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CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY, CRAFTING CRITIQUE: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S SUBVERSIVE USE OF THE TRAVELOGUE EPISTOLARY GENRE

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ALEXANDRA STALLINGS

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BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Susan Kates, Chair

Dr. Sandra Tarabochia

Dr. William Kurlinkus

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Abstract

Historically marginalized populations, denied access to traditional forms of political advocacy, have contributed to public discourse through their subversive uses of genres. In the field of Rhetoric and Writing, scholars have diversified their understanding of history by exploring new perspectives and voices in previously untapped genres. One such genre, the travelogue, was used by Mary Wollstonecraft as a mode of engaging in political conversations in eighteenth-century European society. Her text, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark,* serves as a unique example of the ways in which one woman utilizes the genre conventions of the travelogue to naturally discuss topics such as geopolitics, gender roles, identity, and equality. By placing herself into the role of "hero," she subverts expectations of womanhood and domesticity, demonstrating a woman's ability to be bold, adventurous, and opinionated. At the same time, she writes this travelogue in the culturally "feminine" epistolary genre, rhetorically conforming to certain cultural gender roles in order to gain acceptance and broader readership. These letters, which are presumably written to an estranged lover, attracted readers due to their romanticism and performative intimacy. This rhetorical analysis underscores the importance of recognizing non-traditional modes of communication throughout history to enrich understanding and strive for greater inclusion of systemically overlooked contributors. Rhetorical scholars must continue to seek a radical incorporation of undiscovered genres to advance scholarship toward diversity and progress.

Keywords: genre, performative intimacy, rhetorical analysis, feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft

Introduction

The end of the eighteenth century was a politically turbulent time in England. From the intensities of the French Revolution to the rise of progressive movements calling for universal suffrage and democracy, political thinkers sought to forward their ideas and gain national attention. However, most female thinkers were barred from traditional access to public debates due to their societal position and presumed intellectual inferiority (Towns 685). Amidst battles for freedom and the radical ideologies being spread, women were not invited to openly share their ideas and advocate for change. However, this did not stop many women from joining important political conversations raging inside their society. Inside salons and parlors, masked behind pseudonyms, and buried within disguised writings, women expressed their political views and societal thoughts on the revolution.

Marginalized individuals have shared their views and experiences for centuries, but these accounts are not always published in traditional scholarly sources. A woman's views on war might not be published in a journal, but they might be buried away in a cookbook. An enslaved man's perspectives on freedom might not be posted in an advertisement, but they might be sung in a hymn. An ancient mother's feelings on justice might not be preserved in famous rhetorical dialogues, but they might be depicted on the pots she painted to stock her home. In this, genre becomes a key consideration for rhetorical scholars seeking a robust understanding of history. I believe radical inclusivity of non-traditional genres in Rhetoric and Writing studies can help uncover the powerful insights and perspectives of the marginalized individuals that shaped history.

Of course, the form a text takes inherently impacts the ways in which readers encounter that text. Rhetoricians have recognized this in the past and have sought to incorporate genre

studies into the field of Rhetoric and Writing. Among the voices calling for a greater inclusion of genre in the field are Amy J. Devitt, Anis Bawarshi, Charles Bazerman, and Carolyn R. Miller. The contributions of these and other scholars to the field's rhetorical understanding of genre cannot be understated. Still, I believe scholars can do more. A deeper exploration into genre can reap meaningful fruits for our field's understanding of history and diversity. To exemplify this harvest, I will be exploring Mary Wollstonecraft's epistolary travelogue, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) (referred to as *Letters*) as an example of how one marginalized individual subversively utilized a genre available to her to publicize her political thoughts in a way that was well-received by the public. By choosing a genre that invites her to write in the first person, construct her own identity, compose public letters that feel intimate and private, and describe the world around her in detail, Wollstonecraft offers various political critiques of the countries through which she travels, ultimately seeking to influence English society. Through the epistolary travelogue genre, she performs what I call *performative intimacy*, bending the bounds of genre by formatting her publicly published travelogue as letters to an estranged lover, thus capturing the intrigue of many English readers who initially sought an understanding of her personal life and encountered her political commentaries. I believe Wollstonecraft's travelogue warrants specific analysis because she was an active political and philosophical woman, a well-known writer, and published her accounts with the intention of gaining public attention. And yet, rhetorical scholars have not examined the insights posited by Wollstonecraft in this text. *Letters* demonstrates the significant contributions that marginalized individuals have made in the shaping of history and should inspire scholars to seek new genres for rhetorical analysis.

