

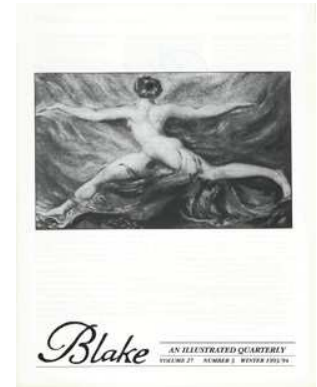
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R E V I E W

Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind
and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft*

Anne K. Mellor

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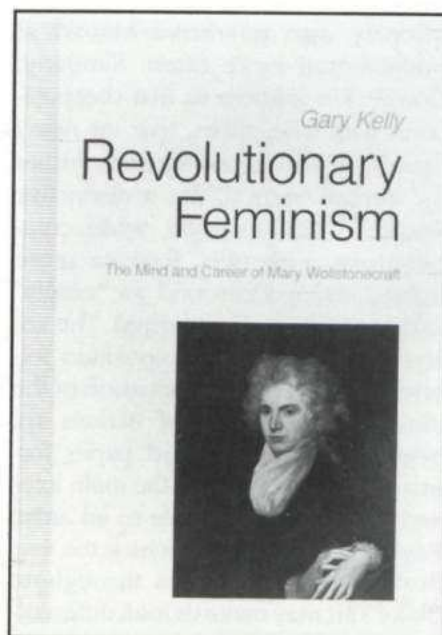


Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. 249 pages. \$39.95.

Reviewed by Anne Mellor

As opposed to the earlier studies of Wollstonecraft that focus primarily on her biography or on her role in the development of liberal (or equality) feminist theory, Gary Kelly's *Revolutionary Feminism* situates Wollstonecraft's thought within the context of a cultural revolution that witnessed the emergence of the values of the middle class as the foundation of the modern state in England in the nineteenth century. Central to this revolution was a capitalist print culture that enabled women writers to emerge as the active producers, as well as the consumers, of a newly professionalized practice of literature as a verbal art. Sensitive to both the gender and the class distinctions encoded in this professionalization of writing, Kelly provides an illuminating account of the way that Wollstonecraft manipulated her verbal style to create a new discourse and a new definition of Woman, one who avoided "feminine display" in order to manifest "feminine mind."

Wollstonecraft's *thought* has by now been thoroughly analyzed, by Virginia Sapiro, Mitzi Myers, Janet Todd, and a host of others, and readers will find few new insights into the content of Wollstonecraft's ideas here. What they do find, however, is an exceptionally sensitive attention to Wollstonecraft's verbal style, to the ways in which she used specific rhetorical tropes and strategies to demonstrate just how a woman can think differently from a man. Wollstonecraft was acutely aware that she must avoid being labeled a



"masculine" female, a monstrous hermaphrodite; at the same time, she must avoid the feminine "sensibility" so easily dismissed as affected and irrational by her male peers. Her solution, as Kelly brilliantly demonstrates, was to develop a new verbal discourse that directly responded to but at the same time turned the tables on the masculine philosophical discourse of her day.

Further, by reading Wollstonecraft's works in the context of the books to which they either alluded or parodied, Kelly reveals how carefully Wollstonecraft shaped her verbal art for maximum rhetorical effect. Her first novel, *Mary, A Fiction* (1787), read against Mrs. Cartwright's *The Platonic Marriage* (1787) and *The History of Eliza Warwick* (1778) to which it alludes, becomes a powerful critique of false female sensibility as well as a more sweeping social criticism of forced, loveless marriages. From the perspective provided by the didactic children's literature written by Anna Barbauld, Dorothy Kilner, and Sarah Trimmer, Kelly shows how Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories* provides a new model of female education, one that suggests that the rational woman need not marry in order to find contentment. Kelly's emphasis on the positive portrayal of the unmarried Mrs. Mason as the builder of a more egalitarian and

benevolent culture in Wollstonecraft's stories should intensify our awareness of the degree to which Blake's designs for *Original Stories* repressed and distorted this image of the *rational* female, as Marc Kaplan has shown in his dissertation on *Blake and Gender* (UCLA, 1993). By setting Wollstonecraft's conduct book for girls, *The Female Reader*, against William Enfield's popular conduct book for boys, *The Speaker*, Kelly can reveal the way Wollstonecraft participates in an "elocution movement" that defined correct speech as the basis of a middle-class cultural nationalism in which women could participate equally.

