Some said she was proud, some call’d her a whore,
And some, when she passed by, shut the door;
A damp cold came o’er her, her blushes all fled;
Her lilies & roses are blighted & shed.

“O, why was I born with a different Face?
“Why was I not born like this Envious Race?
“Why did Heaven adorn me with bountiful hand,
“And then set me down in an envious Land?

(From Williams Blake’s ‘Mary’, Pickering MS)

Then I saw mounted on a braying ass,
William and Mary, sooth a couple jolly
Who married, note ye how it came to pass,
Although each held that marriage was but folly.

(The Anti-Jacobin; or Weekly Examiner)

When she returned to London, Wollstonecraft found herself the figurehead of a circle of liberal women writers, all of whom were inspired to some degree by her revolutionary ideas and by her attempts to act on them in life. Two former actresses and established professional writers, the poet and novelist Mary Robinson and playwright and novelist Elizabeth Inchbald specialized in staging gender. The scandalous Robinson teased the public’s fascination with her identity as the Prince Regent’s ex-mistress by using various pseudonymous personae to correspond in verse with readers of the periodicals. The resolutely respectable Inchbald, author of A Simple Story (1791), was a pioneer in converting
elements of stage melodrama into the ‘Jacobin’ novel of social protest. Inchbald socialized with the Siddons/Kemble theatrical circle, and the radical playwright Thomas Holcroft and his friend the anarchist philosopher William Godwin. The latter had become the chief spokesman for political radicalism in literary London after the publication firstly of his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) which demolished the moral basis of all governmental institutions, and secondly of his exciting novel of pursuit, *Caleb Williams* (1794), which targeted the justice system. The group read and commented on each other’s work in progress with conscientious candour.

In letters, conversation and publications alike, this literary coterie posed philosophical questions about their life experiences while they also tested fictional situations by reference to real events. The disintegration of Mary Wollstonecraft and Gilbert Imlay’s attempt to enact an egalitarian sexual partnership was eagerly discussed, and Wollstonecraft would be fictionalized and sometimes satirized in novels such as her erstwhile friend Amelia Opie’s *Adelina Mowbray* (1804) as well as Anti-Jacobin fiction such as Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800).

When she had arrived back in London at the beginning of October 1795, Wollstonecraft was reduced to cross-questioning the cook at the lodgings her ex-lover had procured for her, to find where Imlay had installed his new mistress. She went to confront her and at long last became convinced there was no hope of continuing the relationship. On 10 October, she took a boat and rowed to Putney where it would be quiet enough to throw herself off the bridge unobtrusively. She walked up and down in the rain to make her clothes heavy, then jumped into the water, pressing her clothes around her to help her sink. She lost consciousness but was rescued and revived by onlookers. The event was reported in the *Times*, though the ‘elegantly dressed’ woman was not named. In a subsequent letter to Imlay Wollstonecraft asserted the attempt was not hysterical, but ‘one of the calmest acts of reason’ (*CLMW*, p. 317). She saw it as a revolutionary and heroic act of will. Godwin too would stress her ‘cool and deliberate firmness’ in *Memoirs*. He would, however, in the same work state that her ‘exquisite and delicious sensibility’ made her ‘a female Werther’ – alluding to Goethe’s fictional suicidal lover (*MAVRW*, 88). As Todd comments, ‘Both Wollstonecraft and her act were pushed back into a romantic or sentimental frame’.1

Mary Wollstonecraft’s suicide attempts inspired not merely gossip but philosophical discussion amongst London literary circles, and a wider debate when Godwin’s *Memoirs* came out after her death on whether suicide was justifiable; whether it could be seen as rational and heroic;