Madame Brulart's Bastille-bijoux: History and Private Lives in Women's Writings around the French Revolution

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Abstract

In her *Letters Written in France* (1790) poet, novelist, translator and Britain's unofficial foreign correspondent Helen Maria Williams records the case of a certain Madame Brulart, "who wears at her breast a medallion made of a stone of the Bastille polished. In the middle of the medallion, *Liberté* was written in diamonds; above was marked, in diamonds, the planet that shone on the 14th of July; and below was seen the moon, of the size she appeared that memorable night." Alternating between grand scenes of public events and emotionally charged narratives of individual lives, one could see such a tiny observation as emblematic of broader patterns in the *Letters* and probably even beyond that. In his foundational 2000 monograph *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* Mark Salber Phillips convincingly describes such cases as instances of "sentimental," often novelistic history entering private, individual lives. This paper proposes to look at a few similar instances with an aim of complementing Phillips's study by showing how the classical, rhetorical model of "exemplary history" survives, even if much altered, in these modern narratives. Although no longer only an educated response of a statesman to the acts of an earlier statesman, the more open-ended modern variety still often wishes to understand individual lives as echoes of larger, public historical events.

Keywords: Helen Maria Williams, French revolution, women's writing, György Lukács, historical writing

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This essay concerns the interpretation of the French Revolution offered by British women authors when those events were either still unfolding or in their immediate aftermath. It presents the argument that an ancient tradition of historical writing, often called exemplary history and strongly associated with Plutarchan biography, helped these women articulate their comments on current events at a time when the public involvement of women was heavily discouraged.

Our narrative begins in June 1790, when celebrated poet and translator Helen Maria Williams arrived in France, just in time for the enormous celebrations

organised to mark the one-year anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. Some of the most enjoyable sections of the first volume of her *Letters Written in France*, her prose account of the neighbouring country's transformations to her fellow-citizens, consist of energetic descriptions of the glorious jubilation, the visible, palpable, electrifying proof, as far as the author was concerned, of the success of the revolution.[1] One memorable example from this text reads as follows:

> I may tell you of pavilions, of triumphal arches, of altars on which incense was burnt, of two hundred thousand men walking in procession; but 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 furnished every image that can elevate the mind of man; which connected the enthusiasm of moral sentiment with the solemn pomp of religious ceremonies; which addressed itself at once to the imagination, the understanding, and the heart!
> The Champ de Mars was formed into an immense amphitheatre, round which were erected forty rows of seats, raised one above another with earth, on which wooden forms were placed. Twenty days labour, animated by the enthusiasm of the people, accomplished what seemed to require the toil of years. Already 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. (64-65)

Besides these grand scenes, Williams also had a very good eye for the small detail. A remarkable example is the passage on her meeting an aristocratic woman who, having fully accepted the arguments against hereditary nobility, renounced her former name along with her title and has assumed the name of Madame Brulart. The detail that directs the attention to her is that she

> wears at her breast a medallion made of a stone of the Bastille polished. In the middle of the medallion, *Liberté* was written in diamonds; above was marked, in diamonds, the planet that shone on the 14th of July; and below was seen the moon, of the size she appeared that memorable night. The medallion was set in a branch of laurel, composed of emeralds, and tied at the top with the national cockade, formed of brilliant stones of the three national colours. (79)

The episode may be easily dismissed as an instance of consumerism and the conspicuous display of wealth, but it can also raise significant questions as to the relative importance of what is big and what is small in history. The Bastille as a sight of memory, understood as public commemoration, and the Bastille as bijoux. Maybe we should not judge Madame Brulart very harshly for her novel accessory, since she

1 On Williams's presentation of the French revolution, and its reception, see e.g. Kennedy, Favret, and Keane.

has been asked to transform, just like the Place de la Bastille, just like the French nation at large, and she did do so rather more successfully than many of the others.

