



Review: Off the Beaten Track

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Camped on my own hot shore,
I send you forth—you deeply
burning
in yourself like a floating candle,
you musing and lit with your own
past—

I send you like a hieroglyph or a
letter
to God, across the shining gulf,
toward the unimaginable ice cliffs
south of the south. (p. 198)

Yet having said goodbye, she discovers what widows come to realize: dead husbands leave only to return. In "February 11, 1994: Berkeley, Anniversary Waltz Again" the widowed speaker addresses her lost husband as if he were present for their familiar yearly celebration, admitting that although she has necessarily forged a new relationship with him, it is one in which both have dramatically changed, he "beardless and pale" into "a *spirit* man" and she into someone who has advanced with "giant steps/ into another somewhere." The wrench of their enforced departure feels fresh again as she contemplates the plum tree's early blossoming, which suddenly seems the only remaining constant of their union, binding them together in a "blind pink three-week waltz/ with air and light and darkness."

Another anniversary poem written four years later, "Berkeley, February 11, 1998: The Hypothetical Life," records the speaker's continuing sense that she and her husband are still man and wife, "still feathered/ with pleasure and the delicate matching/ plumages of marriage." Like the sun brightening the garden after week-long rain, she finds herself feeling warmed by the years of their posthumous life together, "that life/ through which we've walked caressed/ and quarreled all these seven years," even though what remains of her husband is now "only/ the hypothetical/ person that you were."

Although there are occasional soft spots in this taut, polished collection, I feel certain that Gilbert will work out the few lingering kinks with her usual artisanal poise. Among them is a tendency to downshift and blur, rather than heighten and shape, her endings; a poem like "At the Art Institute of Chicago" loses force when it ends by trailing off into colloquial language as the haunting couple strolling arm in arm in Seurat's painting *Sunday Afternoon at the Grande Jatte* are pictured standing "in an eerie shade a whole lot/ scarier than Van Gogh's scream." Sometimes an overwhelming profusion of verbal energy has the effect of obscuring meaning, as in "Sorrow," a frenzied montage of scenes from a Mediterranean cruise that dissolves into the giddy ephemera of images that do not metaphorically cohere.

Gilbert's poems are at their best when her welcoming, unaffected voice serves her exuberant imagination. She is a poet of intense, informed feeling and unusual technical virtuosity. Her range of subject is formidable: she moves from elegy to dramatic monologue, from love poem to *ars poetica*, with an enviable ease. Above all, she has a quality of Keatsian freshness and gusto that is uncommon among contemporary poets. Poems that might wobble and fall to earth in the hands of another poet are kept aloft by the sheer effervescent force of her personality and thought.

Prepare to be dazzled and delighted by the richly imaginative assemblage of poems in *Kissing the Bread*. Like Gilbert's pioneering volumes of criticism, this collection sets a standard by which her contemporaries are sure to be judged. ❧

Off the beaten track

by Audrey Bilger

Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life by Janet Todd.

New York: Columbia University Press, 2000,

544 pp., \$29.95 hardcover.

Frances Burney: A Literary Life by Janice Farrar Thaddeus.

New York: St. Martin's, 2000, 254 pp., \$39.95 hardcover.



In 1798, a year after the death of Mary Wollstonecraft, the minor English poet Richard Polwhele caricatured what he saw as her dangerous views about women's rights in his satirical poem "The Unsex'd Females." Denouncing her as the "intrepid champion of her sex... whom no decorum checks," he lists other women writers who have caught the "Wollstonecraftian" contagion and exchanged feminine charms, blushes and modesty for strident tones and angry demands. These viragos, in Polwhele's opinion, despise "NATURE's law," dismiss the heart and, in so doing, abandon woman's appointed role.

It was Wollstonecraft's own story that helped to build the pyre upon which her feminism would be sacrificed. Also in 1798, her husband William Godwin published her *Memoirs*, exposing to the world her outrageously unconventional life, which included two lovers outside of wedlock, two attempts at suicide, one illegitimate child and one child conceived prior to marriage. Wollstonecraft became an easy target for the pen of writers like Polwhele because her life could be invoked as a cautionary tale. Look what happens, antifeminists would say, if women abandon their traditional roles.