Literature Review and Theory

Many scholars have studied subversive uses of genre and ways marginalized individuals have creatively achieved their social purposes. Across literary and rhetorical studies, scholars recognize that genre functions as a means of reaching target audiences and presenting ideas in socially acceptable ways. Genres can also be manipulated to break patterns. Amy J. Devitt summarizes this well in her article, "Genre for Social Action," as she writes:

> Genres matter because they carry with them not just conventions but expectations and norms. Genres matter because they shape the people who use them into particular kinds of actors performing particular kinds of actions. Genres matter because people enact not just a genre but its accompanying system, institutional setting, and cultural values. Genres matter because people may use genres without being aware of genres' ability to support or inhibit their motivations and goals; or people may use genres fully aware of how genres can manipulate those who are unaware. Genres matter (Devitt 17).

Genres are dynamic and as Devitt explains, deeply rhetorical. By harnessing the powers of genre, authors are able to utilize commonly recognizable patterns to relate to audiences, or they can break these patterns for emphasis.

Before discussing the rhetorical means by which Wollstonecraft uses genre to achieve her purposes, I want to establish a theoretical framework through which to analyze the text. To do this, it is first important to introduce genre theory. Genre theory asserts that "genres represent all sorts of interactions (some textual and some not), are defined more by situation than form, are both dynamic and flexible, and are more an explanation of social interaction than a classification system" (Dean 9). Furthermore, genre theorists recognize that genres exist outside of literature, are dynamic patterns not encompassed by singular categories, "are used to act in specific situations" (11), have cultural and historical bases (15, 16), and present ideological views of the

world (18). Taken together, scholars generally argue that genres have powerful rhetorical applications and have been used throughout history to teach lessons, provide moral frameworks, convey political messages, inspire emotional reactions, and influence audiences to act.

Carolyn Miller, a genre theorist and rhetorical researcher, has been foundational in theorizing the ways that genre functions to achieve social goals. In her essay, "Genre as Social Action," she asserts that genres are primarily modes of creating specific types of action. She writes that a "rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish" (Miller 151). In other words, she argues that many scholars miss the point when they simply focus on classifying texts stylistically. In her view, genre is much more dynamic than that. Genres orient readers to specific modes of action. Miller emphasizes that genres impact and are impacted by the rhetorical situation in which they are bound. Thirty years after initially publishing this article, Miller revisited her claims and stated that "genre has become a much more complex, multidimensional social phenomenon, a structurational nexis between action and structure, between agent and institution, between past and future" (Miller 69). In this, Miller does not retract her claims in the face of modernity and technological advancement. Instead, she expresses that as rhetorical scholarship progresses, it becomes even more important to recognize the power dynamics acting on writers and study the ways they use genres to enact social change.