Williams also refers to the fate of some of the other surviving ruins of the Bastille. Apparently, "[t]he person employed to remove the ruins of the Bastille, has framed of the stones eighty-three complete models of this building, which, with a true patriotic spirit, he has presented to the eighty-three departments of the kingdom, by way of hint to his countrymen to take care of their liberties in future" (77). The juxtaposition of the two scenes might suggest that both ways of preserving the past might be equally authentic: the public warning and the private keepsake. Moreover, the description of the medallion is framed by a discussion of women's contribution to the revolution.

> The women have certainly had a considerable share in the French revolution: for, whatever the imperious lords of the creation may fancy, the most important events which take place in this world depend a little on our influence; and we often act in human affairs like those secret springs in mechanism, by which, though invisible, great movements are regulated. (79)

One might also say that from this perspective the promise of the French revolution is that the gendered demarcations between the private and the public become fuzzy and "secret springs" may indeed lead to "most important events."[2]

The broader structures of the 1790 *Letters Written in France* also show the complex inter-relatedness of the public and the private, since after extensive descriptions of major sights and events, Letters XVI to XXII zoom in on a near-tragic love story. Reminiscent of a gothic epistolary romance, the story of the du Fossés has everything from a love between socially ill-matched partners to an oppressive and vindictive father to suffering and loss, until the revolution eventually removes the father's unjust powers and the young family are finally reunited.[3] To readers of canonical romantic literature, the story itself will be immediately familiar, since it shares its sources with the Julia and Vaudracour episode in Book IX of William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (the 1805 text). The conclusions of the two narratives could not be more different, however. In terms of the autobiographical account, Wordsworth's story stands where an account of his relationship with Anette Valon might be expected,[4] effacing the personal by a narrative that seems to exemplify a domestic tragedy unsalvageable by political change. In Wordsworth's narrative Julia is forced to give up the child and enter a convent, the baby dies as a result of the father's incompetence and Vaudracour goes mad ("Nor could / . . . public hope, / Or personal memory . . . / Rouze him" [Book IX, lines 931-34]).[5]

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2 From the literature on women and the public sphere in the context of the French revolution, see especially, Outram 124-64 and Landes 93-200.

3 The classic interpretation probably remains Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender* 71-74.

4 In the words of the editors of the Norton Critical Edition, "[w]ithin the context of his autobiography, *Vaudracourt and Julia* stands in lieu of his relationship with Anette Valon" (340, fn. 2). "*Vaudracourt and Julia* was published as a separate poem in 1820, and excluded from *The Prelude* in 1832" (341, fn. 4).

5 Cited from the Norton *Prelude* (356).

In contrast, the optimistic Williams goes out of her way to connect the "public" and the "personal," emphasizing that the events happened to a close friend of hers; that domestic tyranny and large-scale oppression are apt metaphors of each other; and she expresses satisfaction that her fictitious correspondent shares her view that this story provides "a good excuse for loving the revolution" (140).

Nothing shows more clearly the provocative power of this crossing of the boundaries between the private and the political than its almost immediate conservative rejection, articulated for the first time in great detail in Laetitia Matilda Hawkins's *Letters on the Female Mind, Its Powers and Pursuits, Addressed to Miss H. M. Williams, With particular reference to her Letters from France* (1793).

> In the busy haunts of men alone can mankind be studied to advantage. And how shall a woman avail herself of this resource? What opportunities can be afforded her of discriminating between the apparent virtues but real vices of the human heart? [. . .] And from whence shall she derive the authority which shall compel human nature to appear what it is, not what it would be? [. . .] The study, my dear madam, which I place in the climax of unfitness, is that of politics; and so strongly does it appear to me barred against the admission of females, that I am astonished that they ever ventured to approach it. To constitute a sound judgement in the interests of states and kingdoms, I should think it necessary that a boy (for I have no idea of a girl now) after having been carefully instructed at home, should be sent to run the gauntlope of a public school, where he would learn mankind in miniature. [. . .] Leaving school, he is sent to a university, where he acquires the theory of politics from the historians and legislators of antiquity [. . .] he travels, lives in those places where he has the best prospect of society, gets as near the springs and wheels of government as he can [. . .]. Through how much of all this discipline can a woman go? You will grant it a path impenetrable to her [. . .] I do not ask women to have no opinion on the subject; but, for decorum's sake, do not encourage them to a tilting match with their acquaintance, on a point to them incomprehensible: let them enjoy in peace the traditionary creed of their forefathers; let them change it for any they think carries more Authority with it; but let it be in silence. (18-24)[6]

