than individuals, an assumption that sensibility continued to reinforce through its insistence on specific, socially recognized physical and

emotional responses. Where the law required women's independent action, it relied on the convenient fiction that an individual could be conjured up by legal necessity and as quickly exorcised. Women's *independence* in consenting to marriage underscored her essential *dependence*: as Smith and Wollstonecraft's novels demonstrate, women's options could be very narrowly restricted. The modern individual as a woman was beleaguered rather than empowered.

For both writers, legal fictions (in particular, a woman's 'suspended' identity during marriage) create conditions in which only other fictions can intervene. Wollstonecraft's 'Advertisement' for *Mary, A Fiction* explicitly rejects previous fictional models for her attempt to 'develop a character different from those generally portrayed' (1998: xxxi). What Mary *is* is left to the unfolding of the narrative, but Wollstonecraft emphatically refuses 'type' and begins from a negative space in which her new kind of heroine can rise and take form. The argument in the 'Advertisement' emphasises the empowering and emancipatory space of fiction and the importance of independent reasoning:

> In an artless tale, without episodes, the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers is displayed. The female organs have been thought too weak for this arduous employment; and experience seems to justify this assertion. Without arguing physically about possibilities—*in a fiction, such a being may be allowed to exist*; whose grandeur is derived from the operations of its own faculties, not subjugated to opinion; but *drawn by the individual from the original source*. (Wollstonecraft 1998: xxxi; my emphasis)

Wollstonecraft's new kind of character is self-aware, autonomous, and, crucially, 'not subjugated to opinion'. Thus, she is equally entitled to 'freedom', which, for Wollstonecraft meant the absence of arbitrary power (Coffee 2014: 908). Fiction seems, initially, to provide Wollstonecraft with the potential space in which an independent, thinking woman can exist. Whether such a being can thrive, however, is less certain. Legal fictions – particularly those that underpin *coverture* – present even Wollstonecraft's fiction with significant barriers. In her later work, *The Wrongs of Woman*, the protagonist laments that 'Marriage had Bastilled me for life!' (Wollstonecraft 1998: 154-155). Incarcerated in an asylum, Maria provides a conclusion to Wollstonecraft's earlier experiments with genre and her belief that fiction could provide a space for 'possibilities'. Mary (in 1788) longs for a world without marriage; Maria (by 1797/8) experiences marriage as a death: 'when I reflected that I was bound to live with [Mr Venables] forever – my heart died within me; my desire of improvement became languid, and baleful, corroding melancholy took possession of my soul' (Wollstonecraft 1998: 154). Smith's more expansive engagement with genre produces little more hope for women either within fiction or without. Marriage, as a potent and

omnipresent indicator of women's lack of secure and fundamental autonomy, is a condition that fiction cannot escape. Even in Smith's more expansive negotiations with genre, her protagonists can ameliorate the affects of *coverture* only superficially by focusing on a relationship based on romantic love that is also supported by appropriate and deserved wealth. Emmeline and Ethelinde may reach a happier conclusion, but they are no less subject to legal erasure.

Early on in *Mary, A Fiction*, Wollstonecraft establishes threats to her protagonist's independence in her cruel father and dissolute husband, representatives of the arbitrary powers oppressing women whose origins may be in legal fictions but whose effects are decidedly real. The former 'always exclaimed against female acquirements' and is pleased by his 'wife's indolence and ill-health' which keep her world narrowly circumscribed (Wollstonecraft 1998: 5). Her husband – 'the man she had promised to obey' – leaves for the continent immediately after their hasty wedding and prolongs his absence by extending his stay, not, Mary despairs, 'to cultivate his taste…but to join in the masquerades, and such burlesque amusements' (19, 58). Whether physically too close or too distant, fathers and husbands present an insurmountable existential threat to Mary's independence. Her mother, Eliza, on the other hand, while occupying considerably more of the text's opening chapters, serves to strengthen Mary's independence, rather than threaten it. Indeed, Mary's independence and her strength of character derive early on from her *rejection* of Eliza's example. Rather than being 'taught by the example of [her] mother', Mary thrives through her neglect (Wollstonecraft 1995: 87). It is an 'old house-keeper' who teaches her to read, after which the little girl is 'left to the operations of her own mind…and learned to think' (Wollstonecraft 1998: 4). Solitude, for Mary, provides the foundation for her individual character and her independence, which grows from childish addresses to 'angels' that she heard 'sometimes visit[ ] this earth' into '[s]ublime ideas' that burst forth in 'extemporary effusions of gratitude, and rhapsodies of praise' (Wollstonecraft 1998: 4, 5). She later uses her independence to provide succour to the local village, impoverished through the mismanagement and greed of landowners like her father, and specifically to aid Ann's family. The community she establishes with Ann and later with Henry while travelling provide a crucial model for a sustainable network of support for her independent desires. In this temporary and ultimately doomed connection, Mary demonstrates Wollstonecraft's developing consideration of independence and citizenship – namely, that 'it is not possible to fully enjoy liberty whilst also oppressing

an other or others' (Hague 2019: 814). In this, Mary finds the surest support for her independence in friendship based in equality and mutual respect – a potential she makes available, importantly, for both men and women.

