

## On Wollstonecraft's Legacy as a Travel Writer and Champion of Women's Rights

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### Abstract

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) serves as both a travel narrative and a feminist discourse. In her account of personal travels, Wollstonecraft critiques societal issues stemming from wealth, champions women's rights, and examines the relationship between individuals and society. Through her eloquent and sublime rhetoric, she underscores the importance of personal experiences, particularly in nature, while advocating for women's education and addressing the negative impacts of commercial pursuits. This paper examines how Wollstonecraft's letters reflect her political convictions and weave her personal journey into a broader social commentary. Moreover, it discusses the text as both a travel narrative and a feminist text.

### Keywords

Mary Wollstonecraft, travel narrative, feminist literature, women's rights, societal critique, personal experience, nature, education, commercial interests.

عن إرث ولستونكرافت ككاتبة رحلات ورمز لمناصرة حقوق المرأة

الملخص

يعتبر كتاب رسائل مكتوبة خلال إقامة قصيرة في السويد والنرويج والدنمارك (1796) سردًا سفرًا وخطابًا نسويًا في آن واحد. في سردتها لرحلاتها الشخصية، تنتقد ولستونكرافت القضايا الاجتماعية الناجمة عن الثروة، وتدافع عن حقوق المرأة، وتدرس العلاقة بين الأفراد والمجتمع. من خلال بلاغتها وبلاغتها السامية، تؤكد على أهمية التجارب الشخصية، لا سيما في الطبيعة، بينما تدعو إلى تعليم النساء وتتناول الآثار السلبية للمصالح التجارية. تتناول هذه الورقة كيف تعكس رسائل ولستونكرافت قناعاتها السياسية وتنسج رحلتها الشخصية في إطار تحليلي اجتماعي أوسع. علاوة على ذلك، تناقش النص كسرد سفر ونص نسوي.

Mary Wollstonecraft, a British author, chronicles her personal travels in her 1796 book *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Known for her powerful beliefs, Wollstonecraft uses these letters to criticize crime brought on by wealth, to support her defense of the

French Revolution, and to voice her progressive views on women's rights. Moreover, she delves into the connection between the individual and society using sublime rhetoric. She emphasizes personal experience, especially in relation to nature, advocates for women's education and emancipation, and highlights the harmful effects of commercial interests on society. This paper aims at reading Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* as a travel and feminist narrative.

Wollstonecraft undertook a tour of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark in order to bring back a stolen treasure ship for her lover, the American adventurer Gilbert Imlay. She first met him when she travelled alone to Paris, and became pregnant. Registered as Imlay's 'wife' during the Terror, Wollstonecraft escaped prison, but was left on her own to give birth to their child. Back in London, abandoned by Imlay, Wollstonecraft attempted suicide; Imlay in response suggested she travel to Norway to transact business on his behalf. She did so in June 1795, accompanied by her infant Fanny Imlay and a French maid servant, writing letters to Imlay that reflect her anger and melancholy over his repeated betrayals which became later the basis for her travel book *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Believing that the journey would restore their strained relationship, she keenly set off. However, over the course of the three months she spent in Scandinavia, she realized that Imlay had no intention of renewing the relationship. *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* can be considered as a travel narrative and an autobiographical memoir.

Wollstonecraft chooses to remove her biographical particulars, such as, her passionate and tumultuous connection with Gilbert Imlay from the published letters. She uses vague descriptions of people and events, like "my host" (Wollstonecraft 60) in Letter I or "my affairs" (92) in Letter V, but she makes no explicit mention of these details. Artistic norms or worries about her reputation are the reasons behind her choice. In other words, she does so in order to let the book continue its popularity because the revelation of Wollstonecraft's unorthodox private life might impact the public reception of the book over time. This is exactly what happened after the publication of Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1798, that reveals details about her personal life.

Mary Wollstonecraft states that "[t]he art of travelling is only a branch of the art of thinking" (Wollstonecraft 13) in one of her numerous assessments of travel literature. *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* is a travel narrative written in the epistolary mode. This book narrates the story of Wollstonecraft's 1795 trip throughout Scandinavia, which she took largely with her baby daughter. Ingrid Horrocks does a fantastic job describing this book.

She says,

Passionate and personal, *A Short Residence* is at once a moving epistolary travel narrative, a politically-motivated ethnographic tract, a work of scenic tourism, and a sentimental journey. It is both as much a work of political thought as Wollstonecraft's better known treatises, and a brilliant, innovative, and influential work in the genre. (qtd. In Wollstonecraft 266)

One of the distinctive things about Wollstonecraft that she uses her emotional responses as a kind of litmus test of the nature of the experience. She is very interested in the conditions of the countries she is in, and the relations between those countries and the grand political events of the French Revolution. Wollstonecraft says that "Norwegians enjoy all the blessings of freedom"(87).

Actually, it is not just Norway's political possibilities that inspire her; nature is hugely important. She reacts to the sublime in the wilderness around her with abandon, and a lot of exclamation marks. In

Wollstonecraft's letters, the concept of the Picturesque<sup>1</sup> is used as an analytical framework. One of her most noticeable techniques is to engage a set of thoughts and feelings with a specific natural formation. Nature, Wollstonecraft argues, is "a common reference point" (Poovy88) between readers and herself. Many of the letters contain these "miniature Romantic excursus"(88) which illustrate Wollstonecraft's ideas regarding the connections between nature, God, and the self. The natural world becomes "the necessary ground of speculation and the crucial field of experience"(88). Picturesque in her letters provides a new way of understanding Wollstonecraft's position in-between Enlightenment and Romanticism. Her new way of travel writing profoundly influenced some important Romantic writers and poets, such as William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who draw on her themes and her letters' aesthetic. But unfortunately, she did not live to the next century to infuse the early Romanticism, she anticipated in many ways with her "energetic conscience and feminist" (Boos).