This was the political, gender-based argument for debarring women from the public sphere and specifically for rebuking Williams's assumption of the right, even authority to interpret the ongoing transformations in France. However, even among those sympathetic to the revolutionary cause, not everyone accepted Williams's approach to discussing the events in France. In 1794, Mary Wollstonecraft, who had visited Williams's salon during her stay in Paris in 1792, published a pamphlet with the progressive publisher Joseph Johnson entitled *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has produced in Europe*. While the work itself was composed in France and clearly reflects the author's recent personal experience, the argument promotes a strongly impersonal, philosophical

6 For context, see Blakemore.

view based on pure rationality. In the preface, Wollstonecraft freely admits that the revolution has unleashed much that is clearly undesirable, but, to her mind, that only serves to accentuate the necessity of looking past such epiphenomena and understanding the essential meaning of historical change.

> The rapid changes, the violent, the base, and nefarious assassinations, which have clouded the vivid prospect that began to spread a ray of joy and gladness over the gloomy horizon of oppression, cannot fail to chill the sympathizing bosom, and palsy intellectual vigour. To sketch these vicissitudes is a task so arduous and melancholy, that, with a heart trembling to the touches of nature, it becomes necessary to guard against the erroneous inferences of sensibility; and reason beaming on the grand theatre of political changes, can prove the only sure guide to direct us to a favourable or just conclusion. (Todd-Butler 6:6)

The critique of sentiment and the rhetoric of sensibility had been central to the attack on Burke in Wollstonecraft's 1790 *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* and also to the construction of femininity that her 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* exposes to the light of reason.[7] In the historical work, this emphasis seems central to the methodology of historical exposition as well.

> The perfection attained by the ancients, it is true, has ever afforded the imagination of the poetical historian a theme to deck with the choicest flowers of rhetoric; though the cool investigation of facts seems clearly to prove, that the civilization of the world, hitherto, has consisted rather in cultivating the taste, than in exercising the understanding. (Todd-Butler 6:15)

The ancients, Wollstonecraft argues, had great poetry and great art, but were barbarians in most other ways. Modernity has brought "improving reason and experience in moral philosophy, to clear away the rubbish, and exhibit the first principles of social order" (Todd-Butler 6:15-16). Modern history should clearly be written in light of those improvements. Critical literature on Wollstonecraft's historical work seems to agree that we should not take her claims to exclusively writing abstract, impersonal, philosophical history at face value. At different points, her own personal experience clearly colours the objectivity of her account and her characterisation of different historical actors has been shown to reflect the influence of different novelistic conventions (see Bour). However, the difference in emphasis is clearly discernible between the two presentations of the revolution. Mary Sponberg offers the following lucid comparison:

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7 In the latter work, she states, for example, that "I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt" (Todd-Butler 5:75). See further, Péter 36-59.

> Williams's *Letters from France* merged the genres of romance and travel writing with family history and letter writing, creating a new historical form that was in keeping with her ideal of the revolution as a force for the feminisation of culture. [. . .] They were presented in language and structure similar to the novel of sentiment. [. . .] [S]he disguised her historical account of the French Revolution in another feminine form, the epistle. Letter writing was considered an appropriate feminine genre as letters were informal, spontaneous, private and domestic. Like family history, letter writing bridged the public and private [. . .]. (94)

Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, "wished her text to be less immediate and personal than Helen Maria Williams's 'feminine' *Letters from France*, but not dry and empirical like masculine accounts of the revolution she had read. The gendered nature of the genre boundaries she sought to transcend created tensions within the text. She wanted the text to appear 'philosophical' in the sense that it should be 'detached, historical and analytical,' yet this conflicted with her desire that the text reflect her personal experience of the revolution" (97–98).

