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To cite this article: Valentina Pramaggiore (2019) Deconstructing the Boundaries: Gender and Genre in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28:7, 837-845, DOI: [10.1080/09589236.2019.1660147](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2019.1660147)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2019.1660147>



Published online: 03 Oct 2019.



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Deconstructing the Boundaries: Gender and Genre in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*

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ABSTRACT

In her 1796 travelogue, Wollstonecraft combines the main elements of many different genres, blending together the physical-geographical account of the countries she was visiting with her own feelings, producing a Romantic conception of the human being overwhelmed by and subsumed into the natural elements. The journey through the Scandinavian countries turns out to be more than a business travel. It takes the shape of an inner route, a rediscovery of herself and of her experiences, including motherhood. The ability to dismantle the boundaries of the travel writing genre in such an innovative way is the same ability she shows when subverting the literary gender stereotypes that saw women marginalized inside the domestic sphere. What emerges from this extraordinary epistolary collection is a woman capable of the greatest sentimentality and, at the same time, of the smartest rationality, an active woman who does not deny her femininity but who strongly refuses the passivity society has always attributed to the female.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 January 2018
Accepted 21 August 2019

KEYWORDS

Mary Wollstonecraft; travel literature; women's studies; women's literature; Romanticism

The aim of this essay is to analyse Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* from a feminist critical perspective. This paper will examine how in Wollstonecraft's text both gender and genre are challenged, constructed and related to each other in order to make of this epistolary collection a pioneering work in eighteenth century travel literature. It is a hybrid text which cannot be easily labelled or constrained in one single literary category. Mary Wollstonecraft and the extent of her contribution to the feminist movement is well known and widely recognized. What is less acknowledged and, therefore, less celebrated, is her importance to women's literary genealogy, especially regarding the development of travelogue, a literary genre extremely popular in the eighteenth century.

Wollstonecraft published *Letters written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* in 1796, and wrote it during her business journey in the Scandinavian countries on behalf of her lover Gilbert Imlay, to whom the letters were addressed, even though not explicitly. The unconventionality of Mary Wollstonecraft's voyage and travelogue can be traced right from the beginning of her expedition. In eighteenth century Mary was a woman travelling alone with her illegitimate baby daughter and a maid. Her mission was to recover a vessel carrying a silver cargo lost in Sweden, on behalf of a man who abandoned her for another woman. Her journey took place in a land almost unknown to English people at the time. It was not a typical travel destination, nor the object of a traditional travel narrative.

Gender and genre hybridity

In eighteenth century Britain, the genre of travel literature was dominated by male writers, who set canons and established borders, colonizing the gaze and, thus, categorizing *otherness*, as anything *other* than themselves. While male travellers were regarded as the epitome of the western adventurer and discoverer and were owners and rulers of the public sphere, women's position was more controversial, as the domestic sphere to which they were relegated did not easily combine with travelling around the world. Thus, women travel writers were a minority and their works usually underwent a severe self-censorship in order to preserve their reputations. Often judged as inferior, women's travelogues were soon erased from literary historiography and collective memory (as happened with a large part of women writers' literary production) until the 1970s when, thanks to the feminist movements, a rediscovery of women authors of the past became essential. Wollstonecraft's *Letters* undoubtedly constitutes an excellent example of this necessary feminist recovery, especially considering the great popularity of the text in the year of its publication, and the many romantic writers it differently influenced, from Coleridge to Wordsworth, from Hazlitt to R.L. Stevenson, to name a few.

Although usually categorized as a travelogue, Wollstonecraft's text is, as previously mentioned, mainly characterized by hybridity, challenging and mixing the traditional canons of various genres, such as travel narrative, feminist vindication and autobiography, while coalescing them with a powerful romantic theorization. The work is shaped as a collection of letters addressed to a lover. Nonetheless, it does not conform to the stereotypical eighteenth century discourse of women and love letters, since as Lawrence (1994, pp. 75–76) pinpoints 'Wollstonecraft's text challenges both androcentric and feminist "genderings" of travel and epistolarity'. What fascinates the readers is indeed the mixture of sentimentality and rationality that pervades the whole composition. Such a stance challenged the popular belief of the time, according to which women were not regarded as rational individuals and, therefore, were unable to exercise the civil rights granted to men. They were perceived to be unfit to receive a proper education and to hold relevant social or professional positions. Although Wollstonecraft had already attacked such a biased mindset in her 1792 political manifesto *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as an explicit response to M. De Talleyrand-Périgord and his *Rapport sur l'instruction publique*¹ (1791), her commitment to women's rights was very much evident in her travelogue as well.

