

## MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

1759–1797

Mary Wollstonecraft's father inherited a substantial fortune and set himself up as a gentleman farmer. He was, however, both extravagant and incapable, and as one farm after another failed, he became moody and violent and sought refuge in heavy bouts of drinking and in tyrannizing his submissive wife, Mary, the second of five children and the oldest daughter. She later told her husband, William Godwin, that she used to throw herself in front of her mother to protect her from her husband's blows, and that she sometimes slept outside the door of her parents' room to intervene if her father should break out in a drunken rage. The early part of Mary's early life was her fervent attachment to Fanny Blood, an accomplished pianist and deepened until Fanny's death.

At the age of nineteen, Mary Wollstonecraft left home to take a position as companion to a well-to-do widow living in Bath, where for the first time she had the opportunity to observe—and scorn—the social life of the upper classes at the fashionable of English resort cities. Having left her job in 1780 to nurse her mother through a long and harrowing illness, Wollstonecraft next went to the Bloods, where her work helped sustain the struggling family. Her sister Elizabeth meanwhile had married and, in 1784, after the birth of a daughter, suffered a nervous breakdown. Convinced that her sister's collapse was the result of her husband's cruelty and abuse, Wollstonecraft persuaded her to abandon husband and child and flee to London. Because a divorce at that time was not commonly available, a fugitive wife could be forced to return to her husband, the two women had to take quarters while awaiting the grant of a legal separation. The infant, autumn-born into the father's custody, died before she was a year old.

The penniless women, together with Fanny Blood and Wollstonecraft's other sister, Everina, established a girls' school at Newington Green, near London. The school flourished at first, and at Newington, Wollstonecraft was befriended by Reverend Richard Price, the radical author who was soon to play a leading role in the British debates about the Revolution in France, and whose kindly advice helped shape her social and political opinions. Blood, although already afflicted with tuberculosis, went to Lisbon to marry her longtime suitor, Hugh Skeys, and became pregnant. Wollstonecraft rushed to Lisbon to attend her friend's child, only to have Fanny die in her arms; the infant died soon afterward. The loss heightened Wollstonecraft (already subject to bouts of depression) into black despair, which she tried to overcome when she found that the school at Newington was in bad financial straits and had to be closed. Tormented by creditors, she rallied her energies to write her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1786), a conventional and didactic series of essays, and took up a position as governess for several daughters in the Anglo-Irish family of Viscount Kingsborough, a man of great wealth whose estate was in County Cork, Ireland.

The Kingsboroughs were well intentioned and did their best to introduce Wollstonecraft into the busy trivialities of their social life. But the ambiguity of her position as governess, halfway between a servant and a member of the family, was an antagonism developed between Wollstonecraft and Lady Kingsborough, because the children feared their mother and adored their governess. Wollstonecraft

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