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Women and Property in Late Eighteenth-Century Fiction: Gendered Property and Generic Belonging in Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft

Kaley Kramer*

University of Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan University

Abstract

The relationship between women and property has been a central investigative concern for literary scholars in recent years. While there can be little doubt that women made up an important part of the increased print market and audience of the 18th century, their participation in other aspects of public life remained highly regulated and constrained by legal requirement and cultural conventions. Yet print offered women an opportunity to explore new kinds of property and foster new communities of sympathetic readers equally versed in literary convention and real-life experiences of oppression. Writing at the end of a century of dramatic change in marriage legislation, property law, and social expectations, Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Smith examine the relationship between gender and genre through the lens of property and ownership. Their novels challenge the limits of generic representation and gesture towards the paradoxical construction of women as marginal and central to the inheritance of real property. Most interestingly, for the purposes of this paper, both demonstrate a keen awareness of the importance of genre and the central role of narrative, not only in fiction but also in relation to discourses that shape women's roles in and relationship with families, social groups, and national communities.

Consider, of what importance to society the chastity of women is. Upon that all the property in the world depends. We hang a thief for stealing a sheep, but the unchastity of women transfers sheep, and farm and all, from the right owner.

Samuel Johnson, *The Journal of the Tour to the Hebrides* (James Boswell, 1785)

But a wife, being as much a man's property as his horse, or his ass, she has nothing she can call her own ... The tender mother cannot lawfully snatch from the gripe of the gambling spendthrift, or beastly drunkard, unmindful of his offspring, the fortune which falls to her by chance; or (so flagrant is this in justice) what she earns by her own exertions. No; he can rob her with impunity ... and the laws of her country – if women have a country – afford her no protection or redress from her oppressor.

Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman, or, Maria* (1797)

'Belonging' is the central and contested social and political concept explored in the fictions of Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft. The multiple connotations of 'belonging' are articulated in Smith's *The Old Manor House* (1794) and in Wollstonecraft's *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) and *The Wrongs of Woman, or, Maria* (1797). These novels respond to Samuel Johnson's comment, which points to the fact that in legal, historical, and literary writing in the late 18th century, women are never the 'right owners'. For Johnson, women's relationship to property can only be expressed as an effect of their sexuality; extending from one object of property (a sheep) to the coherence of the entire project of law and inheritance ('sheep, and farm and all'), women's fidelity determines the relationship between property and the 'right owners'. Wollstonecraft begins with the

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1 same socio-sexual function of women, yet while the wife belongs to her husband on the
 2 same grounds as 'his horse, or his ass' and the mother is locked in a contest over
 3 offspring, 'women', in general, belong nowhere, existing without a country, and outside
 4 of the law. Neither Johnson nor Wollstonecraft disputes property; ownership is the
 5 contested term. Both struggle to articulate how women 'belong' (to society, to the
 6 nation) and what kinds of relationships and objects might 'belong' properly to them.

7 In *Romantic Belongings*, Angela Keane discusses three connotations of belonging: as
 8 'belongings', that is, 'owned goods', the 'property that defines the individual in modern,
 9 contractual society'; as the present participle, 'belonging', which evokes 'a metaphorical
 10 form of ownership: having property in common, sharing the interests of other people';
 11 and as 'the participle 'longing' [that] neatly captures the dynamic of desire ... endemic to
 12 national discourse' (Keane 2). While real property – particularly land – remained the
 13 central ideological and imaginative paradigm in the 18th century, metaphors of ownership
 14 can also describe an individual's acquisition of cultural capital and how they inhabit social,
 15 cultural, and political roles. The law could not forbid women from owning property; it
 16 could, however, limit the privileges accorded with property ownership for women.
 17 Possession of property guaranteed political representation and participation for men; for
 18 women, property was a politically empty signifier. Regardless of possession or position,
 19 women could not act with the power that the same property would automatically confer
 20 on a male owner: women could not sit in Council, or in either parliamentary house, they
 21 could not serve on juries and they could not vote (Greenburg 172). This apparent para-
 22 dox challenges 'the fundamental principles of liberal ideology, namely, that ownership of
 23 property serves as the basis for political freedom and individual autonomy' (Staves 84).
 24 Women's relationships to real property were fraught with social conventions and legal
 25 prescriptions: while single, women were given the same legal status as men; social imper-
 26 atives and the lack of alternative opportunities for legitimate self-sustaining employment
 27 meant that marriage inevitably informed and influenced women's lives. Furthermore,
 28 marriage laws and custom ensured that any property a woman took with her into
 29 marriage transferred automatically to her husband's possession.¹

30 Keane's second and third connotations are particularly relevant to my consideration of
 31 Smith and Wollstonecraft's work. Their novels struggle to articulate the experience of
 32 women alienated from ownership and thus from the basic relationship that created the
 33 modern, autonomous individual. Both authors also demonstrate the close connection
 34 between these three articulations of 'belonging': each relies on the other for meaning.
 35 Belongings prove the owner's entitlement to belong to a community of similarly invested
 36 individuals and reinforces their participation in a larger cultural narrative that articulates
 37 and answers the longing for inclusion in larger communities, extending to the imaginative
 38 construction of the nation. I would extend Keane's third reading of 'belonging': alongside
 39 the 'dynamic of desire' that finds expression in national consciousness, there is also the
 40 imperative to 'be longing' that identifies those unable to separate themselves from belong-
 41 ings or participate in communities of ownership. As 'owned goods', the law condemns
 42 women to a state of frustrated longing, defined by a desire they can never fully own and
 43 therefore never satisfy. Smith and Wollstonecraft articulate this longing in their novels
 44 and it resonates throughout their public lives. Their legal status as property (wives and
 45 daughters) clearly conflicted with their determination to express themselves and give
 46 voice to their desires.

47 ~~Superficially,~~ Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft ~~have little in common.~~ Born
 48 into a genteel family of some wealth, Charlotte Turner married Benjamin Smith when
 49 she was 15. Yet the stability promised by marriage and inheritance proved illusory.

