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H-France Review Vol. 5 (March 2005), No. 35

Helen Maria Williams, *Letters from France*, Neil Fraistat and Susan L. Lanser, Eds., Orchard Park, N.Y. and Ormskirk, Lancashire: Broadview Press, 2001. 295 pp. Introduction, chronology, appendices, and bibliography. \$15.95 U.S. (pb.). ISBN 1-55111-255-8.

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The English poet and novelist, Helen Maria Williams, witnessed many of the key celebrations and political transformations in revolutionary France and chronicled those observations in her series of *Letters Written in France*. Altogether, Williams published eight volumes of her *Letters* on revolutionary France from 1790 through 1796. Prior to 1790, she had established herself as a Romantic novelist and poet, using her pen to critique such contemporary issues as the suffering caused by war and the slave trade as well as to promote the success of the American Revolution, especially its establishment of democratic government. Thus, it is not surprising that when Williams published in 1790 her novel *Julia*, a rewrite of Rousseau's *Julie; ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, she included a poem, "The Bastille," that praised the ideals of the French Revolution.<sup>[1]</sup> The success of her letters and the criticism they provoked provided her the unique opportunity to transform her work from indirect to direct social and political commentary<sup>[2]</sup> and become "in effect a foreign correspondent, interpreting French history in England and around the continent for thirty years" (p. 16).

Editors Neil Fraistat and Susan L. Lanser have prepared a classroom edition of Williams' *Letters Written in France* aimed at both advanced undergraduates and graduate students interested in the French Revolution and the role Romanticism played in both revolutionary France and Europe. The editors begin with a concise yet comprehensive overview of revolutionary France, explaining the key social, political, and economic transformations that contributed to the outbreak of the Revolution. They also situate Williams' work within several relevant contexts: the Revolution in France, reactions in Europe (especially England) to France's radical political and social changes, and the cultural, social and political importance of Romanticism in revolutionary Europe.

The editors aptly link Williams' experience as a prominent eighteenth-century Romantic writer to her political analysis of revolutionary France. For example, Williams used nature, as did the revolutionaries themselves, as a means of legitimating the Revolution. While the revolutionaries planted "Liberty" trees throughout France as one symbol of the natural outgrowth of their freedom, in her work "Williams strives to show the Revolution as an embodiment, restoration, or redefinition of the natural... Nature affirms the rightness of the Revolutionary ideals: the aristocracy is figured as a distorted and twisted tree, while the tree of patriotism is tall and straight" (p. 44). From this perspective, Williams' work provides an opening for students beyond the consideration of women's roles during this crucial period of change. Fraistat and Lanser argue that "as scholars re-establish both the place of women in history and the place of the French Revolution in Romantic literature, Williams emerges as a key figure in understanding the cultural practices of her age," especially "the convergence of aesthetics and politics that lies at the heart of those practices" (p. 41).

While the introduction provides the historical context for Williams' *Letters*, the editors include several appendices containing primary sources that complement the introduction and the letters themselves. These documents allow students to analyze Williams' work and the Revolution from different perspectives. Excerpts of Williams' later letters from 1792-1795 shed light on the radical period of the Terror in France, when Williams herself joined the ranks of imprisoned suspects. Similarly, a selection

of Williams' poetry helps students to analyze the links between Romantic themes and revolutionary ideals. Other items—French revolutionary documents, selected contemporary responses to the *Letters* and to Williams' personal politics, and various responses to the French Revolution—contextualize the *Letters* and establish Williams' place as a female writer whose analysis of the Revolution garnered both strong criticism and praise. In combination, the editors' introduction, the *Letters*, and the varied selection of primary sources allow students to explore the themes of the Enlightenment and revolutionary Europe in terms of the goals of liberty, equality, and justice for all human beings. The editors provide a wide variety of responses to Williams' *Letters* and reactions to the French Revolution, which permits students to analyze the difficulties that revolutionary changes in France posed for Williams' contemporaries.