Miller references Lloyd F. Bitzer in her theory, and for the purposes of my argument, I believe Bitzer provides a necessary framework for understanding how rhetors such as Wollstonecraft contextualize their arguments to achieve their purposes. Miller states that "what is particularly important about rhetorical situations for a theory of genres is that they recur, as Bitzer originally noted" (Miller 156). In his 1968 work, "The Rhetorical Situation," Bitzer posits

that rhetorical discourse is necessarily related to the situation in which it exists. He writes that "rhetoric is a mode of altering reality [. . .], by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action." He continues by explaining that rhetors can alter reality by orienting arguments to empower audiences to become the "mediator of change" (Bitzer 4). Speakers can create this discourse in several different ways but are effective when they recognize the contextual forces that surround their argument. Specifically, Bitzer describes three elements that make up the rhetorical situation: audience, constraints, and exigence (6). He asserts that effective rhetoricians tailor their discourse specifically to their listeners (audience), recognize the societal and political conditions weighing on their discourse (constraints), and speak to an urgent issue of the moment (exigence). Miller extends Bitzer's definition of exigence to apply to genre theory by explaining exigence as a recurring social pattern speaking to the pertinence of a moment. She writes "exigence is a form of social knowledge—a mutual construing of objects, events, interests, and purposes that not only links them but also makes them what they are: an objectified social need" (Miller 157). Instead of simply viewing exigence as an urgent moment, Miller envisions exigence as the cultural understanding that calls discourse into existence. Like genres, exigent moments shape and are shaped by humanity's interpretations and constructions of reality. Miller states, "because human action is based on and guided by meaning, not by material causes, at the center of action is a process of interpretation. Before we can act, we must interpret the indeterminate material environment; we define, or 'determine, a situation" (156). Genres help us with this interpretation by providing recurrent structures through which we organize and make sense of our world. The categorical boundaries of genre serve as a type of "social knowledge" that ignite conversation through both their familiarity and ability to be bent.

Scholars have recognized the power that genre wields in guiding understanding and creating space for the incorporation of new voices in historic work. This project is inspired in part by the work of Sarah Walden in her book, *Tasteful Domesticity*. In this book, Walden analyzes the cookbook as a rhetorical text that women used to create social change in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She writes, "cookbook authors do not focus only, or even primarily, on physical tastes. The domestic experts who composed these cookbooks engaged larger discussions of cultural taste, circulated through educational curricula, public lectures, and print media." Therefore, "the circulation of power in the form of taste discourse does not check its influence at the kitchen" (Walden 5). In this, Walden argues that women exerted influence over the domestic practices of their readers through their strategic use of the cookbook. In sharing their insights about the home, motherhood, and moral familial practices, women expressed their views of correct taste. By doing so, some women found power within a genre that was available to them and contributed to the aesthetic conversations raging in society, specifically conversations popularized by philosophers like Hugh Blair, George Campbell, and David Hume. While women were traditionally barred from such philosophical discussions, Walden argues that the cookbook is a genre where they included themselves. Like female cookbook writers, Wollstonecraft and her fellow female travel writers sought to influence their audience's understanding of taste and morality.

Finally, this work is supported by the important contributions of many literary theorists who have studied *Letters* and articulated how Wollstonecraft uses the written word to advance literature, philosophy, and politics. The primary scholars influencing this work are Karen Hust, Christine Chaney, Valentina Pramaggiore, and Karen Lawrence. They highlight Wollstonecraft's motherly depictions of nature, persuasive uses of emotions, deconstructions of generic

boundaries, and composition of the self throughout *Letters*, respectively. Taken together, these literary scholars paint a robust picture of Wollstonecraft's multifaceted literary successes throughout her travelogue and demonstrate that this work is an important historic account that should be studied. It is important to note that rhetorical scholars have studied Wollstonecraft's feminist contributions in other texts but have not specifically analyzed *Letters*. I will expand upon these findings to argue that rhetorical scholars should also look to texts like *Letters* to fully understand the rhetorical contributions of marginalized authors.

***Letters*: A Brief History and Overview**

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is remembered for her progressive political ideas, feminist advocacy, and influential writing abilities. Throughout her life, Wollstonecraft witnessed the ways in which women were regarded as intellectually inferior to men and pushed to the wayside in important philosophical conversations. She is most remembered for her text, *A of the Rights of Woman* (1792), where she argues that women, if properly educated, could rise in society, contribute to the body of knowledge, and create impactful change. The book was written in response to many political thinkers of the time who asserted that women were naturally inferior to men and therefore, did not require an education outside of domestic subjects. Wollstonecraft criticizes the views of philosophers such as Edmund Burke and Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord who continually argued that women should restrain their emotions, stay inside the confines of the home, and learn only what is necessary to rear children. She used her writing abilities to advocate for women and their rights to education and knowledge.