Smith's protagonists face rather different threats: in both *Emmeline* and *Ethelinde*, fathers are less notable for their absence than for the ineffectual protection they offer their daughters. Emmeline's father is dead, and her uncle believes her to be a 'natural' (that is, illegitimate) child, entitled to nothing and reliant on sentimental familial charity. Ethelinde's father, Colonel Chesterville, may be a caring and sympathetic figure, but he is ultimately unable to protect or advance (and indeed actively damages) his daughter's expectations and future. Both heroines navigate a social world that superficially celebrates ideologies that seem to champion women's independence while ensuring that they remain fundamentally subjugated. Ethelinde, in particular, finds herself menaced by well-meaning, ostensibly harmless men who weaponize sensibility against women. Sir Edward Newenden, her cousin's husband, is the unlikely trap in a novel otherwise populated with dissolute and obviously dangerous men. Lord Danesforte, a neighbouring nobleman of immediately questionable morals, and Davenant, 'a young man not yet of age [...] distantly related to Sir Edward and also his ward' (Smith 1789: vol. 1, 3), both dance attendance on Ethelinde for their own dissolute purposes, providing a more obvious danger for Ethelinde's innocence and reputation. Sir Edward's apparent sensibility and moral rectitude, as well as his public status as the husband of Ethelinde's cousin and her *de facto* guardian, preserves him from initial suspicion. As Joseph Morrissey notes, however, in his treatment of both Ethelinde and his wife, Sir Edward is 'repeatedly shown as capable of harming women under his protection' (2019: 354). Unlike many of Smith's other dangerous male characters, and unlike Wollstonecraft's explicitly tyrannical characters, Sir Edward believes he is helping the protagonist. His unwillingness to admit his complicity in her oppression makes him the greatest threat to her independence. His apparent support of Ethelinde is predicated on her dependence and very nearly destroys her peace as well as his family's. Sir Edward spends his wife's family's money on Ethelinde while allowing his secret affection for his ward to grow to the point that, when he considers her married and 'irrevocably another's', he 'fancied he could rather bear to destroy her, and then himself' (Smith 1789: 2:241-2). Lord Danesforte, whose sexually predatory behaviour later

tempts Lady Newenden from her family and into disrepute, ironically offers more respect to Ethelinde's refusal than does Sir Edward.

While Wollstonecraft's Mary seeks to discover a place where 'a thinking woman' can exist, such a utopia for women is ultimately not even to be found in fiction. It is certainly not found in England, where 'the laws … afford [women] no protection or redress', nor even a secure or reliable identity (Wollstonecraft 1998: 159). Barbara Taylor argues evocatively for Wollstonecraft's repeated demands for, and exploration of the conditions inhibiting, 'the primary demand…for a self-identity that is psychically and culturally viable' (2003: 128). Such an identity is beyond Wollstonecraft's heroines but closer in some ways for Smith's Emmeline and Ethelinde. While Wollstonecraft indicts the entire institution of marriage, Smith is less broadly condemning, representing marriage as a situation that women can navigate to their advantage. Her heroines have multiple examples of women to emulate or reject, and in both cases, find a mutually supportive and sympathetic older female friend who provides emotional support and practical advice. Mrs Stafford provides this for Emmeline; Mrs Montgomery does so for Ethelinde. These examples of female companionship are far more sustainable than, for example, Mary's relationship with Ann, which, while it 'softened' Mary's manners and provides some emotional stability, flounders due to their radically different material circumstances. Independence, Wollstonecraft recognizes later in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and in *The Wrongs of Woman* has a material aspect, particularly where it is understood as part of the foundation of republican citizenship. There is a careful balance to be struck, nonetheless, as too much material wealth leads to the indulgences of the upper classes: a woman's independence depends on her being 'raised sufficiently above abject poverty not to be obliged to weight the consequence of every farthing [spent], and having sufficient to prevent their attending to a frigid system of economy which narrows both heart and mind' (Wollstonecraft 1995: 233). The ability to ignore economy distinguishes Smith's heroines, who, even while struggling with financial ruin, as Ethelinde does, are never reduced to the extremes from which Ann must be delivered.