The Romantic period, it has been argued, saw the formation of a separate feminist tradition of historiography (Kucich).[8] Scholarship has directed readers' attention to women historians such as Lucy Aikin, whose works offer personal, even anecdotal accounts of famous figures from British history. The claim is that "the form of history that Aikin tells is a particularly feminist one, as she considers private feeling and social interactions as shaping forces in history" (Levy).

The argument of the next section of my paper is that Romantic novels by women, whose narratives inevitably become contributions to the ongoing interpretative debates on the significance of the revolution in France similarly experiment with making personal, biographical narratives central to the examination of the historical process. While experiments in different versions of "philosophical history" abounded in the eighteenth century, we can also observe an interesting survival (maybe even renaissance) of more ancient forms of historical narrative, ones based exactly in passion, sentiment, and rhetoric. These narratives have had a significant impact on the emerging form of the historical novel, especially in the hands of the women novelists of the end of the eighteenth century who took it upon themselves to provide fictionalised, narrative interpretations of the French revolution.

The old, rhetorical, pre-Enlightenment model is usually referred to as the exemplary view of history.[9] With roots in classical, especially Latin thought, history in the exemplary tradition is seen as a category of rhetoric: a collection of commonplaces that a well-prepared orator can marshal to motivate statesmen and navigate them towards the accepted forms of behaviour enshrined in exemplary moments from a shared past. For modern British audiences this approach to history came to be associated with a single name, that of Plutarch—widely accessible even to readers without much classical erudition through the so-called Dryden-translation (1683–86).

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8 For the broader context of women's contribution to the writing of history, see Looser.

9 For literature on the subject, see e.g. Witschi-Bernz; G. H. Nadel; Koselleck 27-28. Hampton 1-30. Grafton 1-61.

Dryden's preface to that publication states that the purpose of history is "setting before us what we ought to shun or to pursue by the examples of the most famous men" and it serves "the regulation of [. . .] private manners, and the management of public affairs" (2:2; 2:4). He neatly summarises the two most salient qualities of Plutarch's writing. 1) Biography is the most morally efficacious historical form because "the examples of virtue are of more vigour when they are [. . .] contracted into individuals"; and 2) we get closer to our subject than is customary: "we are led into the private lodgings of the hero" (2:7; 2:9). Probably a range of eighteenth-century biographies owe something to such an understanding of the Greek writer, but none of them have been more famous or influential than Boswell's 1791 *Life of Johnson.* Boswell offers an appeal to the "authority" of Plutarch, "prince of biographers," as a way to vindicate its use of familiar conversation[10] and ends on a quotation from Dr. Johnson himself, who was also deeply interested in Plutarch and in biography, on the principles of the genre. "The business of the biographer is often to pass slightly over those performances and incidents which produce vulgar greatness, to lead the thoughts into domestic privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue . . ." (Boswell 24).

Plutarchan biography is distinguished, therefore, by its ability to navigate the public/private divide: it includes personal anecdotes, but never exclusively for entertainment: the stories are meant to serve as examples that anyone in public life might aspire to following.[11] Examples of the survival of this model into the late eighteenth century and even beyond include the anonymously published *The British Plutarch; Or Biographical Entertainer: Being a Select Collection of the Lives at Large of the Most Eminent Men, Natives of Great Britain and Ireland; from the Reign of Henry VIII. to George II. Both Inclusive. Whether distinguished as Statesmen, Warriors, Poets, Patriots, Divines, Philosophers* (1762) as well as Lewis Goldsmith Stewarton's *The Revolutionary Plutarch: Exhibiting the Most Distinguished Characters, Literary, Military, and Political, in the Recent Annals of the French Republic* (2nd ed. 1804) and *The Female Revolutionary Plutarch: Containing Biographical, Historical, and Revolutionary Sketches, Characters, and Anecdotes* (1803).[12] The first was an educational publication, marketed mostly at children, while in the latter two the exemplary meaning of the lives is extracted in accordance with the strongly anti-revolutionary political stance of its author, coupled with pungent misogyny in the case of the last collection. *The Female*

10 He quotes Plutarch's "Life of Alexander" to the effect that "'Nor is it always in the most distinguished achievements that men's virtues or vices may be best discerned; but very often an action of small note, a short saying, or a jest, shall distinguish a person's real character more than the greatest sieges, or the most important battles" (Boswell 23–24).