Wollstonecraft's work is deeply influenced by the historical moment in which she writes. The French Revolution was a turbulent time in French society defined by financial crisis, public upheaval, governmental cruelty, and a transition of power structures throughout the nation.

While England was not directly involved in this revolution, its people were deeply impacted by it both philosophically and politically. The Revolution inspired British thinkers to advocate for radical progression in many areas of social life. As explained by Dr. Faith Duman, a political scholar from Hitit University, "the writings that have been written to defend the French Revolution or to oppose against the French Revolution are not only expressions of conjectural behaviors but also reflect some basic points of views about aesthetic, epistemological, moral, social and political theory" (Duman 75). In this, she emphasizes that the French Revolution influenced not only the realities of the French people but also inspired European writers to think critically about the basic power structures and assumptions sustaining social divides and hierarchies. The evolutionary context of the French Revolution created space for new perceptions of gender equality and political practices. According to Duman, "Wollstonecraft regards the French Revolution as an expression of revolt of reason against prejudices, revolt of equality and freedom against privileges. The Revolution, the beginning of the process to change the deficient and flawed structure of the European civilization, will rebuild the social reality on equality grounds" (87). In this, Duman emphasizes that Wollstonecraft views the revolution as a manifestation of knowledge that has the power to challenge inequity. Therefore, Wollestonecraft's broad collection of works, including *Letters*, cannot be separated from the societal context in which she writes. In fact, I believe this context is the foundational lens through which scholars must read her epistolary travelogue in order to recognize her use of genre rhetorically.

Wollstonecraft's personal life also shapes the viewpoints and stylistic choices she forwards in *Letters,* perhaps even more than it influences most of her other works. Born in 1759, Wollstonecraft had a difficult childhood. Her father was short-tempered, and her family moved

around often. Due to these factors, there was not much stability in her life. While her family had some money, they were not considered upper class. She did not receive a formal education but had a desire to learn and taught herself to read and write. She began to write professionally when she realized she could share her political thoughts and earn a decent living. Her work brought her into many philosophical societies and into the company of progressive thinkers. One such thinker was Gilbert Imlay, a merchant with whom Wollstonecraft fell in love. The two had a tumultuous love affair which resulted in the birth of their illegitimate child, Fanny. Although Imlay was unfaithful in their relationship, Wollstonecraft was deeply attached to him. As their love became increasingly tragic in 1795, Wollstonecraft attempted suicide. She embarked on a journey the following year in order to fulfill some of Imlay's distant business. This journey inspired her writing of *Letters.* Fanny, their infant child, accompanies her on the journey (Wollstonecraft 8). Due to this personal context and the themes of longing throughout *Letters,* many people read the text as Wollstonecraft's attempt to win Imlay back or overcome her heartache. Obsessed with the scandalous love affair, they see *Letters* as a look inside the mind of a wounded lover as she pours her heart out to a man who did not want her. This attracted readership at the time and still captivates audiences today.