1 Smith's marriage portion and inheritance went to Benjamin automatically upon marriage.
 2 As a married woman, she was entirely at the mercy of her spendthrift and shiftless
 3 husband, who dragged her and their young family to exile in France and to debtor's
 4 prison in London, losing virtually all of his money and the money his marriage to Char-
 5 lotte had brought him. Smith's correspondence is rife with complaints about how her
 6 earnings often went to Benjamin's creditors. While Smith eventually estranged herself
 7 and her children from her husband, her status as wife interfered significantly in her
 8 attempts to establish herself as an independent, autonomous individual. The money she
 9 was paid from writing – particularly the well-received and oft' reprinted *Elegiac Sonnets* –
 10 belonged legally to Benjamin. Jacqueline Labbe argues that Smith's 'self-definition as a
 11 writer extended to viewing her publishers as her bankers' (Labbe 1). From this, it is
 12 evident that Smith regarded her writing as property and treated her future projects as
 13 collateral for current loans. Smith's letters frequently represent her writing as work and
 14 she often used metaphors of drudgery and slavery to express her relationship to the
 15 demands of publishers. It is also possible that keeping money away from her person and
 16 home was a strategy for security – her body and her home legally belonged to her
 17 husband, who could demand her compliance with his demands at any time.² Smith's
 18 unsuccessful attempts to secure her children's inheritance were at least partly due to her
 19 inability to represent herself at law: as a wife, she had no legal autonomy or identity apart
 20 from her husband, regardless of his unwillingness to act in the best interests of his family.³

21 Janet Todd's biography of Wollstonecraft opens with the provocative statement: 'It
 22 began with the will' (Todd 3). The will to which Todd refers belonged to Wollstonecraft's
 23 grandfather, Edward Wollstonecraft, and it provided for 'all his other descendants – with
 24 the exception of a granddaughter, Mary' (Todd 3). Mary was 5 years old when her
 25 grandfather died, and it is unlikely that her disinheritance was the result of some offence
 26 on her part. More likely, Edward Wollstonecraft acted pragmatically, excluding Mary
 27 because, as a daughter, any property settled on her would pass out of the family and into
 28 her future husband's hands. Wollstonecraft, however, avoided conventional marriage until
 29 much later in life. Her correspondence and writing show the difficulty she faced in secur-
 30 ing financial – and personal – stability as a single woman without the support of family
 31 property. Financial solvency eluded Wollstonecraft ~~for much of her life. Like~~ Smith, she
 32 was often in debt to her publishers. As an educated, determined, self-aware young woman,
 33 Wollstonecraft found the available options for self-sufficiency, such as governess or lady's
 34 companion, suffocating and degrading. Her attempt to forge a relationship with Gilbert
 35 Imlay outside of marriage illustrates the difficulty and danger women faced in straying
 36 beyond cultural narratives of proper femininity. Her parents' difficult marriage and her
 37 sister's disastrous experience with her husband undoubtedly influenced Wollstonecraft's
 38 views on marriage, which she later described as 'legal prostitution' (*Vindication* 135, 239).
 39 Like Smith, Wollstonecraft's writing was an economic lifeline, one that allowed her to
 40 claim ownership over her ideas and expression while allowing her a slender margin of
 41 sustainable existence.

42 A will would also occupy most of Smith's life. Intended to benefit his grandchildren,
 43 Smith's father-in-law, Richard Smith, drew up the settlement without the advice of
 44 lawyers, establishing a trust for Smith's children that earned between £700 and £900 per
 45 year from the sugar trade with the Barbados (Fletcher 237). Disagreements between
 46 trustees over Richard's intentions meant that little of the money was ever distributed
 47 and the will remained subject to competing claims until it was finally settled in 1813.
 48 None of Smith's children were benefactors and Smith had died 7 years previously. The
 49 different legal struggles of Smith and Wollstonecraft nonetheless point to the systemic

1 disinheritance of women from legal ownership and legal protection and recognition.
 2 Smith's experiences illuminate the difficulties in relying on even those laws meant to offer
 3 protection to women in marriage, such as marriage settlements and separate allowances.
 4 Married with £3000, Smith complained bitterly that even the money due to her from
 5 this settlement was withheld by Benjamin. Her life of penury was a direct effect of her
 6 husband's economic mismanagement and her ~~own~~ inability to intervene in her ~~own~~ and
 7 her children's best interests with any legal authority.

8 Both women found in writing and authorship navigable, if contested, spaces in which
 9 they could create property and enact ownership. In addition to much needed income,
 10 writing offered Smith and Wollstonecraft a platform from which to articulate their expe-
 11 riences of oppression and engage in realms conventionally closed to female participation.
 12 Neither entirely physical nor entirely abstract, writing occupied an ambiguous place in
 13 18th-century conceptions of property. Catherine Gallagher and Harriet Guest argue that
 14 women found in this ambiguity a productive space in which to establish their own claim
 15 to possession and ownership. Debates over copyright and literary property throughout
 16 the 18th century complicated the status of 'author' for both men and women. As Galla-
 17 gher suggests, 'woman' shared with 'author', 'marketplace', and 'fiction' 'connotations of
 18 nothingness and disembodiment' (Gallagher xviii). The 'writer-as-whore' paradigm draws
 19 an inescapable link between the body of the (female) writer and the body of work
 20 produced – both circulating in an economic system that values and cheapens commodi-
 21 ties. It is an essentially and inescapably gendered metaphor that compounded the problem
 22 of public exposure for female writers. This assumed immodesty of the female writer,
 23 Guest argues, could be diffused by conventionally apologetic prefaces in which the author
 24 begged indulgence from her audience, pre-emptively modelling proper feminine
 25 modesty. On the other hand, writing for financial gain rather than courting public esteem
 26 could in itself be represented as modest, a strategic awareness of the assumption that
 27 women lacked the educational qualifications required for writing 'serious' literature
 28 (Guest 480). In either case, the proprietary relationship between text and author that
 29 Daniel Defoe likened to a father's natural ownership of his wife and children was never
 30 available in the same way to female authors.⁴ Yet neither Wollstonecraft nor Smith used
 31 these strategies in the prefaces to the novels under consideration. *The Old Manor House*
 32 does not include any prefatory material and Wollstonecraft's prefaces to *Mary* and *The*
 33 *Wrongs of Woman* are opportunities for her to lay claim to the original and experimental
 34 aims of her writing. Clearly, both women conceived of their writing as incontestably
 35 their rightful property.