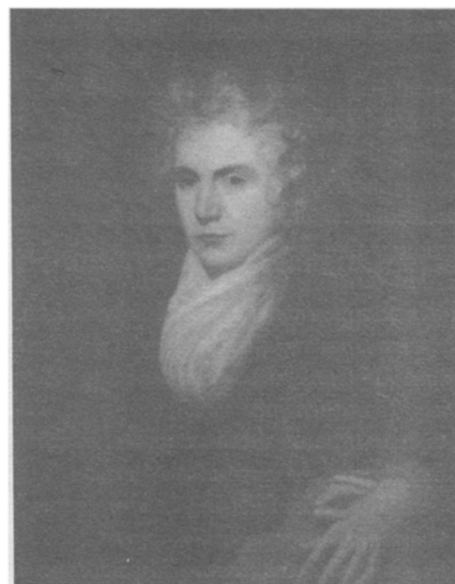
Among those whom Polwhele marshals to resist the tide of Wollstonecraftianism and to serve as standard-bearers of femininity he includes the novelist Frances Burney, because of her ability to "mix with sparkling humour chaste/Delicious feelings and the purest taste." He assumes, as would critics for the next two centuries, that no parallels could be drawn between the polemical author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and the beloved novelist who created such virtuous and outwardly conventional heroines as Evelina, Cecilia and Camilla.

These two new biographies will reintroduce Wollstonecraft and Burney in all their complexity to readers of the twenty-first century. The lives of these eighteenth-century authors illustrate that simple understandings of gender categories cannot do justice to individuals who seek to redefine those very categories in a society that continually reinforces them. From the 1970s on, feminist critics have recognized that Burney's plots are deeply involved with and even anticipate the polemical analysis of gender that Wollstonecraft unabashedly offers. In twentieth-century assessments, Wollstonecraft has been enshrined as a feminist heroine, while Burney has largely been seen as a more cautious and fearful proponent of similar views.

Both Janet Todd and Janice Farrar Thaddeus seek to complicate our understanding of their subjects, and they bring

to the table decades of experience in the field and deft archival research. Todd presents us with a Wollstonecraft whose endless and often irritating self-reflection demonstrates a "new female consciousness," even as it underscores the discrepancies between her life and her work; Thaddeus reveals a Burney who was strong, confident, courageous and professional—in the terms of the book, "protean."

The life writing these two left behind to a large extent determines the stories that may be told about them. In this regard, Burney was indeed more circumspect. Sorting, burning and cutting occupied her during the last months of her life. While an abundance of material remains—especially from her seventy-year "habit" of journal writing—she knew that her more private words would eventually be of interest to readers, and she made choices about what to take with her to the grave.



The earliest known portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft, by an unknown artist, 1791. From *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*.

Had Wollstonecraft lived to be 87 instead of dying at the age of 38 from complications arising from childbirth, she might have done at least some pruning of the letters that represent her life to posterity. Unlike Burney, who always writes with a consciousness of an audience and who honed her narrative talents in letters and diaries, Wollstonecraft writes in the moment, so much so that she seldom pauses to wonder whether a letter will achieve the effect she desires. Todd puts it this way: "As thoroughly as any American of the 1970s, Mary was caught in the sentimental myth that it was good to express every emotion, to let everything hang out."

Throughout her life, but most painfully in her voluminous correspondence with her lover Gilbert Imlay (who eventually rejected her and their

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Mary Wollstonecraft by John Opie, c. 1797. From *Mary Wollstonecraft*.

young child, Fanny), Wollstonecraft's letters reveal each qualm, insecurity and doubt, whipping up hysteria as they go along. Although she emphasizes reason in the *Vindication* as the key to women's emancipation, Wollstonecraft comes across in her personal writing as unable to exert rational control over herself,

even when the alternative is self-abasement.

Past biographers have tried to put a good face on Wollstonecraft's uneven temperament and epistolary histrionics. Godwin, for example, who seems to have valued her more as a figure of sentiment than as a defender of women's rights, calls for an empathetic audience: "I cannot easily prevail on myself to doubt, that the more fully we are presented with the picture and story of such persons as [Wollstonecraft], the more generally shall we feel in ourselves an attachment to their fate, and a sympathy in their excellencies," he wrote. In 1974 Claire Tomalin, in one of the franker recent presentations of Wollstonecraft's life, pointed out the tendency of admirers of this early feminist to "adopt defensive tones and gloss over the aspects of her life and personality that might bring discredit or ridicule on their causes."