This freedom from economy, however, might be what enables Smith's heroines to make clearer verbal attempts to assert their independence. Emmeline's first articulation of self-determined identity occurs while she resides at Mowbray Castle and is a direct interference in patriarchal control over her body and choices. Following the deaths of the housekeeper and steward, family domestics who cared for

both Emmeline's father and Emmeline, Smith's protagonist realises that she 'belongs to nobody; [has] no right to claim the protection of anyone; [and] no power to procure for herself the necessities of life' (Smith 2003: 49). Furthermore, she understands her vulnerability as an unprotected young woman, alone in the castle with the predatory Mr Maloney, Lord Montreville's ill-considered replacement for Emmeline's devoted steward and stand-in 'father'. When Montreville's son, Delamere, announces his intention to reside at Mowbray Castle, Emmeline's circumstances demand attention. The simplest expedient is to marry her away from Montreville's family – and Mr Maloney provides an easy solution. In addition to legally erasing any connection she might leverage against the estate, such a marriage would also tie her – contractually – to the castle in a wholly different way, effectively limiting her ability to develop her individual identity according to her own rational choices. Montreville's arguments are bolstered by his appeal to feminine propriety: given Delamere's intentions to reside there, Emmeline can only remain as the wife of another man. Her response to Montreville's favourable presentation of Maloney's proposal insists on her rational capacities as a thinking woman: 'suffer me to be a servant; and believe I have a mind, which tho' it will not recoil from any situation where I can earn my bread by honest labour, is infinitely superior to any advantages [Maloney] can offer me!' (Smith 2003: 66). Refusing to be married for her own protection, Emmeline insists on her right to self-determination, even if it means, as Wollstonecraft's Maria would claim in *The Wrongs of Woman*, being 'classed [with] the lowest' as long as she remains 'mistress of [her] own actions' (Wollstonecraft 1998: 141). Women's inability to direct their own actions or external perception of those actions is evident in Montreville's insistence that she has 'undoubtedly encouraged' Maloney to propose marriage, and that her 'extraordinary emotion' stems from either 'artifice or coquetry' (Smith 2003: 66). Emmeline's final pronouncement, in response to Montreville's bewildered inquiry over what he should tell Maloney, comes closer still to self-determination: 'Tell him that you are astonished at his insolence in daring to lift his eyes to *a person bearing the name of Mowbray*; and shocked at his falsehood in presuming to assert that I ever encouraged his impertinent pretensions!' (Smith 2003: 67; emphasis added). Yet it is not Emmeline's reason that sways Montreville: the episode concludes with his *appropriate* response to her emotional state – she is reduced, in his perspective, to an image of virtue-in-distress: 'The violent and artless sorrow of a beautiful young

woman, whose fate *appeared* to be in his power, affected him' (Smith 2003: 67; emphasis added). A woman 'with thinking powers' was not quite yet the suitable individual for a novel.

Emmeline's next declaration of individuality is much stronger and emerges from her growing confidence in dealing critically with social norms and adjusting to the dictates of her own prudence. Montreville's attempts to quickly marry her away from the family are matched, however, by the determination that his son, Delamere, shows in his desire to bring her into the family by marriage, against Montreville's explicit commands. Their early engagement, contracted secretly and awaiting the consent of Lord and Lady Montreville, dominates the bulk of the narrative, and it is through negotiating her changing responses to this contracted marriage that Emmeline develops as an individual. Having been doubted and insulted by Delamere, Emmeline refuses to re-acknowledge their secret engagement, which he had dissolved and which she no longer wants. 'Content to engage' herself to be Delamere's wife at one point because 'such an engagement would make [*him*] happy', she cannot make the same promise knowing that it will not make *her* happy (Smith 2003: 381-3). The length of this exchange, in which Delamere insists that she conform to a fixity of intention that he has not demonstrated, offers an illustrative example of the difficulty with which women could articulate their individual desires. Emmeline's attempt to reassure Delamere of her rational decision ends with her self-exile from any future marriage; to convince Delamere of her sincerity, she must reject not only his reassertion of their engagement, but 'disclaim all intention of marriage whatever' (Smith 2003: 383).