36 While cultural capital and intellectual property may have been ascendant in an era of
 37 increased literacy and public discourse, female authors did not see their professional status
 38 overturn their dependent legal status. The money Smith earned through writing – even
 39 after separating from Benjamin – was a source of anxiety: as a wife, she had no legal right
 40 to her earnings without her husband's consent, though he had every right to them with-
 41 out hers. Smith's novels were widely read and critically well-received⁵; her right to the
 42 proceeds of her work – to the full material ownership of her intellectual property – was
 43 much more tenuous. Writing offered women an opportunity to earn money in a
 44 respected (if controversial) profession, however, it did not change the way they were
 45 perceived at law nor did it affect their relationships with real property and legal owner-
 46 ship. They could demonstrate their possession of cultural capital in the production of
 47 further cultural capital but translating that into secure financial gain proved more difficult.
 48 For both writers, genre and generic convention are the spaces in which they stage their
 49 most effective arguments on the structures and system of the law. Narrative conventions

1 provide the framework within which the story unfolds; by focusing awareness on the
 2 ways in which literary narratives collude with larger cultural narratives given authority
 3 and agency over women's lives, Wollstonecraft and Smith reveal the power of the 'the
 4 law' rather than specific examples of oppressive laws. Keenly aware of their 'belonging'
 5 to traditions of female writing – particularly romance and sensibility – both women dem-
 6 onstrate how these systems perpetuate women's alienation from legal property ownership
 7 and, crucially, from claiming the fundamental property in their person that underwrites
 8 the social contract and political belonging.

9 Literary conventions and traditions represent a wealth of cultural capital available to
 10 Smith and Wollstonecraft as readers and writers. Their novels demonstrate a sophisticated
 11 awareness of genre and stylistic elements that enable them to create hybrid texts that are
 12 intensely self-reflexive and interrogatory. This attention to form allows both writers to
 13 not only deploy but also to deconstruct generic conventions and play with audience
 14 expectations. In addition, their deliberate (and sometimes declared) attention to the artifi-
 15 ciality of genre and their facility with literary convention announces the cultural 'educa-
 16 tion' of the writer. Smith's *Ethelinde, or, The Recluse of the Lake* (1789) offers a retelling of
 17 Odysseus' return at the end of the *Illiad*, with the shipwrecked hero, Montgomery,
 18 recognized only by his dog, Vigo, returning to claim the hand of Ethelinde, who has
 19 fought off various suitors in his absence (*Ethelinde* 5:291–335). Wollstonecraft's texts refer
 20 constantly to contemporary and classical literature; her heroines demonstrate their value
 21 through their educated and critically self-aware reading. Though determined to create a
 22 new species of fiction, Wollstonecraft's two novels nonetheless exhibit the attractions and
 23 flaws of conventional and established literary novels. Smith's generic flexibility is more
 24 subtle; her need to create a sellable commodity is clearly often at odds with her sharp
 25 commentary on the narrow options open to both heroines and their female creators.

26 It is through this generic flexibility that both Smith and Wollstonecraft reveal their
 27 interest in selfhood and property as well as their engagement with the ideologies and
 28 institutions that support narrative conventions. Gender is the critical marker of social
 29 belonging for both writers. In a moment of despair, Wollstonecraft's heroine, Maria,
 30 demands of the universe 'Why was I not born a man, or why was I born at all?' (*Maria*
 31 139). The 'or' implies that the two questions are essentially the same: being born a
 32 woman equates with not being at all. Yet in spite of this erasure, women are vital to
 33 narratives of legal acquisition and inheritance. Smith's *The Old Manor House* presents a
 34 particularly cogent example of how legal and historical narratives overlap, mutually rein-
 35 forcing the representative function of the other. The revelation of the critical duplicate of
 36 Mrs Rayland's will links women with history through their roles as wives and caretakers
 37 of family property. The will, secreted in Rayland Hall by the mysterious and malevolent
 38 Mrs Lennard (later married and renamed Mrs Roker), is hidden in time as much as in
 39 space. The hero, Orlando, must depend on his faithful memory of 'old times' to recover
 40 it. The intertwining of national and private family history in this episode reinforces the
 41 connection between landed property and national identity:

42
 43 If you have not forgotten old times, Mr. Orlando, you know very well that Rayland Hall,
 44 which belonged to such famous cavaliers in the great rebellion, has a great many secret stair-
 45 cases, and odd passages, and hiding-places in it ... By the side of my bed, in that chamber partly
 46 hung with scarlet and gold painted leather and partly with painting in panels, where there is a
 47 brown mohair bed lined with yellow silk, you may remember a great picture of Lady Alithea,
 48 second wife of the first Sir Hildebrand Rayland, with her two sons and a dog—She was and
 49 Earl's daughter ... and great great grandmother to my late Lady. The picture is only a copy ...

Close under that picture there seems to be a hanging of gilt leather ... under it is a sliding oak

board, which gives into a closet where there is no light—but a very narrow stair-case goes from it through the wall, quite round to the other side of the house, and into other hiding places ... [I]n a sort of hollow place about three feet wide, made like an arch under the thick wall in the closet, is a tin box with a padlock—and in that box this inlaid rose-wood box or casket. There you will find the real will of my Lady (*OMH* 513–14).