Todd's account does not shrink—nor should it—from presenting the less flattering elements of her subject's tumultuous life. From early on, she acknowl-

edges Wollstonecraft's selfishness, her inability to identify with the suffering of others, her tendency to place herself at the center of all events, including the death of her mother. The young Wollstonecraft formed close attachments to other women and wrote to them obsessively, insisting that her friends give her the central place in their lives. Her desire to make a home with Fanny Blood leads her first to move in with Fanny's impoverished family and to begin dominating their lives. Then, having decided that she and Fanny should be alone, she arranges for lodgings and moves in—only to be devastated when Fanny won't leave her family.

In a later scheme, she persuades Fanny to join her and her two sisters, Everina and Eliza, in starting a school, but only after she has alienated Eliza from her husband and child in what she herself views as a rescue. Todd evaluates this "rescue" as the "most impudent and imprudent plan she could think up," and judges the escape as simply a prelude to enticing Fanny: "If she could lure one woman into her household, could she not lure another?" Whatever the truth of the matter, Todd makes it clear that Wollstonecraft gave no thought to the gravity of separating a mother from her child and that she was ultimately unable to sustain the responsibility that she undertook.

Todd evaluates Wollstonecraft's dramatic acts of self-fashioning more favorably. Most notably, her decision to move to London on her own and to set herself up as a professional writer comes across as nothing short of heroic. Wollstonecraft claims status for herself as "first of a new genus," asserting "I am not born to tread in the beaten track—the peculiar bent of my nature pushes me on." And, against the odds, she does indeed manage to fashion a career out of writing. Unfortunately, the published work loses some of its luster in Todd's account of the author's overweening egotism. Wollstonecraft was "averse to revising on other people's advice," including in one work a "belligerent" and "irritable" preface in spite of her editor's request that she mute it.

The *Vindication*, when read through the lens of its creator's personal life, is captioned thus: "Wollstonecraft was battling her infatuation for [Henry] Fuseli by some ground-breaking work." Todd sees its championing of reason over feeling as a retreat from the misery of unrequited passion. Even though she gives the book its due as an original and significant accomplishment, she rather unsettlingly uses it as a touchstone throughout the rest of the biography to illustrate how far its author's own actions and expressed sentiments swerved from the path of reason. In times of crisis, Todd tells us, "[s]he could not bring herself to use the rational language of *The Rights of Woman* on herself; her own life was always delivered in the language of sensibility."

The protracted affair with American businessman Gilbert Imlay occupies a large segment of the biography, overshadowing the horrors of revolutionary France and the Great Terror. At every separation from Imlay, Wollstonecraft writes out each nuance of her desperation. "Why am I forced thus to struggle continually with my affections and feelings?—Ah! why are those affections and feelings the source of so much misery... Will you not endeavor to cherish all the affection you can for me? What am I saying?—Rather forget me, if you can—if other gratifications are dearer to you."

An hour after one letter is dispatched, she writes another, begging her lover to come back, preaching to him about the evils of commerce and his need to be someone different for her sake.

As Wollstonecraft becomes even more despondent, she writes still more, claiming that she will stop criticizing Imlay and then criticizing him, saying that she will write no more and then writing again. Her two attempts at suicide seem worse than maudlin, her clinging love is far from noble. As Todd notes, "The exhortations of the letters are so frequently inappropriate as to seem grimly comic."



Portrait of Frances Burney. From *Frances Burney: A Literary Life*.

While Todd succeeds in delivering an impressively readable story, rich in historical detail, one continually senses the biographer's irritation with her subject's foibles. Far otherwise is Thaddeus' relation to Frances Burney. Rather than viewing Burney's "[p]otent, competing emotions" as a fault, Thaddeus uses the metaphor of "medley" to highlight the way in which feelings of tension, contradiction and frustration coexist to color the author's creative output. Like Wollstonecraft, Burney exhibits a forceful sense of her own worth as a writer, but here we are presented with a positive appreciation of each assertion of ego. Just as Burney managed to navigate her chosen path as author while placating those who might deem her work to be unfeminine, she emerges in Thaddeus' biography as admirably attuned to the status she rightly deserves.