In *Letters*, Wollstonecraft deals with the stereotypical preconceptions about female intellect, and with women's social and juridical subordination, employing a different and more subtle strategy compared to her previous composition. In fact, she does not directly oppose societal prejudices against women but conceals her critique inside the content of her letters, letting a new portrayal of women's mind and social role emerge through her own words. In *Letters*, Wollstonecraft's fight for an equal society is very much embedded in her aesthetic discourse – as suggested by Bohls (1995, p. 148), her 'preoccupation with aesthetics, especially landscape aesthetics, is inseparable [...] from Wollstonecraft's political engagement'. Throughout her narration, she is able to redefine the relation between human beings and their physical-geographical environment, as well as the gendered aesthetic canons that were enhancing biased power structures between the sexes (Bohls, 1995, pp. 144–49).

Challenging conventions

In her writings, the Scandinavian countries, so far away from the wars that were devastating Europe, turn from being regarded as cold and rough places – a 'masculine' environment inappropriate for a woman travelling alone – to being depicted as challenging yet unspoiled ecosystems, whose wild and spectacular landscape can arouse the highest feelings in those who linger over such a view. The territory acquires a progressively greater importance as the narration proceeds – it is not merely a land the author happens to step on, it becomes a lens through which she can read

the world around her and understand the people she meets, as well as discover a different side of herself. In the text, we can trace what Rose (1993 cited in Bassnett, 2002, p. 230) defines as 'a new feminist concept of geography [that] sees the world differently'. That is to say, the letters depict a world where everyday life, natural landscapes, human relationships and a more personal dimension can together be mapped as physical details, in order to construct new, varied and flexible geographical patterns. Human beings are at the very centre of this new idea of geography. That is why the representation of the natural environment given by Wollstonecraft is outlined 'according to the perceptions, feelings, and needs of those who live on it' (Bohls, 1995, p.154), including, I would argue, the author herself.

Wollstonecraft's figure is inseparable from her political perspective, and her gaze is strictly entwined with what surrounds her, so that her feelings and opinions necessarily influence both her impressions and the narration of events. Her body, as the tool through which she senses, is central to the whole composition and, as she moves from place to place reporting her journey, it becomes the symbol of a regained female authority and authorship. As theorized by French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous, the act of writing is a fundamental means through which women can retake possession of their physicality, and it is 'putting themselves into the text' that they can affirm their subjectivity 'into the world and into history' (Cixous, 1975, p. 875). Thus, it can be argued that this is what Wollstonecraft was trying to achieve in her epistolary work, where she implicitly asserts herself as the protagonist – the one and only authoritative voice – and her point of view as the filter through which she narrates the events and portrays the environment. Making use of both sentimental and descriptive structures, Wollstonecraft inscribes her emotions into the distinctive aesthetic discourse of the romantic age, combining geography and feelings in order to disclose undiscovered dimensions for a female subjectivity to enter and reclaim. Such a powerful combination is exemplified by this passage, which is closer to poetry than to a regular prose letter:

Nature is the nurse of sentiment, the true source of taste; yet what misery, as well as rapture, is produced by a quick perception of the beautiful and sublime when it is exercised in observing animated nature, when every beautiful feeling and emotion excites responsive sympathy, and the harmonised soul sinks into melancholy or rises to ecstasy, just as the chords are touched, like the AEolian harp agitated by the changing wind. But how dangerous is it to foster these sentiments in such an imperfect state of existence, and how difficult to eradicate them when an affection for mankind, a passion for an individual, is but the unfolding of that love which embraces all that is great and beautiful! When a warm heart has received strong impressions, they are not to be effaced. Emotions become sentiments, and the imagination renders even transient sensations permanent by fondly retracing them. (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 53).