Methodologies:

In this project, I sought to analyze Wollstonecraft's text, *Letters,* in order to understand how marginalized individuals creatively contributed to historical progress and determine what factors limit a text's inclusion into contemporary Rhetorical scholarship. To conduct this research, I chose a method of rhetorical analysis that relied heavily on the insights of Liz Rohan, Amy Devitt, and Sonja K. Foss. I approached Wollstonecraft's epistolary travelogue with a historical, feminist lens because I wanted to understand the conversations shaping her work, the

public's perception of her as a writer and woman, and where the text would have fit into the discourse of the late eighteenth-century. While historical work is important for the understanding of progress, it calls for acute ethical care. When working with posthumous subjects, it is necessary to establish a scope and lens through which their voices are analyzed as they can no longer respond. We as researchers must wield this remembrance power wisely. Liz Rohan states that "historical work is, after all, rhetorical work, that is, the making of research" (Rohan 25). She continues by stating that when conducting historical textual analysis work, scholars must demonstrate "a concern for ethical representations of research subjects, which [she characterizes as] caring for others, no matter which side of the grave" (27). This ethical consideration shaped the scope of my project and helped me to contextualize my criticisms of Wollstonecraft based on her historical reality and lived oppressions. Still, it is important to note that many of Wollstonecraft's political ideas were classist and euro-centric in nature, and this harmful orientation to many of her subjects should not be overlooked or excused based on her context.

Secondly, by conducting a rhetorical analysis on the eighteenth-century travelogue, I was able to encounter the text in a way that it had not been studied in the past and expand on the insights of literary analyses. It is important to note that a rhetorical reading of the text does not act as the antithesis to literary analyses, but instead, as an additional mode of understanding. According to Amy Devitt, literary and rhetorical scholars can work toward more robust findings within the field of English through common perceptions of genre. She writes:

> If […] the fields of literature, linguistics, and rhetoric-composition share more in common with one another than they do with other disciplines, then a greater argument can be made that we in English should work to maintain our connections, for our

different methodologies and questions can complement and contribute to one another's research and teaching (Devitt 696).

Devitt advocates for a more unified connection between English subfields to increase the impact of our scholarship. She continues by stating that “today, literary studies, like rhetorical studies, is renewing its interest in genre by reconceiving the nature of genre” (698). Inspired by this renewed interest in genre and the strides literary scholars have taken to understand *Letters*, I sought to approach the text interested in Wollstonecraft’s motives as a travelogue writer in the revolutionary context in which she wrote. This method not only aligns with my research goals, but it also aligns with Wollstonecraft’s stated writing goals in *Letters* as she expressed her desire to invite readers into her mind and take them with her on her journey, allowing them to experience her lived realities from the comfort of their homes (Wollstonecraft 10).

In conducting this rhetorical analysis, I relied on the modes of feminist criticism outlined by Sonja K. Foss in her book, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice.* She states that feminist criticism “disrupt[s] the practice in the communication discipline of only studying the speaking practices of men” and seeks to include “forms of communication more likely to be available to and used by women” (Foss 145). Thus, a major aspect of my critical feminist methodology was selecting a female-authored text that was written in a genre available to her. After text selection, Foss emphasizes that the “primary goal [of] a feminist critic is to identify and explicate strategies that disrupt established hegemonies and, in turn, create new ways of thinking, acting, and being” (147). With this in mind, I engaged in several close readings of the text. The first close reading consisted simply of orienting myself to Wollstonecraft’s romantic writing style and following along with her through her journey. Next, Foss instructs that feminist critics must formulate a research question aimed at understanding the ways in which a text

disrupts heteronormative structures within its context (154). The research question driving my next reading was simple: Why has a text written by a well-known early feminist author, with statements that explicitly respond to the rhetorical conversations of the time, been neglected by contemporary rhetorical scholarship? During this reading, I made mental notes of the themes that naturally arose but resisted the urge to interpret the text. Encouraged by the words of Rohan, I wanted to let Wollstonecraft tell her own story. I walked away from the text viewing it as a political commentary engulfed in a series of letters about life, love, and identity.