Burney's story is every bit as fascinating as that of her more revolutionary counterpart. She became a celebrated author with her first publication, held a prestigious but stultifying position at the court of King George III, married a refugee from the French revolution, traveled through war-torn Europe and, most startlingly, at the age of 59, underwent a mastectomy without anesthesia. All of these experiences she narrated vividly in her journals, editing and revising her own accounts later in her life and exerting authorial control over what would be viewed by future readers. As Thaddeus rightly points out, the journal writing can by no means be viewed as strictly private revelation: "it must always be called the unpublished, not the private, self. The private self remains always untouchable, too difficult to record, beyond words."

Burney was married at 41 to a man of her own choosing (who, Thaddeus tells us, had written a poem in celebration of the joys of mutual masturbation!). He served as her amanuensis and helpmate, liberating her for a degree of personal and professional success that would have been extremely rare for a



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woman of her (or any) day. As Thaddeus makes clear, while fear and timidity may have been elements of the young Burney's life, it is a mistake to view that early self as the "total self." She insists that we attend to the mature Burney and recognize her fearlessness and independence.

The biography takes its shape from Burney's published works. For readers who like to get caught up in the story of an author's life, the narrative might seem somewhat discontinuous as a result. However, within this framework Thaddeus does an outstanding job of illuminating the context of Burney's writing and of introducing readers to her major works and themes. Burney's broad social canvas and extraordinary ear for dialogue and comedy will delight any reader who undertakes her sometimes formidably long creations (*Cecilia*, for example, runs to about 400,000 words). With its undercurrent of violence and overarching comic vision, Burney's oeuvre merits even greater recognition for its radical originality.

Thaddeus cites nineteenth-century historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, who celebrated Burney's achievements in terms that echo Wollstonecraft's foundational feminist text: "She vindicated the right of her sex to an equal share in a fair and noble province of letters," accomplishing this without including in her works "a single line inconsistent with rigid morality, or even with virgin delicacy." Much like Polwhele, Macaulay finds it necessary to stress Burney's purity, even as he moves beyond the earlier writer's simplistic antifeminism by staking a claim for her "vindication" of women.

Burney's own comment on Wollstonecraftianism may be found in her last novel. Subtitled "Female Difficulties," *The Wanderer* (1814) includes a secondary character caught up in the revolutionary spirit who has become an advocate for the rights of woman. Elinor Joddrel falls passionately in love with a man who will later marry the novel's protagonist, and she stages several failed suicide attempts as a result of her unrequited desire (which by virtue of repetition come to seem perversely comic, not unlike Todd's verdict on Wollstonecraft's letters). At the end of the book, we learn that Elinor's pride ultimately assists her in coping with her love object's marriage to another woman and that time brings about a moderation of her passions. The last speech of the novel belongs to this highly unconventional character: "Alas! Alas!" she cried, "must Elinor too,—must even Elinor!... find, with [the] herd!—her own level?—find that she has strayed from the beaten road, only to discover that all others are pathless!"

Undoubtedly modeled on Wollstonecraft (and perhaps deliberately echoing that author's declaration that she was unable to tread the "beaten path"), Elinor evokes sympathy for her plight, calling attention to women's exclusion from an authentic existence. From one female writer to a fallen comrade, this appeal pleads for compassion. Reading the overtly contrasting lives of Wollstonecraft and Burney, one might be tempted once more to pit them against one another. But both ought to enhance our appreciation of the serious steps these women took in venturing off that "beaten road." In the "pathless" state, it is easy to get lost, as Wollstonecraft undoubtedly did at times. Fortunately for those who have followed, they broke new ground. ❧

Workers of the brave new world

by Lillian S. Robinson

The Globalized Woman: Reports from a Future of Inequality by

Christa Wichterich, translated by Patrick Camiller. London and New York: Zed Books, 2000, 180 pp., \$59.95 hardcover, \$19.95 paper.

Feminists Doing Development: A Practical Critique edited by

Marilyn Porter and Ellen Judd. London and New York: Zed Books, 1999, 246 pp., \$65.00 hardcover, \$25.00 paper.