Mary Wollstonecraft's epistolary collection best represents the change in travel literature that occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century, when objective narration and facts left room for subjective accounts and, quoting Batten (1978 cited in Lawrence, 1994, p. 90) 'collections of evocative descriptions focusing on the almost poetic qualities of mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes'. Wollstonecraft, who is accustomed to reading and reviewing travel writings as a contributor to Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review*, adheres to this subjective turning, but pushes it to a further level. She combines the emotions aroused by nature with her personal experiences and philosophical meditations, aimed at dismantling fixed norms and stimulating the reader's reflections. The traveller's gaze is absorbed by nature, in a process of fusion that provokes the strongest feelings in the protagonist and echoes the romantic aesthetic categories of 'beautiful' and 'sublime', theorized by Edmund Burke (1756). According to the famous theorist, beauty stimulated love sentiments and harmony and was therefore associated with the 'feminine', while sublimity inspired amazement and respect, and so it stood for the 'masculine' (Burke, 1756). The gender implications of this binary were refused by Mary Wollstonecraft, who merges instead beauty and sublime, presenting them as part of the same continuum rather than as opposite domains, as noticeable in the quotation above where the two categories are mentioned together to fully portray the nature surrounding her and the emotions it evokes. As Lawrence (1994, p. 93) rightly underlines 'Wollstonecraft's travel record implicitly revises Burke's "gendering" of the sublime and the beautiful', giving to *nature* the power

to inspire sentiments and taste and, therefore, erasing whatever categorization established by men. If nature *per se* has not created any labels, cultural constructions as aesthetics and gender do not have a legitimate value before the natural world, and thus, all the subjects subsumed into the environment are whole and equals. As Wollstonecraft (1796, pp. 53–54) explains

I cannot, without a thrill of delight, recollect views I have seen, which are not to be forgotten, nor looks I have felt in every nerve, which I shall never more meet. The grave has closed over a dear friend, the friend of my youth. Still she is present with me, and I hear her soft voice warbling as I stray over the heath. Fate has separated me from another, the fire of whose eyes, tempered by infantine tenderness, still warms my breast; even when gazing these tremendous cliffs sublime emotions absorb my soul.

The travelogue is not merely a journey report but also a partial account of Wollstonecraft's life story, as she narrates what is happening to her during her expedition as well as past events that come to her mind while she travels. The absence of borders between nature and feelings that emerges through the description of the Scandinavian scenery plays an important role even in the narration of the author's life and memories. Autobiographical facts, such as the death of her dearest friend Fanny Blood, are intertwined and presented together with the landscape surrounding her, as if nature was eliciting her memories while, at the same time, her sentiments were shaping her perception of the physical environment. The boundaries between the writer and the natural elements, as well as those between genre categories, are completely overcome. It becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to determine where the travel account ends to leave room for an aesthetic meditation and where the latter is transformed into the narration of an intimate episode. The protagonist is inscribed, almost subsumed, into nature in the same way her autobiographical recollections and philosophical reflections flow spontaneously as a whole.

The combination of different literary genres, which prevents *Letters* from being engaged into a specific category, provided the author with greater room for manoeuvre; a new dimension where she could write freely, following her own mental itinerary and addressing the many diverse issues she considered essential for the construction of an equal society. The new 'feminist geography' previously mentioned, while delineating a borderless physical route, leaves new unmapped territories for women to discover, where they can explore, at the same time, both the world around them and themselves, without being obliged to adhere to the imposed social normativity. Travelling is thus a necessary act to reconcile the outer world with the inner self. Moreover, writing about such a complex journey becomes a crucial act to regain women's authority over both the social order and the female body itself.

The same mixture between outer and inner world is noticeable, for example, in Letter VI where the articulated description of her arrival in Norway turns into a personal thought on motherhood, which then shifts into a feminist rumination on women's oppression in the eighteenth century. The way Wollstonecraft is able to relate one topic to the other, makes every letter a mapped itinerary in the author's mind while tracing a geographical route, so that the reader can almost follow the spontaneous succession of her thoughts and be with her as she moves from place to place. The letter presents many details about boats, shores, and natural elements as rocks and sand, together with a very brief overlook of the town where she lands. The very practical information leaves room for the depiction of the local people's curiosity about, and attitudes towards her, as well as some digressions on their local customs. From the landscape to the food, from the clothes and the houses, to native people public and domestic affairs; every aspect of the journey is rendered equally important.