Kelly's emphasis on style as cultural critique produces exceptionally rewarding studies of both of Wollstonecraft's *Vindications*. He shows that in *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, Wollstonecraft calculatedly represents the eloquent Edmund Burke as the Tacitean *delator*, the "man who uses his rhetorical skill in extravagant denunciation of innocent citizens in order to share their property as a reward from a grateful ruler" (87), while she becomes the *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, the honest (wo)man who speaks directly and sincerely. Focusing on the style of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Kelly argues convincingly that it is not the hasty production previous commentators have assumed, but rather a carefully crafted mediation between two competing discourses: an overly masculine "philosophical" discourse of abstract rationality and an overly feminine "sentimental" discourse of emotional subjectivity. *A Vindication* writes a "revolution in discourse" in which a personal voice is combined with sociological analysis to construct a New Woman, a female philosopher whose "woman's way of reasoning and arguing" (117) vindicates her claim to intellectual and moral and legal equality. Kelly's detailed analyses of generic bricolage, novelized polemic, rhapsody and paradox in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* should be required reading for anyone interested in this

all-important cultural text, the more so since it acknowledges that in the eyes of current academic feminists, this style failed to achieve the revolution in female discourse that Wollstonecraft attempted.

Kelly concludes with an interesting analysis of Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, which he reads as an attempt to reclaim a "feminized" French Revolution (170), a controversial reading of her *Letters* from Scandinavia as the self-destructive representation of the female philosopher as merely a woman (193), and a familiar reading of *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, which usefully focuses on the trial scene as staging the thematic concerns of the book as a whole.

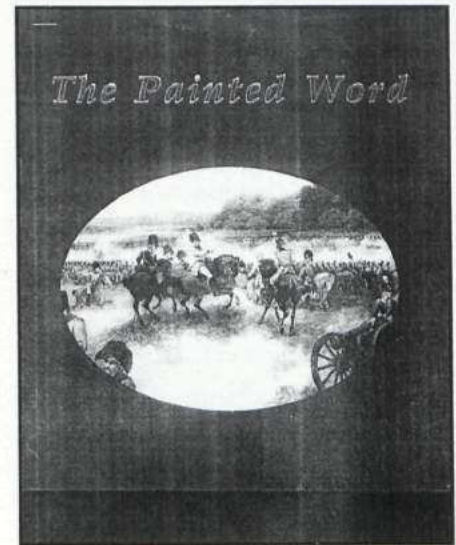
Readers will continue to turn to Eleanor Flexner, Emily Sunstein, and especially Claire Tomalin for more engaging accounts of Wollstonecraft's personality and the development of her thought, and to Mary Poovey, Cora Kaplan, and the contributors to the second Norton Critical Edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* for more perceptive accounts of the ambivalences and contradictions in Wollstonecraft's life, thought, and writings. But Gary Kelly's *Revolutionary Feminism* provides the best account we have of how Wollstonecraft's literary style and rhetorical engagement with specific texts worked to construct a "revolution in discourse" that verbally embodied the rights of women to participate equally in the bourgeois cultural revolution of the romantic period.

The Painted Word: British History Painting, 1750-1830. Ed. Peter Canon-Brookes. Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester NY: The Boydell Press, 1991. 139 pp. 156 plates. \$70.00.

Reviewed by
G. E. Bentley, Jr.

This impressive little book on *The Painted Word* has nothing to do with William Blake (who is mentioned only in an aside to Stothard's "Pilgrimage to Canterbury" engraving). However, it has everything to do with his context, for history painting was what Blake practiced (in water colors) all his life, giving visible form to heroic and dramatic events from literature and history, including religion and myth. Here is set out verbally and, more important, visually, a record of what Blake and his leading contemporaries from Barry and Fuseli to Reynolds and West thought was the noblest form of visual art, the equivalent of the epic in poetry and of the opera and symphony in music. We can scarcely appreciate the consistent sense in Blake's art without understanding what he and his contemporaries meant by history painting, and here the context as it developed in his time is set out more completely than I have found elsewhere.¹

But there is a paradox here, for most of those who devoted their lives to history painting, such as Barry and Blake and Haydon, starved for their pains, and many of the painters who spoke most eloquently of the dignity of history painting, such as Reynolds and Romney, made their handsome livings by painting portraits. The noblest history paintings were heroic in size, and the only walls appropriate for such



heroism were in great houses and churches and munificent institutions, such as the Royal Society of Arts which commissioned (but did not pay) James Barry to cover the walls of its Great Room with his series of paintings illustrating "The Progress of Human Culture." However, the noblemen and bishops and magnates with suitable walls to decorate preferred pictures of their dogs and horses and wives, rather than Culture or Il Penseroso or The Prodigal Son. Of the devotees of history painting, only the Americans Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley were commercially successful; for West, success was guaranteed by the personal patronage of George III, and for both West and Copley it was prints rather than paintings which established their popularity and secured their incomes in old age.

One might like to think our own time more enlightened about painting than Blake's, for family portraits and race horses no longer dominate the walls of the best galleries and homes. However, fashionable ladies and noble sportsmen have not been displaced in public favor by goddesses and prophets, for this exhibition of "The Painted Word" was the last to be held at the distinguished Heim Gallery, which has now gone out of business. The noble and the heroic apparently have no more appeal to our age than to Blake's.