High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women,

Work, and Pink-Collar Identities in the Caribbean by Carla

Freeman. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000, 334 pp., \$54.95 hardcover, \$18.95 paper.



When I think of globalization, I see it as a ring of fire on the map of the world. Despite its prophetic echoes, this is not a Biblical metaphor. In fact, it's not a metaphor at all, but a marker in working-class women's history. In 1911, a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City took the lives of 146 operatives, most of them Jewish immigrant girls who were trapped inside because the fire doors were kept locked. In 1992, Black workers at a chicken-processing plant in Hamlet, North Carolina, where the emergency exit served as a disciplinary, not a safety measure, were killed in a disastrous fire. In 1993, it was teenage girls working at a doll factory in the suburbs of Bangkok who had no way of escaping the flames because they were locked in. And in 1996 the same scenario was enacted in Bangladesh, where 32 women were burned to death in two Dhaka textile workshops lacking both emergency exits and fire extinguishers. The jobs keep moving to increasingly cheap and desperate labor markets and the flames go with them.

The last item in my grim summary comes from Christa Wichterich's *The Globalized Woman*. Wichterich comments that the women textile workers she interviewed in Bangladesh "have two great fears: a fire in the workshop and rape," adding pointedly that, although the two fatal fires "are still talked about everywhere...there is silence about cases of rape." The authors of these three splendid books about women in global economies respect their subjects' personal reticences, but manage to convey a sense of the women's vulnerability by concentrating on their work lives.

Wichterich's "reports from a future of inequality" show globalization at its most literal. She documents not only the shift of manufacturing and some clerical jobs from developed countries to those in process of development, but also the eventual return of certain jobs to impoverished areas of Europe and the migration of labor to industrial and domestic work or prostitution in what are still richer regions than their own, even as wages there too decline precipitously.

From this perspective, Wichterich surveys the new industrial development of Ireland (the "Celtic tiger") and Wales, both fueled by the low expectations ("flexibility") of women workers in the matter of pay and job security. "In Wales," she points out, "a number of

[manufacturing] activities already pay less than in South Korea." Emphasizing the shape of the international economy, she adds that the "global conveyor belt has come full circle." At the same time, and as part of the same system, homeworking and the sweatshop, hallmarks of an earlier phase of capitalism, have reappeared in the developed world. Contrasting the air-conditioned storage and display rooms on the ground floor of buildings in New York's garment district with the small factories upstairs, where "closely packed employees sit bent over sewing machines in the sultry air, hardly different from their colleagues in Bangladesh," she sees each building as a self-contained globe "with the First World on the ground floor and the Third World above."

The workers in these shops are immigrants, as are many domestics in the Middle East and sex workers in Europe, all of them attracted by the promise of higher wages. The lure of these wages leads many to choose the perils of illegal

immigration: a grotesque parallel to the history of factory fires in the movable sweatshops may be found in the spectacle of more than fifty undocumented Asians who suffocated this past summer in the back of the truck that was delivering them to the promise of work in Britain.

As a journalist, Wichterich is able to move the focus of her densely-packed narrative from macro- to microcosm and back, shifting easily from close-up to long-shot and from one country and type of female labor to another. Her scope includes not only the developed and undeveloped worlds, but also the problematic area between, in newly capitalist Russia and the other nations in the former Soviet bloc. With the demise of "actually existing socialism" in these countries, an economic revolution has turned them into active players in the game of global inequalities.

Because she includes post-socialist Eastern Europe in her inquiry, Wichterich makes very sparing use of the two pairs of categories that typically constitute the basic dialectic of development studies: her remark about the representation of First and Third Worlds in each Garment Center building is the only one I can recall that uses those terms, and she seldom if ever has recourse to the North-South dichotomy. Indeed, once the "Second World" turned capitalist, acquiring in the process certain characteristics of both First and Third Worlds, the contrast between North and South on a worldwide scale also lost its meaning. Wichterich's empirical descriptions of everything from new corporate organizations to women workers' family relationships is so fascinating that I didn't notice the absence of these once central concepts until I began to epitomize her arguments and found myself at a literal loss for words.

Marilyn Porter and Ellen Judd take no notice of this conceptual and lexical shift. They permit the contributors to *Feminists Doing Development* to go on speaking of economic contrasts and dependencies between North and South, even though this now requires awkward qualifiers like

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