It is important to note the progression from ‘old times’ to ‘Rayland Hall’ through Mrs Rayland’s ancestry and finally to Lennard’s bed. While Lennard’s identity remains enigmatic throughout the novel, she has inserted herself firmly into the Hall and into its history through her ability to relate family stories. The hiding place can only be revealed by a woman, accessed through an intimate, feminine space – Lennard’s bedroom – and, furthermore, it is symbolically guarded by Lady Alithea, described as a wife, daughter, and mother: a composite picture of the roles that women play in the transmission of property. Lennard’s ‘odd passages’ map history onto Rayland Hall by linking architectural and textual features: her detailed directions to Orlando serve little function, purpose to the plot – it is an ‘odd passage’, full of digression and description. In many ways, the passage does not belong: it is excessive to the needs of the romance plot or the property plot. The ‘very narrow stair-case’ alludes obliquely to Monimia, Orlando’s love interest, and the novel’s other great mystery, whose elusive origins align her with Lennard and whose turret-bedroom is also a nexus for secret passage ways. Lennard’s meticulously detailed retelling of the history of Rayland Hall stands in for a particular understanding of history, and the place of those omitted from historical record. It replaces the open spaces of the Hall, the grand banquet halls and portrait galleries preferred by Mrs Rayland, with the secret spaces that serve less orthodox projects: the servants of Rayland Hall use the ‘hiding-places’ and ‘odd passages’ in their smuggling operations, the servant, Betty, as well as Monimia and Orlando, use them for illicit liaisons. Through Rayland Hall, *The Old Manor House* multiplies available paradigms of ownership and use; it represents the intractable nature of landed property that can, nonetheless, be adapted and altered, fitted up for modern use.⁶ Her representation of female property owners and female agency further complicates the novel’s seeming trajectory towards narrative convention.

Smith’s *The Old Manor House* cannot be considered a purely Gothic text, though it does borrow significantly from the Gothic, particularly in the plots involving Monimia, Mrs Lennard, and Mrs Rayland. The Gothic obsession with family lineage and property are clearly carried over into Smith’s novels, particularly *Emmeline*, *Ethelinde*, and *The Old Manor House*, but it is the latter that most self-consciously demonstrates the subversive potential of combining generic elements without necessarily resolving them into a coherent whole. Smith’s heroines face the conventional problems associated with female disinheritance from cultural, social, economic, and familial support networks. The refusal to integrate Monimia into traditional sentimental or Gothic narratives makes her a remarkable character. Wollstonecraft’s fictional heroines, Mary and Maria, are comfortable and confident in their family origins (however uncomfortable those relations make them): they are never legally orphaned nor, as infants or children, are they separated from their families. Smith’s eponymous heroines, Emmeline and Ethelinde, are more conventionally drawn: they are orphaned through misfortune before or shortly after their births, and are surrounded by well-meaning, if neglectful, relatives. Mary and Maria, likewise, know their families but, as for Emmeline and Ethelinde, this does not necessarily guarantee protection or security. By including family and kin as part of the heroines’ lives, both authors emphasize the systemic disinheritance of women rather than indicting singular examples of bad fathers or guardians. While these conventional villains appear in the novels, it is not their essential badness that allows them to persecute the heroines but

1 instead their willingness to use a system already available for corruption and biased against
 2 women's involvement. Even where uncles, brothers, or fathers are idealized models of
 3 familial behaviour, they are unable to offer any real or lasting protection. Only marriage
 4 and the authority of the husband can provide the security and stability longed for by the
 5 heroine.

6 The challenge offered by late 18th-century Gothic novels, such as those by Ann Radc-
 7 liffe, to the stability of history as an explanatory and progressive narrative, fundamental to
 8 cultural cohesion, carries its own defeat – a trap that both Wollstonecraft and Smith
 9 anticipate. If patriarchal history is unreliable, all history is unreliable – the instability
 10 becomes systematic, driven by an epistemological flaw inherent in narrative. Historiogra-
 11 phy emerges as an exercise in self-expression rather than objective recording. In the face
 12 of such social and personal fragmentation, the importance of a new external standard on
 13 which to base identity becomes paramount. The continuity of property, its ability to be
 14 recalled from a dormant past, and its ability to locate individuals within personal and
 15 national narratives are significant elements in Ann Radcliffe's Gothic texts.⁷ Due to their
 16 popularity as a genre, Gothic novels offered women a literary space in which to construct
 17 alternative or supplementary histories and to work towards integrating these forgotten or
 18 omitted stories as part of their cultural inheritance. Women's experiences of alienation
 19 and exclusion in Radcliffe's Gothic novels stem from their *exclusion* from history and
 20 property ownership, but it is not an inevitable effect of either. This unbalanced access to
 21 these systems of identification throws the knowable world out of order, resulting in the
 22 disruption of 'natural' order by elements of chaos and the supernatural. It is only when
 23 women claim their 'natural' position *within* systems of inheritance and ownership that the
 24 Gothic instability subsides.

25 Though Mrs Rayland's sole ownership of Rayland Hall goes uncontested, the text
 26 emphasizes her unmarried status and her honorary title 'raise[s] the spectre of the married
 27 woman with property' (Labbe 'Metaphoricity', 218). Her possession of Rayland Hall,
 28 though reinforced through her equally certain possession of the family patronymic,
 29 depends on her continued spinsterhood. Fortunately, she is 'educated with such a very
 30 high idea[] of [her] own importance, [she] could never be prevailed upon to lessen, by
 31 sharing it' (*OMH* 37). Unable to fulfil her proper feminine role as a wife and mother,
 32 and unwilling to sacrifice her property for the good of succeeding generations, Mrs Ray-
 33 land becomes both the Gothic villain and victim. 'Sharing' property for women was
 34 entirely a sentimental illusion: legally, marriage would transfer the name, the Hall, and all
 35 (to borrow Samuel Johnson's phrase) away from Mrs Rayland and to her husband. The
 36 narrative focus on exorcism undermines her claim to the property as well. Her will makes
 37 Orlando's inheritance contingent on his taking Rayland as a family name, 'settling the
 38 whole of the landed estate ... on his *male heirs*', and buying back the title of baronet
 39 (*OMH* 519, my emphasis). Orlando must become his ancestor, Sir Orlando Rayland.
 40 Only then can the spectre of Mrs Rayland be exorcised from the narrative and from
 41 family history: because the estate is entailed on male heirs, there is no anxiety about the
 42 possibility of a future Mrs Rayland.

