‘There are moments, when any creature that lives, has power to drive one into madness. I seemed to know the absurdity of this reply; but that was of no consequence. It added to the measure of my distraction.’ In his Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1798), this is William Godwin’s description of his feelings shortly after questioning the nurse just coming out of the room where his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, lies dying. To Godwin’s question, what she thought of her mistress, the nurse responded that ‘in her judgment, she was going as fast as possible’.1 Godwin’s distracted condition during Wollstonecraft’s fatal illness continued well beyond her death. It is from the state that verges on the borderline of madness that he started to mourn her. After Wollstonecraft’s death from septicaemia following the birth of the future Mary Godwin Shelley, Godwin, symbolically taking his dead wife’s place, moved into her room at the Polygon, where she used to live and work separately from Godwin during the day. Here he immediately immersed himself in work, re-reading all her books and letters. As a reaction to his pain at her loss he started writing the Memoirs, and also began to edit and then publish her posthumous works in 1798, among them her last, unfinished novel, Maria; or, the Wrongs of Woman, and her letters to Gilbert Imlay.

Much scholarly attention has been paid to the unfortunate consequences of the publication of Godwin’s Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Despite Godwin’s respect and good intentions, the book – with an honest account of his wife’s sexual affairs, suicide attempts and unorthodox religious ideas – scandalised contemporaries, and was an inevitable blow to the feminist views associated with Wollstonecraft’s life and work. After the publication of the Memoirs, Wollstonecraft’s work, now considered inseparable from the
life and death her ideas were seen as leading to, was largely ignored and her name was only invoked as a warning until the end of the following century. Her reputation suffered intensely from what the public saw as tasteless exposure. Even friends like Southey were disappointed and accused Godwin of a ‘want of feeling in stripping his dead wife naked’. Roscoe condemned him for mourning her ‘with a heart of stone’. Cruel jokes written by Tory journalists proliferated, while the Reverend Richard Polwhele saw the hand of Providence operating in Wollstonecraft’s life, death and the Memoirs: ‘she died a death that strongly marked the distinction of the sexes’. The Anti-Jacobin, in one of its volumes anonymously edited by Polwhele, cross-referenced ‘Wollstonecraft’ and ‘Prostitution’ in its index.

While in our time successful critical attempts have greatly restored Wollstonecraft’s reputation and significance, and incorporated her works into the study of literary and cultural history, Godwin’s mourning has not yet been fully understood. There seems to be some resistance on the part of scholarship equally to do justice to both sides – perhaps shying away from a critical position that risks not being feminist enough when recovering a feminist icon. What does it mean to mourn ‘with a heart of stone’ a person one deeply loved – a mourning that, besides ‘stripping his dead wife naked’, threatened to damage Godwin’s own reputation in the eyes of his – and even our – contemporaries? How is it possible to demonstrate a paradoxical ‘want of feeling’ under the influence of the most powerful emotions? This chapter reads Godwin’s writings produced at the time of Mary Wollstonecraft’s death (his Memoirs, letters, notes and diary) as they were created in the vortex of overwhelming emotions induced by loss. As I will argue, the growth of affectivity and sensibility that has often been observed in Godwin’s writing during this period is the result of a complex and emotionally ambivalent psychological process: melancholy mourning. Godwin’s case reaches beyond the boundaries of the eighteenth-century understanding of melancholia, raising questions that point towards the ideas of Freud and his successors. Also, as this chapter will hope to show, Godwin’s mourning – as registered in his writings – offers an alternative case study, which in many respects differs from, and poses new questions to, existing psychoanalytic views.

Freud discusses the two processes in his 1917 essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, and later in The Ego and the Id (1923). In his terminology, the work of mourning implies a gradual withdrawal of the libido from the lost loved object during a long and painful process. The attachment is given up bit by bit, through the testing of external reality, until the ego