Emmeline's two declarations of individual preference are based on very different foundations. In the first, her insistence that she would rather 'earn her bread by honest labour' on one hand suggests the extents to which she will go to preserve her autonomy. That it fails to move Montreville can also be ascribed to the romantic naivety of such a claim. In *Ethelinde*, a similar bold declaration is made by Ethelinde's lover, Montgomery, and dismissed more firmly and quickly by Newenden, who demands what labour Montgomery imagines he would undertake that would support a family (Smith 1789: vol. 4, 239). Emmeline's assumption that she has the skills or constitution to labour as a servant betrays her limited experience, as well as the unquestionable class bias that permeates Smith's – and Wollstonecraft's – understanding of the parameters of an 'individual'. For both writers, if gender could be challenged, class, with its very different considerations of economic dependence and limited self-determination,

remained relatively stable. Emmeline's second assertion of individuality, however, draws on reason and exhibits her superior self-management and recognition of herself as a conscious and rational agent, able to give and withhold consent about her inclusion in contracts and communities.

Smith's next novel, *Ethelinde; or, The Recluse of the Lake* (1789) contains a more forceful attempt to work through women's individuality inside of patriarchal narratives and social roles. Her independence is not necessarily a positive goal, but a state she is forced into through her difference from the social circle in which she finds herself. The novel is unique for several reasons: Ethelinde is not a conventionally orphaned heroine, neither is she an heiress. Like Emmeline's father, Ethelinde's father, the younger brother of the family, marries for love rather than money, thereby disinheriting himself and his children from his family's considerable wealth, which is inherited entirely by his brother, Lord Hawkhurst. Furthermore, in many ways, the plot does not trace the re-establishment of a family to its historical status and property; instead, it follows Ethelinde's development as an autonomous, if not financially independent, woman. Neither is Ethelinde a 'new kind of heroine', demonstrating many of the same character traits and narrative difficulties as other heroines of sensibility. More than Smith's previous heroine and like Wollstonecraft's Mary and Maria, Ethelinde makes explicit the connection between suffering and sensibility. Yet, despite Ethelinde's unquestionable merit as a sentimental heroine, she is not rewarded with a vastly improved social or financial position through a marriage that unites love and money. Her assertion of independence is not connected to actions that emphasise her resolution. Ethelinde is far less legally and financially independent than Wollstonecraft's heroine, Mary. The daughter of a dissolute gambler, Ethelinde lives on the financial generosity of her cousin's family – in many ways, her narrative is closer to Ann's (in *Mary, A Fiction*). Ethelinde lives by the continued favour of wealthier friends and extended family. She does however, make the strongest claim to independence of any female character: asked to defend her preference for solitude, Ethelinde replies that it is 'For no other reason in the world, but because I am like nobody else' (Smith 1789: 1: 193).

This remarkable declaration both echoes Rousseau's claim in his *Confessions* that 'I was not made like any that exist' (2008: 5) and claims such independence for a young woman. It is also the opening of a discussion that requires Ethelinde, like Emmeline, to assert and then defend her right to reject a proposal of marriage. In a series of questionable revelations, Sir Edward Newenden informs Ethelinde that her

beloved father, while being 'quite well' requires her to return to London; then, that Davenant has desired Sir Edward to 'offer…his heart and fortune' (Smith 1789: 1.194-196). Despite Ethelinde's firm assurance that 'no considerations shall influence me to unite myself to Mr Davenant', Sir Edward carries out his commission only as far as telling Davenant that 'she seems…averse to any proposals of marriage' (Smith 1789: 1.202). Morrissey claims that Ethelinde consistently positions Sir Edward between herself and Davenant with regards to his proposal, despite saying that she would speak to Davenant herself if he requested it. While he acknowledges that 'talking to Davenant herself could expose [Ethelinde] to gossip, charges of coquetry, or be construed by Davenant as encouragement', Morrissey considers Ethelinde as 'petulant', arguing that her 'tirade of speech gestures towards excess rather than delicacy, denoting spontaneous wilfulness and exasperation at the thought of not getting her own way' (2019: 346). Given the stakes of marriage for women, particularly a young, unpropertied woman without sufficient paternal protection or independent wealth, this representation of Ethelinde seems contrary to what Morrissey's argument later acknowledges as Smith's 'deep resentment about patriarchy and what indigent women must do to survive' (Morrissey 2019: 356-7). Indeed, while Wollstonecraft's Mary finds herself creating more fictions – a place '*where there is neither marrying*, nor giving in marriage' – Ethelinde finds herself pushed to a real geographical margin. Her early insistence that she is 'like no body else' is given material dimensions in the novel by her eventual self-exile to the banks of Grasmere lake, where she shares a cottage with Mrs Montgomery, believing her beloved Montgomery to have died overseas. As a character 'type', of course, Ethelinde is part of Smith's critique of genre and thus, her belief in her own individuality an ironic comment on the conventions of fictional heroines; yet the comment can also be read as a sincere declaration of personal subjectivity and a resistance of social conventions regulating female identity. Smith concludes the narrative with an idealised vision of middle-class domesticity supported by moderate wealth – a tenuous and ultimately unstable narrative conclusion for a heroine like no other.