A woman coming alone interested them. And I know not whether my weariness gave me a look of peculiar delicacy, but they approach to assist me, and inquire after my wants, as if they were afraid to hurt, and wished to protect me. The sympathy I inspired, thus dropping down from the clouds in a strange land, affected me more than it would have done had not my spirits been harassed by various causes – by much thinking – musing almost to madness – and even by a sort of weak melancholy that hung about my heart at parting with my daughter for the first time. You know that, as a female, I am particularly attached to her; I feel more than a mother's fondness and anxiety when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex. (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 50).

As is evident in the quoted passage above, her situation as a mother travelling alone, having temporarily left her daughter in another country, gives the places she visits and the people she meets a different connotation. Her feelings, her gaze and the way she perceives people's behaviour are affected by her personal experience. Indeed, Wollstonecraft proves she is not solely the object of people's curiosity, but also a subject who carefully – and meticulously – watches and takes note of the men and women she meets along the way, as exemplified in the following line:

At supper my host told me bluntly that I was a woman of observation, for I asked him *men's questions*. (Wollstonecraft, 1796, pp. 18–19).

Thus, the act of observing and, overall, of questioning is considered as men's prerogative, alien to women who were, by opposition, the target of their gaze. Conversely, Mary Wollstonecraft is the observed while she is the observer. As Weiss (2006, p. 206) remarks: 'She is watching them watching her, watching the male and female townspeople's reactions to her and producing a social analysis of that reaction'. In so doing, she proves how such roles can coexist and how biased is the dichotomous opposition man/woman, subject/object, observer/observed. As the text disrupts borders, so does the protagonist herself who is similarly characterized by hybridity. The binary division of gender roles is overcome by Wollstonecraft as she delineates a woman traveller who embodies both traditionally male and female traits, showing independence and agency together with femininity and sensibility, thereby demonstrating how such traits do not belong to opposite realms but to the same continuum of human characteristics. Furthermore, as Joyce Kelley (2005, p. 357) points out, 'writing about foreign bodies in a strange land compelled a woman writer to consider the position of her own body as a foreign object' – foreign in a sense of alien to the country but also of different *per se*, *other* from the norm and, thus, powerless.

Society and female subjectivity

Wollstonecraft situates herself as a stranger in the Scandinavian countries, who watches and judges what she sees according to her own standards, which derive from her personality and all the varied intersectional elements that forged her subjectivity. The several axes that construct her identity – such as gender, age, race, class, sexuality – interplay differently according to the circumstances, as pinpointed by Stanford Friedman (1998, p. 23) in her examination of the situational approaches to positionality. If Wollstonecraft's gender is the most relevant axis, as it has the greatest impact on her literary production, other elements should not be overlooked, since they also affect her writing to certain degrees, according to different settings and occasions (Stanford Friedman, 1998, p. 23). For instance, her social class is undoubtedly relevant in the way she looks at the world around her, and so is the fact that she received a proper education, which was not something women could take for granted. Wollstonecraft positions herself as an independent woman because she can write, earning enough money from her publications to support herself without being economically dependable on a husband.

Nationality is indeed a further factor to be taken into account, as England was a powerful country on the verge of becoming an empire, with a vast audience for the many travelogues published in the second half of the eighteenth century. Travel writing widely helped in the construction of a national consciousness that took pride in being part of the 'expanding British Empire' (Bohls, 2005, p. xxvii) while affirming its superiority over the *othered* foreign countries. Wollstonecraft doesn't seem to fit into such a narrative, and although the society she came from certainly influenced her somehow, it is noteworthy the extent to which she tries to be as unbiased as she can, so that she does not give a wrong impression of the countries she visits. In so doing, she criticizes 'most writers of travels [...] eager to give a national character, which is rarely just, because they do not discriminate the natural from the acquired difference' (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 45). Therefore, it can be argued that Wollstonecraft positions herself as a foreigner who is well aware of her background, and of the general tendency to impose the superiority of 'Englishness',

and she condemns such a biased attitude – ‘Travellers who require that every nation should resemble their native country, had better stayed at home’ (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 46).