The inclusion of an excerpt from Burke's 1790 *Reflection on the Revolution in France*, which criticized the Revolution on the basis of its radical transformation and complete abandonment of past traditions, is designed to help students contemplate the "implicit dialogue" between Burke and Williams (p. 41). For Burke, the Revolution was an unnatural perversion of the social and political order that endangered French, and potentially European, stability. While Williams and Burke's positions may seem completely at odds, Fraistat and Lanser highlight their shared Romantic roots: "Burke and Williams share an affective approach to the Revolution that ultimately sets sensibility and sympathy above reason as the foundation of moral and political agency, distancing them from the Enlightenment rationalism of Paine and Wollstonecraft and from the deconstructive dialogues of More" (p. 41).

Williams framed her observations of the changes in revolutionary France as a series of letters written to an unnamed friend in England. As "a poet of radical sensibility who often attempted in her poetry to align the reader's sympathies with those who were socially oppressed" (p. 191), she began her commentary on the political and social changes of the French Revolution in 1790, starting with the *Fête de la Fédération* that celebrated the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille and the creation of the constitutional monarchy. According to Fraistat and Lanser, "the 1790 volume imagines the entire Revolution as a sublime spectacle carrying forth the spirit of [this] Federation, appealing to the noblest of human sentiments, and establishing aesthetic and moral harmony across differences of sex, race, and condition" (pp. 14-15). This historical moment created for Williams a vision of a new path not only for France but also for all of Europe, where the establishment of human rights could flourish.

In her first fifteen letters, Williams journeyed from Paris to Rouen, visiting the symbolic origins of the revolutionary transformation from tyranny to freedom. This was a voyage that encompassed both the public and the private transformation of tyrannical authority in France. For example, Williams re-created for her readers the historic moment—the fall of the Bastille—that the Federation celebrated by a personal visit to the former royal prison. The Bastille symbolized the potential for the despotic power of both the king and fathers, who had both, under the *ancien régime*, used the dreaded *lettres de cachet* that allowed the king to imprison anyone, and fathers to imprison their children, without a hearing. Thus, the overthrow of the Bastille represented the Enlightenment of the French and the courage of the men and women who had achieved this historic feat: "After having visited the Bastille," writes Williams, "we may indeed be surprised, that a nation so enlightened as the French, submitted so long to the oppressions of their government; but we must cease to wonder that their indignant spirits at length shook off that yoke" (p. 74).

A visit to the National Assembly, whose goal was the restoration of French liberty, provided a stark contrast to the despair that Williams imagined for the chained prisoners of the Bastille. Although the new political order limited the ranks of future deputies through stringent economic requirements, the Assembly opened its tribunes and its podium to all. Williams marveled at the lottery system that allowed ordinary citizens, including women, the opportunity to attend the debates and voice their

opinions in an atmosphere that Williams described as simultaneously chaotic and exalting: “Those men now before my eyes are the men who engross the attention, the astonishment of Europe; for the issue of whose decrees surrounding nations wait in suspense, and whose fame has already extended through every civilized region of the globe...My mind with a sensation of elevated pleasure...anticipated the increasing renown of these legislators, and the period when, all the nations of Europe following the liberal system which France has adopted, the little crooked policy of the present times shall give place to the reign of reason, virtue, and science” (p. 82). Williams sought not only to describe the new political institutions in revolutionary France but also to create an investment for her readers in the success of the new government that held promise for the enlightened transformation of all of Europe.

In letters XVI-XXII, Williams’ romantic rendering of the trials and tribulations of the socially mismatched du Fossé couple linked the benefits of revolutionary change from the public to the private sphere. The real-life dispute between a noble father and his son over freedom of choice in marriage brought to life the issue of parental tyranny under old regime justice. The young du Fossé defied his father by secretly marrying his poor but virtuous wife, forfeited his inheritance, and moved to England to avoid the father’s wrath. However, the father eventually tricked the son into returning to France, who was immediately imprisoned by his father’s *lettre de cachet*. This dramatic tale takes the reader from the darkest dungeons of France through the almost miraculous escape of the young du Fossé, who is once again united in love and poverty with his wife and daughter in England, to their triumphant return to France the day after the fall of the Bastille. Saved by the revolutionaries, Williams and the du Fossés are reunited on French soil where liberty now reigns.[3]

As Williams brings the 1790 *Letters* to a close, she turns her eye towards England and her impending departure from the stronghold of both Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic sensibility. “Her last letter hopes for a new ship of politics, ‘built upon principles that defy the opposition of the tempestuous elements’ that will sail ‘sublimely over the untracked ocean’ to ‘[unite] those together whom nature seemed for ever to have separated, and [throw] a line of connection across the divided world’” (p. 44). For Williams, France had clearly taken the lead that England must now follow. In this sense, her letters become reminiscent of Voltaire’s *Philosophical Letters*. Her effusive praise for France’s revolutionary changes is often used as a means of critiquing English politics. As the editors note, Williams hoped the French example would “infuse England and all of Europe with a new commitment to human rights that would be signified [primarily] by the abolition of the slave trade” (p. 15).