43 Smith stages a careful and considered exploration of genre through the character of
 44 Mrs Rayland. While her status as a female landowner places her within a tradition
 45 of power associated with romance, she also challenges romance conventions and gender
 46 assumptions. She is simultaneously the princess in the castle and the monster that
 47 guards it. She is not, however, an entirely monstrous-feminine character and is
 48 sufficiently sympathetic to evoke the reader's pity. Although she undermines her only
 49 remaining family, the Somerives, and stands between Orlando and his future happiness

1 with Monimia, she is also plotted against and the machinations of Dr Hollybourne and
 2 the Rokers appear unjust and wicked. She sticks out: an element of chaos that cannot be
 3 absorbed completely into the narrative. She dies off-page, while Orlando, her champion,
 4 is in North America. Gothic villain and Gothic victim, Mrs Rayland represents both the
 5 disappeared women of history and the agency behind their disappearance. For the sake of
 6 her family's continuance, Mrs Rayland must sacrifice her belongings (Rayland Hall) and
 7 her belonging (by erasing her anomalous presence from history).

8 Monimia, the enigmatic heroine of *The Old Manor House*, represents the opposite
 9 trajectory. She is unique in Smith's novels and her presence in the text serves to highlight
 10 women's relationship to property and to genre. In her introduction to the 2006 edition
 11 of *The Old Manor House*, Ina Ferris points out that Monimia's turret and her knowledge
 12 of the secret passage ways that connect it to the rest of the house enable the romance
 13 plot. Her knowledge of the structure and alternative uses of Rayland Hall, which exceed
 14 Mrs Rayland's, complicates the qualifications by which ownership and belonging are
 15 established. ~~Monimia, on the other hand, belongs to Rayland Hall.~~ Unconventionally, her
 16 background and history are never revealed and her identity is constructed purely in her
 17 relationship to the Hall. While there is never any question that Monimia does not, and
 18 cannot, own Rayland Hall, her knowledge of the building and her ability to use its struc-
 19 ture to her own advantage eventually enable her development and growth that allow her
 20 to function when she is expelled from the hall. Monimia's longing is never straightfor-
 21 ward, most importantly, it 'mingles with [her] desire for books' (Ferris xix). Thus, her
 22 sense of belonging emerges as a complicated process of becoming literate and discovering
 23 an interior self that she can possess. While it is possible to read Monimia's lack of family
 24 connection and background as a crucial part of her seamless integration into the conclu-
 25 sion of the novel, that same lack allows her to create a self unrestricted by pre-existing
 26 conditions. Ferris' connects Monimia's creation of interiority with Smith's description of
 27 interiors. Her brief analysis of the 'bookish enclave' is particularly illuminating for my
 28 purposes. Monimia and Orlando hold their most intimate conversations in the ruined
 29 library deep in the heart of Rayland Hall. Neglected by Mrs Rayland and overlooked by
 30 her criminally entrepreneurial servants, the library 'mirror[s] ... the heroine herself [as] a
 31 potential to be activated' (Ferris xix). Again, there is no question of Monimia's 'owner-
 32 ship' of the books, nonetheless, the opportunity for education offered by the library does
 33 imply the potential for some forms of property – particularly literary and cultural – to be
 34 detached from the material.

35 Monimia emerges from nowhere and becomes an integral part of the social and
 36 cultural community of Rayland Hall, yet unlike Mrs Lennard or Mrs Rayland, she is able
 37 to survive away from the Hall. Both Mrs Rayland and Monimia allude to romance
 38 conventions and their double presence in the text, one declining, one ascending, gestures
 39 towards the continued fascination for romance in competing masculine discourses of
 40 history, the law, and 'realism'. Her name alone mystifies and disturbs other characters.
 41 Both Mr Somerive and Mrs Rayland insist on calling her 'Mary', remarking that
 42 Monimia is too romantic, too literary: it reminds Mrs Rayland of 'a very hateful play'
 43 and Mr Somerive insinuates that Orlando is disguising his affection for a common servant
 44 by giving her such a name (*OMH* 1, ch. 2; 2, ch. 4). Through Monimia, Smith responds
 45 to the critical consensus of romance as a fantastic and false genre: she retains the conven-
 46 tional association with nature and young animals, but – far from the accusations of artifice
 47 levelled at romances – she is also a 'poor dissembler, and had never in her life been guilty
 48 of a falsehood' (*OMH* 46, 51). Her superstitious beliefs stem from experience, having
 49 'seen and heard' evidence of the apparitions of Rayland Hall that Orlando mocks.

1 Her tutelage in the neglected library serves to equip her with modern opinions and
 2 enables her to survive outside of the hall. But the teacher/student relationship also serves
 3 to shore up Orlando's beleaguered masculinity, while tacitly demonstrating male desire
 4 for and direction of romance.⁸ At least implicitly, Orlando's interest in Monimia's ability
 5 to read and write is self-serving: an illiterate mistress has little precedence in romantic
 6 traditions and a mediator would remove (or at least alter) the clandestine, erotically
 7 charged nature of reading/writing a love letter. Metaphorically, her education suggests
 8 the reassignment of feminine romance as masculine novel in order to legitimate, illicit,
 9 'feminine' desires of male readers and writers. As Monimia acquires knowledge and
 10 increases her understanding, however, she becomes increasingly independent, a develop-
 11 ment that threatens Orlando's control over her. Her ability to adapt to communities
 12 inside and outside of Rayland Hall, arguably her discursive origin, figuratively represents
 13 the ability of romance to adapt, to *belong*, within other genres as a site of both support
 14 and resistance.