11 Plutarch is, of course, also among the first books the Creature studies after learning to read in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. "Plutarch taught me high thoughts; he elevated me above the wretched sphere of my own reflections, to admire and love the heroes of past ages . . . I read of men concerned in public affairs, governing or massacring their species. I felt the greatest ardour for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence for vice, as far as I understood the signification of those terms" (ch. VII).

12 For the success of Plutarchan biography in the eighteenth century and long beyond, see I. B. Nadel, esp. 15-19 and Mossman.

Revolutionary Plutarch is also symptomatic of the perceived necessity to contain the potential meanings of the lives and achievements of a multitude of women thrown into a station of prominence during the revolutionary years.

Stewarton's desire to use his narratives to serve an anti-revolutionary agenda is obvious already from the title-page, where (in block capitals) he dedicates his work "To the Revered Memory of Marie Antoinette Josephe Jeanne, Archduchess of Austria, Queen of France and Navarre; Daughter, Sister, and Aunt of Emperors and Kings; A Lamented Victim of the Inhospitable Rage and Ferocious Character of Revolutionary Frenchmen. Legitimate Sovereigns and Loyal Subjects, Her Murder is Still Unrevenged!!!"

Stewarton's account is full of all manner of details to hammer home the horrors of the revolution, not shying away from lurid particulars such as the description of "French anthropophagi" feasting on "the flesh of a roasted aristocrat" (1: 165). His rejection of the revolution (both of its principles and its practices) is absolute: "The French revolutionary system is and will always remain the same, whether the French revolutionary rulers style themselves citizens, sans-culottes, or emperors and kings. To crush grandeur, to ruin wealth, to exalt meanness and to enrich poverty, were the principles and the objects of the French revolutionists of 1805, as well as of those of 1789" (2: 103).

The didactic aspect of the Plutarchan tradition is here employed to attack changes to what he sees as the right norms of female behaviour and to protect the ones he accepts. Madame Recamier is praised for keeping out of politics ("according to the duty of her sex, she never meddled with political or revolutionary transactions" [1: 162]). Marie Antoinette is an example of elevated female perfection ("The beauty of her person, the known attachment of the king, the endearing kindnesses which youth and prosperity prompted, the public heard with delight; and they appeared to add to the consequence of every Frenchman" [2: 7]). The life of Madame de Staël is offered as a lesson against the "mania" of philosophy in a woman. Her mother's educational decisions apparently deformed her daughter's character ("She could explain an enigma and compose an epigram, before she knew how to put on a gown, or how to pin a handkerchief. She could explain the movements of the constellations, but she was ignorant of the manner of roasting a fowl . . ." [1: 174]) and her tale is especially cautionary as regards female intellectuals as wives ("Without any just principle of duty, of honour, or as a philosopher, above them, she frequently unites infidelity with dissimulation, and oppression with both. [. . .] Disgusting in her person, filthy in her dress, the grey-haired female *savan*, when advancing in life, generally adds jealousy to her other defects and vices" [1: 181]). However unpleasant a writer, Stewarton is an instructive example of the contention over the representation of women in the public eye: the choice and the characterisation of the canon of emblematic individuals in whom change (or stagnation) is embodied.