In both Smith and Wollstonecraft, the historical context against which women struggled to articulate individual identity is present throughout genre and structure. The parameters and restrictions that permit certain expressions of individuality while proscribing others emerges stylistically throughout their novels. Wollstonecraft's explanation of her original heroine is couched clearly in generic terms: Mary will be 'neither a Clarissa, nor a Sophie, nor a Lady G---' – naming the heroines-cum-tropes of

Richardson and Rousseau's novels of Sensibility. Yet, despite their unequivocal assertions of individuality, the expectations of genre threaten to overwhelm Smith and Wollstonecraft's protagonists. Joan Forbes notes of Smith's *Emmeline* that the conventional triumph of sentimentalized, middle-class, heterosexual society (contained symbolically in the emotionally restrained, private marriages between the protagonist and her beloved) seem overly pat and artificially truncated (Forbes 1995: 303). *Emmeline*, for example, unfolds over four volumes yet the fate of the eponymous character is decided in the final chapter. Having found her perfect conjugal companion in Godolphin and been freed from her foolish promise never to marry by the death of her unwanted suitor, Delamere, Emmeline attempts to set aside some time for herself. This wish, however, is so incompatible with sentimental convention that Smith must remind the reader (and heroine) of Emmeline's extreme sensibility and her proper desire to 'make [others] happy' before herself:

> [T]ho' she still meant to adhere to her resolution of remaining single until she became of age, the tender importunity of her lover, the pressing entreaties of friends, and her own wishes to make them happy, were…powerfully undermining it…[T]heir increasing solicitations obliged her to consent to shorten the term to three months [and] Godolphin undertook to make it the particular request of Lord Montreville and his daughter, that their marriage should take place within three weeks. (Smith 2003: 474-475)

Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman*, published in its unfinished state, dissolves into a series of possible endings collected by the 'editor' (William Godwin) from Wollstonecraft's notes. Her earlier novel, *Mary,* began with a claim for the potentialities of fiction to provide a space for 'thinking women' but concludes with a utopian dream of independence beyond this world. While for Smith, women's limited independence finds some space within existing discourses of gender and identity, for Wollstonecraft it remains wholly incompatible with existing ideological, political, and social structures.

By the end of the eighteenth century, sensibility was increasingly under attack as a threat to social order, cohesion, and rationality. Although it was largely formulated by British philosophers, scientists, and political thinkers such as David Hume, Adam Smith, Isaac Newton, and John Locke, sensibility had developed a close association with French writers, particularly Rousseau through *La Nouvelle Héloise* (1761) and *Emile, or On Education* (1762). This connection with France was emphasised by critics in Britain as the French Revolution devolved into the Terror throughout the 1790s (Ellis 1996: 190). Smith and Wollstonecraft were both ardent and vocal supporters of the French Revolution; the new French

Constitution of 1791, which 'formally denied political rights' to women, must have been a severe blow (Taylor 2003: 209). Yet the Declaration of the Rights of Man only made public what was implicit in sentimental ideology: women's 'equality' did not grant them the same – or even comparable - independence. Though the French Constitution did not directly affect British women, transnational migration of ideas and representations did influence the 'masculinization' of radical and reactionary British culture. Talleyrand's summation of women's roles in his report on national education eerily echoes Blackstone's assessment of women as the 'favourites' of British law:

> the common happiness, especially that of women, requires that they do not aspire to exercise rights and political functions…Let us teach them the real measure of their duties and rights. They will find, not insubstantial hopes, but real advantages under the empire of liberty; *that the less they participate in the making of the law, the more they will receive from it protection and strength;* and that especially when they renounce all political rights, they will acquire the certainty of seeing their civil rights substantiated and even expanded. (qtd in Taylor, 2003: 210, emphasis added).

Tallyrand's paradoxical insistence that women were most free by rejecting individual rights echoes Sir William Blackstone's earlier insistence that women are 'so great a favourite of the laws of England' that 'even the disabilities, which a wife lies under, are for the most part intended for her protection and benefit' (Blackstone 1765-9: vol. 1, 433). Both contradictory and hugely problematic statements contain the same paradoxes as sensibility: a woman's source of strength is her weakness and only by abdicating her individual identity will she be included in civil society. What fiction provided, nonetheless, was a space for experimentation – a space from which alternatives to subjugation, isolation, and compliance could be put to a wide and interested readership and from which, community could arise.