Considering Williams’ repeated emphasis on human rights, she makes surprisingly few observations regarding the position of women during the Revolution and how such concepts applied to them in revolutionary France. Women’s political contributions are briefly commented on by Williams but without any recognition of the limitations they faced in the political sphere: “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” (p. 77).

Women’s contributions to political change were crucial if often unacknowledged. Williams’ own experience as a woman engaged in political discourse emerges when she writes, “my political creed is entirely an affair of the heart; for I have not been so absurd as to consult my head upon matters of which it is incapable of judging” and moreover, “anyone with common sensibility” would respond the same way (p. 91).[4] Clearly, Williams was not unaware that women faced distinct challenges as political actors and used a strategy to justify her own involvement that equated liberty with passion and privileged feminine sensibility in revolutionary France.

Fraistat and Lanser explore the problems Williams encountered for expressing her political views and the role that gender played in her observations of the Revolution and in the responses of her contemporaries. However, they comment only briefly on the fact that Williams never engages the issue of women's human rights and political representation in France (p. 48). This is not to say that the editors overlook the issue of women's rights in the revolutionary struggle. As part of their appendices, Fraistat and Lanser include Olympe de Gouges' "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Female Citizen" for students to compare to the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen" that paved the way for representative government in France and the concept of universal human rights throughout the world. They include these two documents to expose the "inconsistencies of laws and prohibitions that treated citizens differently on the basis of their sex, race, class, or religion" (p. 246). By highlighting these inconsistencies, the editors have left the door open for students to analyze the limitations of revolutionary freedom. Moreover, students also have the opportunity to consider why Williams, and the majority of French women, chose not to protest their exclusion from full political rights.

In addition, the editors highlight Williams' identification of revolutionary political change with the idea of a particularly feminine sensibility in the struggle for human rights. They argue that "Williams seeks to universalize this sensibility across gender boundaries, opposing the Burkean notion of 'manly morals' by establishing the human hearts of both men and women as the 'natural terrain of politics'" (p. 48). Fraistat and Lanser also connect this argument to the work of Gary Kelly as one way of understanding how Williams continued to support the Revolution as it moved from constitutional monarchy to Republic and the Terror that departed "from the feminizing values of the earlier Revolutionary period" (p. 49).<sup>[5]</sup> For Williams, the Revolution and its principles lived on despite the Terror, "like vigorous seeds committed to the fertile earth...they will remain alive, and ready to spring up at the first favourable moment" (p. 169).

Fraistat and Lanser have prepared an excellent edition of the *Letters* for the classroom. Williams' work and the French Revolution generated a lively debate among her contemporaries within developing liberal, romantic, and conservative circles. The chance to explore an insider's view of the Revolution and to situate Williams' ideas within multiple historical contexts will offer students the same opportunity.

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## NOTES

[1] *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology*, edited by Paula R. Feldman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 797-798.

[2] Deborah Kennedy writes that "Williams had reached the limitations of what she could do in the genre of the literature of sensibility. While Julia, her exemplary woman of feeling, was caring for injured birds or reading to the poor, a whole new way of dealing with injustice was being proposed by the Revolution in France." See Kennedy, *Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 2002), p. 51.

[3] Fraistat and Lanser aptly note how Williams' romantic rendering "creates a microcosm of what Lynn Hunt describes as the 'family romance of the French Revolution,' in which sons overthrow tyrannical fathers and establish new structures of relationship based on love and unity rather than on fear," p. 47. See Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[4] Deborah Kennedy notes: "A self-deprecatory stance was a common strategy for women writers and would probably have seemed especially necessary for one who published on a political topic, since there was a long standing tradition of excluding women from political discussion." See Kennedy, *Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution*, p. 63.

[5] See Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution: 1790-1827* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

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