15 Yet as an individual woman, Monimia fits perfectly within the general trend of female
 16 disinheritance. Though hardly unique in 18th-century literature as an orphaned heroine,
 17 Monimia's identity remains unresolved by the conclusion of *The Old Manor House*. In
 18 Wollstonecraft's two novels, the over-determined economic, social, and cultural 'orphan-
 19 ing' of women does not require actual legal or physical abandonment. Smith's *Emmeline*
 20 (1789) features a heroine orphaned from the opening, who must recreate familial relation-
 21 ships with various strangers throughout the novel. In *Ethelinde* (1788), the heroine's iden-
 22 tity is not an issue; as in Wollstonecraft's novels, the heroine's family is there the cause of
 23 her social and economic disinheritance. Both writers play with the concepts of inheritance
 24 and the connection between ownership of real property and cultural legacies. Through
 25 their heroines, Wollstonecraft and Smith 'dramatise[] confusions about reciprocal duties
 26 and responsibilities of individuals to families, communities, and societies' (Perry 2). More
 27 than this, the heroines exemplify the initial problems of women's ever wholly belonging to
 28 any of these socially configured groups. In Monimia's case, her identification with romance
 29 enables her to move freely within a narrative that manifests generic play. This same flexibil-
 30 ity caused by her *lack* of a fixed identity enables her complete absorption into the new con-
 31 jugal family and lineage (re)created at the conclusion. As her marriage to Orlando becomes
 32 more certain, Monimia diminishes in importance to the property plot. Long before the
 33 dramatic discovery of the will, the narrative loses interest in Monimia, revealing Mrs Roker
 34 as the key to unravelling the mystery and realigning property with proper owners. Lacking
 35 any property or family with connexions to local or national history, Monimia can neither
 36 add to nor take away from the property or history of the Rayland family. Metaphorically,
 37 Monimia-as-romance reveals the possibility of female empowerment and the extent to
 38 which romance 'belongs' within a patriarchal framework. As an individual character, Mon-
 39 imia represents women's troubled and troubling status as property.

40 For Smith's heroines, family lineage matters less than the affective and imagined family
 41 groups assembled and abandoned throughout the novels. Though not purely Gothic,
 42 *Emmeline* does represent the consanguineal family as malignant and threatening, necessary
 43 but unreliable and destructive compared with the nurturing environment the heroine
 44 finds beyond the walls of 'home'. Emmeline, the eponymous heroine, must realize that
 45 'belonging' to her consanguineal family relies on obligation and duty that can be reduced
 46 to a contract. Smith, however, requires her heroine to recognize herself as a participant
 47 in the creation and maintenance of mutually beneficial contracts. Unlike more rigidly
 48 sentimental heroines of earlier literature, Emmeline understands a contract in quantifiable
 49 financial terms and furthermore, threatens to break the agreement if the other party, her

uncle, Lord Montreville, discontinues his contracted responsibility. Wollstonecraft's heroines, particularly Mary, are more hampered by sensibility and their faith in the positive potential of sentimental ideology. For both Mary and Maria, recognizing their belonging to either consanguineal or conjugal families destroys their sense of self. Both survive by imagining communities to which they can belong as full and equal participants: in *Mary*, it is the sentimental sisterhood and later the platonic relationship with Henry, in *Maria*, Darnford and Jemina form an idealized circle of sympathetic souls in the madhouse. Again, both are failed by available narrative paradigms: Mary can only long for a utopia of complete self-possession and isolation after death and Maria is left a character without a story in Wollstonecraft's unfinished fragments. Where Smith allows her heroines to adapt and survive by combining elements of genre, Wollstonecraft sacrifices narrative at times to preserve her heroines' characters.

In the creation of her first heroine, Mary, Wollstonecraft emphatically refuses to follow models of female characters or narratives. Yet the prefatory advertisement to *Mary, A Fiction* already anticipates the difficulty of her project to 'develop a character different from those generally portrayed' (*Mary* 'Advertisement'). Unwilling to create a character that fits available paradigms, Wollstonecraft still cannot offer a description of *where* her heroine belongs. Claudia L. Johnson has pointed out accurately that longing defines Mary: she longs for attention from her parents, for a friend and confidante, for a stable relationship, and finally, all these things disappointing her, she longs for death (Johnson 50). Yet the tension throughout the text is achieved in the disjunction between the belonging that Mary craves and the sacrifices required for her to belong. Within literary, social, and legal paradigms, Mary's longings are illicit. She spends family money on her friend, Ann's, family to relieve them of debt and, though her relationship with Henry 'reinscribes [her] into a straight sentimental narrative', it still remains, at least psychologically and emotionally, adulterous (Johnson 57). Straying outside of generic boundaries threatens to make Mary an outlaw, a position that Wollstonecraft deals with explicitly in *The Wrongs of Woman, or, Maria* (1797). In *Mary*, however, women's ownership of property demands sacrificing the self; to return to Keane's tenets, Mary can only ever fulfil the first and most literal sense of 'belonging', that is, as an owned good. Her attempts at fostering community fail because she is so very singular, so resistant to becoming 'Clarissa, Lady G—or ... Sophie' (*Mary* 'Advertisement'). In terms of genre and narrative, a woman who belongs can have neither belongings nor longing: 'what was a woman, if not a wife or mother?' (Taylor 236).

By 1797, in her final work, *The Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft had moved from attempting to create a singular and 'novel' female subjectivity and attempted instead to represent the commonality of women's oppression under legal regulation and cultural expectation. Unambiguously condemning marriage as 'juridical and political chatteldom', *The Wrongs of Woman* takes account of a wider range of female experience and produces a much more unsettling and unsettled representation of the reality of women's existence. While retaining narrative control, Wollstonecraft expands the novel to include inset narratives in the first person from the eponymous heroine and the working class gaoler and saviour, Jemima. Disinheritance unites all of the narratives but it is Jemima who most forcibly represents and vocalizes the betrayal of women by legal discourse and traditional generic conventions. While *Mary* focused on the imaginative life and intellectual freedom of women, *The Wrongs of Woman* places women's bodies in the centre of the novel's philosophical battle. Psychological alienation and isolation is not less emphasized, but foregrounded by the narrative insistence on fully realising the material, physical threats suggested in Gothic novels:

[a]bodes of horror have frequently been described, and castles, filled with spectres and chimeras, conjured up by the magic spell of genius to harrow the soul, and absorb the wandering mind ... [w]hat were they compared to the mansion of despair

~~that confines the heroine from the beginning (Maria 85).~~ In addition, Wollstonecraft and Smith recognize the psychological trauma of oppression. Smith's heroines become depressed, suffer eating disorders, and in Monimia's case, engage in self-harm.⁹ Wollstonecraft's novel relocates Gothic supernatural fear to the power wielded by male guardians (husbands or fathers) since 'the laws of their country – if women have a country – offer [them] no protection' (Maria 149). Women's bodies throughout the text bear the visible marks of male ownership and tyranny; they 'epitomize the unnatural blockage that their narratives protest' (Johnson 61). Maria and Jemima are the contested property and they unconsciously conjure up their owners and the conditions of their possession.