The distinction made between natural and acquired, in relation to the depiction of Scandinavian peoples, inspires an implicit, though interesting, reflection about what is biological and what is, conversely, culturally or socially constructed. The author seems to imply that the traditional attributes allocated to male and female genders do not correspond to nature but to a patriarchal system that needs to reiterate them in order to legitimize itself. Thus, any allegation about some hypothetical female inferiority – which prevented women from receiving a proper education, obtaining civil rights and pursuing a professional career – appears as artificial and biologically unfounded.

Wollstonecraft’s criticism of women’s conditions in society is disseminated all over the letters and varies from being more subtle and implicit to being expressed in more vehement tones, depending on the context into which they are inscribed. In denouncing social inequality, whenever the events recounted inspire her to do so, Wollstonecraft shifts positions, from being the subject of her own story to the object of prejudices and disparity. And, if as a subject, she publicly contests and resists the stereotypical passive role attributed to women in society, as the object of that social oppression she is compelled to reflect on motherhood and the responsibilities it involves, being the mother of a young girl.

I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. With trembling hand I shall cultivate sensibility and cherish delicacy of sentiment, lest, whilst I lend fresh blushes to the rose, I sharpen the thorns that will wound the breast I would fain guard; I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit. Hapless woman! what a fate is thine! (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 50).

In a society where women are valued solely according to their femininity and all the virtues that make them attractive to men, a girl educated to both sensibility and rationality may be even unhappier, as she may not find her place in such a biased social order. As Weiss (2006, p. 208) highlights ‘In thinking about her daughter’s life, the protagonist appears to reach a point in which she is unable to see a way through the stultifying experience of female victimization caused by society’s desire for women to be sexually passive and intellectually vacant’.

The protagonist of the *Letters* is a woman who loves and suffers and, contextually, sees and reports the world through the lens of her own sex, which necessarily imply political and social connotations. As suggested by Tracy Davis, the literature of any minority group is necessarily politically engaged, as the voice and history of minorities have been ignored and silenced for centuries (Davis, 1999, p. 26). That is why, even though Wollstonecraft’s epistolary travelogue is not a political composition but a more autobiographical account, it is political nevertheless, as her voice, opinions and sufferings are written down, described and shared with a public audience. Wollstonecraft resists the traditional sentimental discourse by merging sentiment with reason to create what Weiss (2006, p. 203) defines as ‘a new *Sentimental Journey*, [where] women’s pain becomes a source of intellectual accomplishment, and women who both feel and think are transformed into agents of progress’. The progress Wollstonecraft is promoting is denoted by a series of political hints and more explicit observations dispersed across the letters. In Letter I, for instance, she reports ‘I with difficulty did honour to some of the dishes, nor relishing the quantity of sugar and spices put into everything’ (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 18), which refers to the goods at the centre of the boycott enacted by radicals and dissenters in order to support the abolitionist movement, as sugar and spices were cultivated by the slaves’ labour in the colonies. Conversely, in Letter XVIII the political content becomes more evident and more explicitly discussed as she describes women’s condition in Denmark and the country’s royal family. Her description of Danish women as ‘notable housewives’ and ‘indulgent mothers’ (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 133) spoiling their children constitutes a prelude to discuss the former Queen, the ‘unfortunate Matilda’ (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 133), who is depicted, in contrast, as a good loving mother to her son, the Prince of Denmark.