This book was Wollstonecraft's most popular book in the 1790s . It inspired too many readers to travel to Scandinavia. About Sweden, Wollstonecraft says,

Travelling in Sweden is very cheap, and even commodious, if you make but the proper arrangements. Here, as in other parts of the Continent, it is necessary to have your own carriage, and to have a servant who can speak the language, if you are unacquainted with it. (73)

Her letters mention detailed and engaging descriptions of people and places, musings on history, and an insatiable curiosity in the traveler. For example, she mentions the wonderful people's hospitality.

Hospitality has, I think, been too much praised by travelers as a proof of goodness of heart, when, in my opinion, indiscriminate hospitality is rather a criterion by which you may form a tolerable estimate of the indolence or vacancy of a head; or, in other words, a fondness for social pleasures in which the mind not having its proportion of exercise, the bottle must be pushed about. These remarks are equally applicable to Dublin, the most hospitable city I ever passed through. But I will try to confine my observations more particularly to Sweden. (62)

"If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, [*Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*] appears to me to be the book." (Godwin 133). This book was one of Wollstonecraft's most successful books in the 1790s. It sold well and was reviewed favorably by most critics. Mary Favret says,

Since its publication in 1796, Wollstonecraft's *Short Residence* has been recognized as her most beautiful and alluring work. A travelogue in letters, it is also a sophisticated experiment in genre. Historical reflection, ethnography, political and economic critique, philosophical reverie, and feminist memoir all take their turns as Wollstonecraft maps the limits of her idealism. (qtd. Wollstonecraft 266)

Wollstonecraft balances the conventions of travel writing, such as exploration, immediacy of description, attention to landscapes, weather, customs alongside her more intimate passages on daily life like mood, feeling, and sensory experience. Describing Wollstonecraft's travel narrative, Virginia Sapiro says,

*A Short Residence* has many different layers. It is the only writing of Wollstonecraft that is lovely to read. She was an observant traveler, and highlighted details of clothing, dining tables, seaports, and children's faces in a way that makes this a good travel memoir. But it is also a treatise on nature and society, and she tried once again to understand history and

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<sup>1</sup> The Picturesque is a contemporary British aesthetics concerned with how we look at landscape, and with the aestheticism of viewing.

human character, including her own. It is also a memoir of a woman struggling to win back her lover and to achieve peace of mind. (36)

William Godwin also makes a nostalgic statement regarding this book in his *Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'* (1798) when he says that "perhaps a book of travels that so irresistibly seizes on the heart, never, in any other instance, found its way from the press" (249). What can be observed from the above words, and especially from Godwin's insistence that Wollstonecraft is a "female Werter" (242), is how stereotypes of gender is responsible for the reception of literary texts. Another example is made by one of Wollstonecraft's contemporaries, Amelia Alderson, she says,

I remember the time when my desire of seeing you was repressed by fear - but as soon as I read your letters from Norway, the cold awe which the philosopher has excited, was lost in the tender sympathy called forth by a woman. I saw nothing but the interesting creature of feeling and imagination. (quoted in Russle 187)

The book's strength lies in its ability to effectively uphold Wollstonecraft's concern in women's rights while simultaneously being a significant travelogue. She is captivated by the diverse nature that contrasts with the norm on her journey. It was uncommon for a woman to be traveling successfully by herself. According to this point Boos says,

[Wollstonecraft's] situation was of course eccentric: as few foreigners traveled in eighteenth-century Scandinavia, but fewer still wereingle women with infants, there to arrange shipping contracts for men who had deserted them.

She wanders all the time about a way to develop society's treatment of women. Every place she goes, she looks at the way women are treated. She talks about the domestic drudgery of women in Sweden, and she is perturbed to discover Swedish female servants living lives of brutal drudgery in near slavery.

Wollstonecraft defends and sympathizes with Queen Caroline Matilda of Denmark, who had been accused of licentiousness for her extra-marital affair during her marriage. Wollstonecraft depicts this royal, who was a progressive social reformer, as a woman of courage who tried to radically change her country before it was prepared. This example increases Wollstonecraft's despair and melancholy. At one point, she laments the fate of her daughter:

You know that as a female I am particularly attached to her – I feel more than a mother's fondness and anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex. I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. With trembling hand I shall cultivate sensibility, and cherish delicacy of sentiment, lest, whilst I lend fresh blushes to the rose, I sharpen the thorns that will wound the breast I would fain guard – I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit – Hapless woman! what a fate is thine! (84)

Her interest in the fate of Queen Matilda of Denmark, George III's mistreated sister, is tied to the fact that she seems to be overthrown because she tries to introduce issues that allow more latitude for women to be infested in politics. The interest in this story seems to be about the latitude and the possibility of women being involved in politics. This issue of women's situation remains behind everything she sees including, for instance, her interest in sublime which is something that stretched our senses and also associated with mastery and power.

Mary Wollstonecraft is a passionate advocate of educational and social equality for women. The unusual mixture of oblique confession, probing soliloquy, travel narrative, social and philosophical observations, and early-romantic landscape description reveals uncommon mental acuity and casual, private charm not apparent in her more formal polemical works (Boos). The interest in this story seems to

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be about the latitude and the possibility of women being involved in politics. This issue of women's situation remains behind everything she sees including, for instance, her interest in sublime which is something that stretched our senses and also associated with mastery and power. These wonderful letters could be used in courses on Romanticism, travel literature, or autobiography, and also the history of feminist thought.

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