I argue that not only historical narratives but also certain novels by British women authors written during or very shortly after the revolutionary events in France can also be read in light of the Plurarchan tradition. Also, I believe that an awareness of this tradition enables a broader definition of the concept of the historical novel as well. Doubtlessly, the most influential theory of the historical novel has been that

of György Lukács (written 1936-37, English translation 1962), who directed a lot of attention to the genre by identifying an "instinctive" historicism in it. This historicism supposedly enabled its writers to present (instead of an Enlightenment view of ever-same human nature, where history can only be a colourful backdrop) human life as fundamentally historical in every aspect, with human subjectivity being constantly shaped and reshaped by history's impersonal powers. "This key interest in historicised character, in giving the reader insight into the mind of a member of a past society, is for Lukács the political importance of the historical novel, as it induces historical empathy and a sense of process" (de Groot 27). This sense of process is first born as a result of the collective trauma of the Napoleonic wars, according to Lukács, and its first literary master is Sir Walter Scott. While the importance of Lukács's contribution remains unquestioned, he has been criticised for working with an exclusively male canon (Wallace 8-15) and for showing almost no interest in anything preceding Scott.[13] From the perspective of the present paper, his somewhat ahistorical decision to attribute a proto-Hegelian historicism to Scott can also be questioned.

For Lukács, what he calls Walter Scott's understanding of "historical characterisation" is of seminal importance. It should be noted, however, that the origins of such a technique date from before the Napoleonic wars and many of the first authors to experiment with it were women. Perhaps the latter fact should not be that surprising, since the connection that the historical novel enables between the private and the political, the domestic and the national or international must have been felt even more acutely by women. In Lukács's words,

> for Scott the historical characterization of time and place, the historical 'here and now' is something much deeper. For him it means that certain crises in the personal destinies of a number of human beings coincide and interweave within the determining context of an historical crisis. It is precisely for this reason that his manner of portraying the historical crisis is never abstract, the split of the nation into warring parties always runs through the centre of the closest human relationships. Parents and children, lover and beloved, old friends etc. confront one another as opponents, or the inevitability of this confrontation carries the collision deep into their personal lives. (41)

While Lukács's description strikes me as very convincing, the earlier overview of the exemplary tradition suggests that it is perfectly possible to reach such an insight without a Hegelian history of philosophy and following traditions that were conveniently available to the writers concerned. Therefore, in what remains I wish to offer sketches of certain pre-Scott historical novels. My aim is not to offer comprehensive interpretations, merely to indicate how "historical characterisation" can be understood in the framework of exemplary history.

The first novel that needs to be mentioned is very directly linked to Williams's *Letters*. As Stuart Curran documents in detail, Charlotte Smith was a reader of

13 For an overview that traces the historical novel's sources back to the seventeenth century and presents Scott as at least as much of a synthetizer of existing traditions as an innovator, see Maxwell.

Williams's works, used specifically the *Letters* as inspiration both in terms of the generic choice of her only epistolary novel and a number of its motifs (6: xvii). She also follows Williams in using the French revolution, in the words of Eleanor Ty, to "draw a disconcerting parallel between political and domestic tyranny" (138). In her 1792 *Desmond* Smith constructs a parallel between the suffocatingly oppressive marriage that Geraldine, its unmistakably autobiographical central character, pines away under and the political oppressions the revolution was supposed to set to rights. The novel's ending is a happy one, but it is noteworthy how qualified Smith's optimism already is. The revolution is far from over and there is no telling what direction events will take, and although after the death of her husband Geraldine has the opportunity to marry a man who truly loves and respects her, she is still thought of as property, and Desmond's last effusion about his future wife reads as almost laughably possessive. "Geraldine will bear my name – will be the directress of my family – will be my friend – my mistress – my wife!" (335). No amount of romance or revolution seems to change the fact that Geraldine's life is confined within patriarchal households. Placing her life-story at the very heart of a novel about revolutionary change, however, showing how it exemplifies the cross-roads between private and public wrongs, makes it very central indeed and very much a part of history.[14]

With the passage of the years, it became overwhelmingly obvious that the promotion of women's rights was not among the priorities of the revolutionaries. By the time the 1801 volume of her *Letters* was published, even the ever-sanguine Williams declared that "the women of France have nothing at present to do with the Constitution but to obey it" (Williams, *Sketches* 2: 60).[15] While maintaining that women "participate" in "some" of the "advantages" brought by the revolution "at second hand" (Williams, *Sketches* 2: 50), she reviews at length (like Wollstonecraft did earlier) women's inadequate education, the limitations on activities permitted to them, the legal and political inequities of a married woman's position, etc. As the ultimate argument against the different ways of marginalising women, she paints a passionate image of women who assumed public roles, stood as equals by men in the revolution and gave their lives for its causes.