United through this common property (the female body), women in *The Wrongs of Woman* are able to cross the divide between upper and lower classes. Jemima's prostitution is compared easily to Maria's marriage, distinguished only by the lack of seduction in the former and Jemima's status as 'common property' rather than private property (Maria 112). As a prostitute, Jemima achieves financial independence to a degree, unlike Maria, whose inherited fortune and any earnings pass automatically to her husband. Jemima's independence, however, is compromised by her status as an 'outlaw of society', and it is only when 'galled by the yoke of service' that she experiences 'comparative regularity' (Maria 113). When Jemima exercises control over her body as her own property, she is outlawed legally and socially. Yet it is the same moment that she gains access to education (through a wealthy and comparatively humane client) and opinions 'from which, in the common course of life, women are excluded' (Maria 114). Her insistent corporeality, emphasized by her profession, unsexes Jemima; paradoxically, by performing her sexuality she loses 'the privileged respect of [her] sex' (Maria 113). Jemima's experience provides a physical corollary to Maria's: like Jemima, Maria is 'outlawed' when she attempts to control the circulation of her body. The equivocation of marriage and prostitution emerges briefly, though peripherally, in Wollstonecraft's political treatise, *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman*, when she touches on 'legal prostitution', a term that forces the recognition of the physicality of marriage over the companionate ideals of sentimental ideology that obscure 'sexual chatteldom' (*Vindication* 135, 239; Taylor 118).

Jemima's indictment of injustice in her inset narrative, incorporates legal, social, cultural, and economic inequality, and speaks for all women as a 'wretchedness of situation particular to [the] sex':

A man with half my industry, and, I may say, abilities, could have procured a decent livelihood, and discharged some of the duties which knit mankind together; whilst I, who had acquired a taste for the rational, nay, in honest pride let me assert it, the virtuous enjoyments of life, was cast aside as the filth of society. Condemned to labour like a machine, only to earn bread, and scarcely that (Maria 117).

In a less rhetorically convincing attempt to unite social classes, Maria later makes the same observation of her sisters, who have been disinherited by their father and uncle. Born into greater expectations than Jemima, Maria's sisters find themselves circumscribed by their sex. Despite being 'accomplished' and 'well-educated', they can only just manage to maintain themselves as governesses – a 'menial' profession that barely saves women from 'infamy' (Maria 141). The younger sister, having 'a more delicate frame', declines almost immediately and Maria blames her death insistently on her socially inscribed uselessness: 'She had abilities sufficient to have shone in any profession, *had there been any professions*

for women' (*Maria* 141, my emphasis). Yet this common experience of women desirous of self-sufficiency through personal autonomy is immediately undercut by Maria's admission that her sister 'shrank at the name of milliner or mantua-maker as degrading to a gentlewoman' (*Maria* 141). Class intervenes, insisting on only certain kinds of belonging and creating a block to women's independent financial stability; occupying a social position, such as 'gentlewoman', closes off available avenues to self-sufficiency – gentlewomen do not work. Ascribing her sister's decision to 'false pride', Maria exhorts her daughter/reader to 'be possessed of that energy of character which gives dignity to any station', but this is based, idealistically, on her already having the ability 'to choose a situation for yourself, or submit to be classed in the lowest, if it be the only one in which you can be the mistress of your own actions' (*Maria* 141). Jemima's experience of belonging to the lowest class, which is related immediately before Maria's own history, works against this assumption of choice for women. Without property, or the ability to gain property through valued labour, women's actual choices remain narrow indeed.

In *The Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft articulates the disappointing effect of her narrative experiment in *Mary* when Maria questions whether women have a country at all: in both texts, even imagination fails to provide women with a stable identity and subjectivity. In spite of her attempt to translate romance as a potential site of resistance, her heroines cannot escape the 'oppressively gendered' nature of the genre; *Mary* may be a new kind of heroine, but the narrative containing her is oppressively traditional (Johnson 50). Symptomatically, *Mary* cannot even begin to articulate her desires: she is aware of her unhappiness, but unable to voice any complaints. Indeed, the control exercised by genre limits even *Mary's* 'thinking powers' – she cannot even formulate 'what to complain of' (*Mary* 16). Six chapters into the novel and Wollstonecraft's heroine has stagnated; genre forces her to recognize the limits of her own discourse. Yet, though *The Wrongs of Woman* ultimately offers no more viable or positive alternative to *Mary's* longing for a world without marriage, Jemima at least represents a more complex, inclusive representation of the magnitude of both the problem of patriarchal oppression, expressed through property laws, and the women it affected.

Short Biography

Kaley Kramer was awarded her PhD from the University of Leeds in 2008. She is currently teaching at the University of Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan University. Research interests include the Gothic, literature and the law, 18th-century Catholicism, and women's writing.

Notes

* Correspondence: [Civic Quarter Campus, Leeds LS1 3HE, UK. Email: K.A.Kramer@leedsmet.ac.uk, k.a.kramer@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:k.a.kramer@leeds.ac.uk)

¹ See Janelle Greenburg (1975) and Susan Staves (1990).

² Smith's anxiety over her control of her earnings – particularly their security from Benjamin's debtors – is a recurrent concern in many letters to her booksellers, particularly to Thomas Cadell, William Davies, and Joseph Johnson. See Judith Phillips Stanton (2003).

³ The court case nearly outlasted Smith and by the time the inheritance was settled, the estate had been virtually depleted. Charles Dickens may have used the case as the model for Jarndyce and Jarndyce in *Bleak House* (1852–1853). See Loraine Fletcher (2001, 338).