Poor Matilda! thou hast haunted me ever since my arrival; and the view I have had of the manners of the country, exciting my sympathy, has increased my respect for thy memory. (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 133)

Matilda was the sister of the British King George III, she married Christian VII of Denmark and after her husband's mental disorders, she started leading the country promoting important social reforms. By highlighting Matilda's skills as a mother, Wollstonecraft aims not only at restoring a positive opinion of the former Queen, but also at drawing a parallel between motherhood and government, demonstrating to what extent a caring mother who knows how to raise a child and to provide for his/her needs could also make a good ruler, understanding maybe better than anybody else people's necessities. Moreover, the figure of a woman who is a loving mother and is also governing a country transcends traditional gender boundaries, as she constantly moves between the private and the public sphere, legitimately belonging to both of them. Queen Matilda's painful fate, exiled and kept away from her children, further supports Wollstonecraft's feminist reflections: women are not allowed to step out of prescribed boundaries and inhabit a public realm if they do not conform to the gender stereotypes imposed by patriarchy.

Conclusions

Hence, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* should be considered a fundamental feminist text. Wollstonecraft was able to feminize the popular genre of travelogue, not merely by substituting a female protagonist to a male one, but also by modifying the genre's canons themselves. She resists the gendered expectations about women's travelogue, not conforming to a traditional sentimental discourse, but instead inscribing sentimentality into political matters, business issues and geographical descriptions. The modern concept *the personal is political* certainly finds application in this work. As Weiss (2006, p. 202) points out, 'despite its use of sentimental structures, *Short Residence* is as much about politics and economics as it is about suffering femininity'. The idea of a different kind of sociability emerges, a 'continuum of sociability' where there are no opposite realms, where public is not the antithesis of private since neither sphere can be conceived as singular: what Davis (1999, p. 19) defines as 'an inclusive and diverse model of sociability, representativeness and citizenship'.

Women travellers in the eighteenth century, as (Bassnett, 2002, p. 231) underlines 'wrote about their experiences from within a tradition that denied them a role, [...] and in full knowledge of the absence of a tradition they could insert themselves with any degree of comfort or familiarity'. That is why rediscovering and theorizing women's travel writing is necessary and essential both in a literary genealogy and in gender studies in order to value and appreciate what has been done by our foremothers, as well as to recognize what still needs to be done, which paths still need to be explored and regained. Through this fascinating travelogue, Mary Wollstonecraft strongly affirms the status of the female traveller and writer. She introduces to the reader a woman able to cross both physical and imaginative boundaries, reclaiming a female role, language and public voice. At the same time, she traces a flexible female geography that involves all those categorical domains rigidly built and separated. The means used by the author to recount her extraordinary voyage is the act of writing, defined by Fortunati, Ascari, and Monticelli (2001, p. 6) as 'the threshold between exile from oneself and one's own culture and between a sense of belonging within the self and the new world'. Thus, in women's travel narrative, the journey is not only a physical displacement but a more complex exploration that examines the social order and its constraints, while it becomes a tool to interrogate and investigate the self and the way it perceives the world (Fortunati et al., 2001). Mary Wollstonecraft seems to be aware of what the concept of journey meant for her own sex, and employs the genre of travel writing with a specific purpose in mind: to question and eradicate gender borders and stereotypes, to narrate a personal route towards a new self-awareness and affirmation of her identity in all of its different aspects: a woman, a mother, a philosopher, a traveller and much more else. In the same way, she uses her gender, what we would now call a *gender perspective*, to dismantle the genre's

canons, making of her travelogue a comprehensive and fluid experience, an innovative work for the eighteenth century and, in my firm opinion, what could be and should be considered a literary and theoretical model, a masterpiece that is still exemplary and relevant nowadays.

Note

1. French aristocrat Charles Maurice Talleyrand-Périgord presented to the French National Assembly his above-mentioned Rapport sur l'instruction publique fait au nom du comité de constitution à l'assemblée nationale, which included a chapter on female education, where he stated the necessity for girls to receive a domestic education that was appropriate for their own sex and that prepared them for their social role as wives and mothers (1791, pp. 211–12).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Valentina Pramaggiore was awarded a BA Degree in Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Bologna in 2013. In 2014, she began the GEMMA Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women's and Gender Studies, which she successfully completed in 2016, when she received an MA Degree in Modern, Comparative and Post-Colonial Literatures from the University of Bologna, and an MA Degree in Women's and Gender Studies from the University of Hull. She is currently a PhD Candidate in European Literatures – Curriculum EDGES in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Bologna, that has awarded her a PhD Scholarship.

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