> Have we not seen the daughter, led in the bloom of beauty to the scaffold with her parents, seeming to forget that she had herself the sacrifice of life to make, and only occupied in sustaining their sinking spirits?—Have we not seen the wife refusing to survive her husband, provoke also the fatal sentence, which it was her choice to share, and mingle her blood with his under the axe of the

14 *Desmond* is also an excellent example of why we make a mistake when disregarding Scott's precedents. Katie Trumpener discusses in detail how lesser-known "national tales" by (especially Irish) women writers as well as in the traditions established by the gothic romances of Ann Radcliffe, which clearly had a strong influence on Charlotte Smith as well, created a tradition of novelistic reflection on historical transformation significantly before Scott's *Waverley*. She reflects on the irony of Scott's emphasising Waverley's "uncontaminated" name in the preface to his novel when both Smith's radical novel and its anti-revolutionary redaction by Jane West (*The Loyalists: An Historical Novel* [1812]) had a character bearing that name (see 137–42).

15 For context, see Franklin.

> executioner?—What Roman virtue was displayed by Charlotte Corday!—more than Roman fortitude dignified the last moments of Madame Roland! Since that period, new Revolutions have left new memorials of female virtue. . . . (Williams, *Sketches* 2: 66)

Execution-scenes, unfortunately, provide the best opportunities for commemorating female heroism. The two most outstanding examples are those of the above-mentioned Charlotte Corday and Madame Roland.

> . . . it is difficult to conceive the kind of heroism which she [Corday] displayed in the way to execution. The women who were called furies of the guillotine, and who had assembled to insult her on leaving the prison, were awed into silence by her demeanour, while some of the spectators uncovered their heads before her, and others gave loud tokens of applause. There was such an air of chastened exultation thrown over her countenance, that she inspired sentiments of love rather than sensations of pity. She ascended the scaffold with undaunted firmness, and, knowing that she had only to die, was resolved to die with dignity. (Williams, *Sketches* 2: 68)
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> When she mounted the scaffold, and was tied to the fatal plank, she lifted up her eyes to the statue of Liberty, near which the guillotine was placed, and exclaimed, "Ah Liberté, comme on t'ajouée!" The next moment she perished. But her name will be recorded in the annals of history, as one of those illustrious women whose superior attainments seem fitted to exalt her sex in the scale of being. (Williams, *Sketches* 2: 101-02)

While it is probably not true that the aim of the novels here discussed is to offer such "more than Roman" "memorials of female virtue," it can be argued that they participate in a vital discussion on whose experience is seen as representative and worthy of memorialisation, whose story is seen as rising to the level of history and whose remain merely instances of private (mis)fortunes.[16]

The Banished Man, Charlotte Smith's lesser-known second novel to deal directly with the French Revolution as a subject was published in 1794 and poignantly reflects both the changed historical realities and the author's deep disappointment with the transformed events. The novel could easily be written off as Smith's caving to pressures both political and personal (from revolutionary terror in France to oppressive measures at home, not to mention her own extremely precarious financial situation). Indeed, the politics of the novel seem radically different to those of *Desmond*, since instead of a justified revolution, we see Jacobin mobs, described as "anarchists and murderers" (Smith, *The Banished Man* 2: 209). However, as Judith Davis Miller explains, the book's sympathy for French aristocrats was not at all deferential to public temperaments, given the increasing hostility towards the French emigrants in England. "Smith challenges contemporary patriotic sympathies by writing a novel

16 See Adriana Craciun's reading of Williams's letters in light of an "uneasy rivalry with Robespierre for the role of true representative of the French Revolution" in her *British Women Writers* (100).