⁴ The increasing importance of intellectual property and cultural capital was an important development in concepts of property and ownership in the 18th century. These intangible forms of property are connected to the dramatic

rise of the print market, general literacy, and critical readership. Copyright law emerged as a crucial arena of legal and cultural discussion and the status of authors and the role of booksellers and publishers underwent radical and important changes. Two key players in this legal and ideological drama were Alexander Pope, whose battle with his publisher Curll formed the background of early copyright legislation, and James Thomson, whose poem, *The Seasons*, was the subject of copyright claims throughout the century. Crucial to the debates on copyright was the perceived relationship between authors and their works. The crux of the debate was whether a work of literature bore a 'familial' connection to the author, or whether the relationship was akin to an inventor or mechanical labourer. The concept of authenticity and originality is relatively unimportant and only emerges as a key element of authorial 'property' towards the end of the century. See Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: the Invention of Copyright* and John Whale, *Imagination Under Pressure, 1789–1832* for a discussion of the gendered nature of the concepts of 'author' and the ramifications of the development of literary property, see Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace*.

⁵ Though Wollstonecraft castigated Smith's first novel, *Emmeline* (1788) in *The Analytical Review* for 'the same tendency[ies]' that marred the 'numerous productions termed novels'. In particular, Wollstonecraft singled out Smith's sympathetic representation of female adultery in *Lady Adeline* as 'absurd [and] dangerous' and accuses Smith of allowing the model of wifely submission, Mrs Stafford, to 'escape ... notice'. Article XIII, *The Analytical Review*, July 1788 in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*. vol. 7. Eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler. London: William Pickering, 1989; 22–7.

⁶ In *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Sir William Blackstone (1765–1769) represents the British constitution as an 'old Gothic castle' which is 'fitted up for modern use'. The architectural analogy resonates clearly with Smith's Rayland Hall, which functions as a memorial to the past and as a guarantee of the future of the Rayland family. Given Blackstone's comments, the Hall can be figured as a microcosm of the nation.

⁷ This is particularly true of Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1792), which was the most critically well-received of her Gothic novels, but is also used in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and *A Sicilian Romance* (1789). Radcliffe's Gothic properties, always representative of historical and national institutions as abbeys and castles, assume a fixed and constant relationship between the individual and the nation; the history represented through the property exists as a yardstick of objectivity and facticity against which fallible and malleable human memory and the machinations of 'villains' are measured (and corrected).

⁸ On Orlando's feminization, see Jacqueline Labbe, 'Metaphoricity' and her introduction to the Broadview edition of *The Old Manor House*.

⁹ Jacqueline Labbe and Loraine Fletcher both note the physical trauma Smith's female characters undergo throughout the courses of their narratives. See Fletcher's introduction to *Emmeline* (15) and Labbe's to *The Old Manor House* (11).

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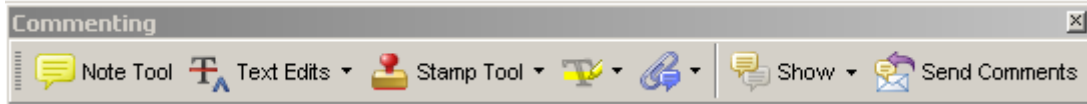
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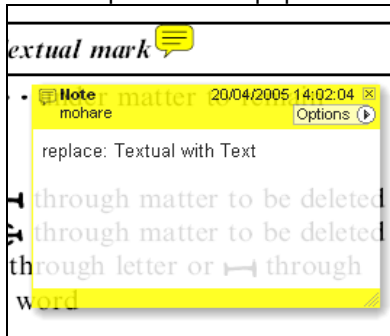
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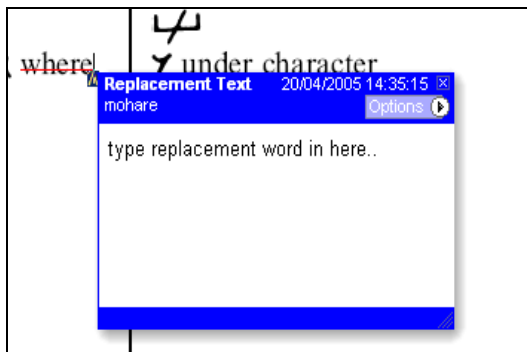


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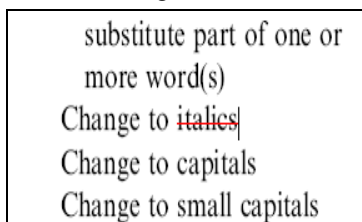


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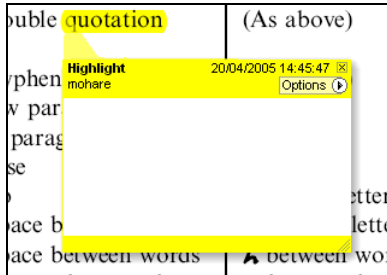


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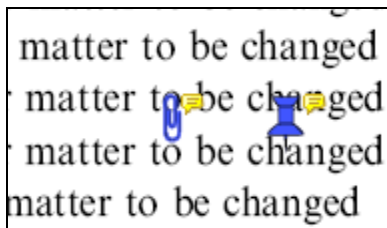


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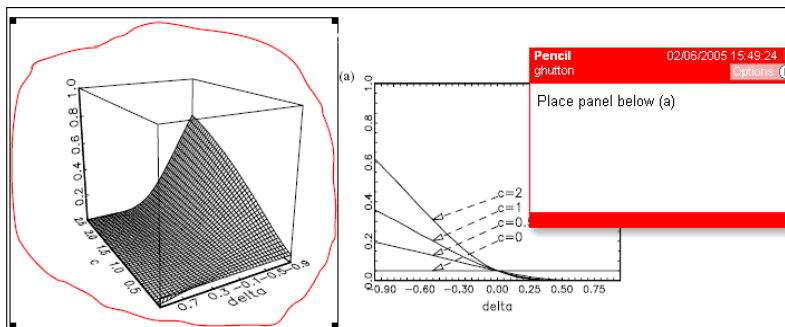


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