whose thesis is essentially a plea against narrow national prejudice and in behalf of principles that transcend national boundaries" (Miller 347). Many of its characters are formerly powerful aristocrats who have become deprived of their titles and property and have reason to fear for their lives. This is history written from the margins, with a focus on those debarred from a real impact on state affairs for the moment. However, while representing figures who have either been expelled from public life or (in the case of—especially English—women) who were never really accepted there, Smith finds a way to politicise private life and make it exemplary towards a hoped-for peaceful, reunited, cosmopolitan Europe. This becomes clear when, at the end of the novel, she makes an "Anglican Englishwoman marry a Catholic Frenchman, and a Protestant Scots-Englishman marry a Catholic Polish woman" (Mellor, "Embodied Cosmopolitanism" 293), to finally settle down in a small inter-cultural, inter-faith, and inter-language cosmopolite community in Verona.

The third relevant novel in this context is Mary Robinson's 1799 *The Natural Daughter*. The title already is an indication not just of the plot that turns around the fate of a girl whose biological father is only revealed at the very end, but also of the quality of what counts as natural in the context of the raging Jacobin phase of the revolution. We follow the fate of two sisters, whose characters seem to correspond to Mary Wollstonecraft's idea of sentimentalism as detrimental to the character of women (Julia), and the more controlled, more rational, more independent alternative (Martha). While most of the events take place on British soil, there are repeated episodes connected to revolutionary France. The attention is constantly on how the different female characters suffer from Jacobin reign in an immediate, bodily sense. Julia becomes the lover of Robespierre, while Martha falls into his prison, only to be liberated when he is killed. Earlier, Martha befriends a woman who very narrowly escaped being raped by Marat and was only saved after Marat was murdered. As Adriana Craciun explains, the novel is also part of a larger symbolic struggle to divest Robespierre from his almost consolidated role as the emblematic embodiment of the revolution, to regain those 1789 principles that still seemed worth fighting for (Craciun, *British Women Writers* 117). Therefore, the gothic suffering of these female characters is strongly politicised: even in the absence of public involvement, it is women's wrongs that give meaning to historical transformation.

Finally, the last novel I will mention focuses on Marat's murderer. Her name is Charlotte Corday, although in Helen Craik's 1800 *Adelaide de Narbonne* she receives an aristocratic "de" before her name. Of all the novels here discussed this one presents the reader with the most complex political stance, since its titular heroine experiences rather harsh mistreatment both from her royalist father and her republican second husband. Neither party seems to embrace women's rights or even consider their suffering when it comes to armed struggle. However, the novel presents very strong narratives of women's camaraderie. The lady-in-distress's champion is not a knight in shining armour but de Corday herself, and it turns out that de Narbonne's secret mission is to hide and harbour a certain Victorine, Marie Antoinette's fictional niece, and consequently, the potential future queen of France. Once again, the private and the political are very closely aligned; female friendships might lead to political restoration, and they definitely lead to republican tyrannicide.

The argument has been raised in critical literature that Craik depoliticises de Corday's action by making its motivation a revenge for a friend, rather than (as the historical Corday stated) for Marat's attack on the principles of the republic. Stephanie Russo has argued that "By focusing on the everyday life, thoughts and feelings of a woman like Charlotte Corday, Craik invites her readers to engage sympathetically with one of the most notorious and most militant women of the age" (Russo 111). However, she also asserts that "[i]n the process of 'normalizing' Corday, Craik effectively strips Corday's actions of any political significance, instead locating her motives in private vengeance and domestic entanglements" (Russo 111). One might also want to challenge her further claim that this tendency (besides Craik's putative political stance) can be ascribed to the fact that the novel as a genre is conventionally associated with the domestic (Russo 112).

The aim of the above argument has been to cast doubt on such sharp dichotomies. The relevance of the long tradition of the exemplary view of historical thinking and specifically of the model provided by Plutarchan biography is that it enables us to see discussions of private life not necessarily as turning away from public engagement but rather as continuous with it. The novels interpreted above all demonstrate that it would be wrong to see fiction (even in its domestic varieties) as automatically distanced from political realities. On the contrary, what we can observe is that the first British masters of the historical novel used women's personal experience as the focal points of their interpretation of the French Revolution.

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