In my next readings of the text, I coded for several thematic categories including her political and social criticism, autobiographical expressions of identity (including that of mother, adventurer, woman, and lover), and commentary about the rhetorical discussions popular to her time. Once finished with this process, I analyzed the data and placed it into conversation with the literary scholarship previously published on the text. Throughout the interpretive phase of feminist criticism, Foss urges critics to examine a text and ask: "Do the strategies [that rhetors utilize to create new modes of thinking, acting, and being . .], allow rhetors to claim agency, to engage in acts of self-definition or self-determination, to refuse to be confined by an ideology of domination, to transform dominating structures and relations in imaginative ways, or to articulate a different mode of being altogether?" (154). Through this line of questioning, I compared my code to pre-existing literary arguments and I noticed that there was a disconnect between my political understanding of the text and the literature community's focus on its romantic style as a series of love letters turned travelogue. Genre, I found, was a key component of these different readings because the field of Literature is accustomed to seeking out a vast array of genres and analyzing what is being said (often for stylistic and metaphoric understandings). Meanwhile, the

field of Rhetoric, although seeking to expand its generic focus, is less accustomed to this categorical diversity and can overlook texts that influenced societal progress.

Including the Travelogue in Rhetorical Scholarship

For the zealous explorer, travel writing seems to flow naturally from the experience of going abroad. According to *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing,* "writing and travel have always been intimately connected. The traveller's tale is as old as fiction itself" (Hulme, Youngs 2). Through novels, journals, and travel guides, travel writing has inspired writers and readers alike for centuries. Adventurers fill these texts with their reflections on the world, culture, life, and love. This genre naturally lends itself to societal critique and political thought. Therefore, historical travelogues are rhetorical by nature.

The term "travelogue" functions as a vague classification of a broad assortment of writing styles. Travelogues are typically described as literary narrative accounts written about a traveler's experience in a foreign place. These accounts often include commentaries on the culture, geography, and aesthetics of a destination. Furthermore, these texts can be written in a variety of formats, including a diary, journal, or in the case of Wollstonecraft, a series of letters (Burke 4). The travelogue genre is the literary home of many important works ranging from Marco Polo's *The Travels of Marco Polo* to Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love.* Clearly, the travelogue genre is diverse and broad, and while I believe its exploration can bring fruitful benefits to our field, it has historically been used as a colonizing text. The diversity in style and form displayed through various travelogues demonstrates that although genre is an important and helpful classification tool, the sum of a text cannot be limited to a single categorical space. Instead, works utilize the basic conventions of genre as a starting point, but often expand to combine elements from several genres and defy the "rules" as they are written.

Although Wollstonecraft combines the elements of several genres of writing, I choose to primarily classify *Letters* as an example of writing from the travelogue genre. *Letters* falls within this categorical realm for several reasons as Wollstonecraft describes the geographical, cultural, and social customs of the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish people. Her account is personal as she reflects openly about her experiences in the countries. Also, her reflections are written with the intention of speaking to an audience and bringing them along with her on her journey. In the opening of the text, she states that she simply desires to "give a just view of the present state of the countries [she has] passed through, as far as [she] could obtain information during so short a residence" (Wollstonecraft 11). Here, she orients herself as the leader of a journey and a guide through uncharted territory. To do this, she uses vivid descriptions, honest reflections, and personal language. The travelogue classification is rhetorically significant for Wollstonecraft because the genre by nature allows for cultural critiques in a subversive manner. Travelogue readers expect to encounter conversations about landscapes, people, governments, and geography, but they also expect to encounter stories, prose, and personal thoughts. The latter set of qualities were deemed more "feminine" in nature by European readers, and therefore created an opportunity for women to vocalize their thoughts on the former. Wollstonecraft understands this subversive power in the travelogue genre and takes the opportunity to address the inequities she notices.

Brief Summary of *Letters*

Before analyzing the text, it is important to provide a brief overview of Wollstonecraft's adventures. Mary's journey begins in England as she sets sail to Sweden to carry out business for Imlay. She describes this voyage as "Eleven days of weariness on board a vessel not intended for the accommodation of passengers" (Wollstonecraft 10). Despite this rocky start, she arrives to

Sweden hopeful and expectant. Immediately, she begins to speak of the beautiful scenery and kindness of her hosts. However, she becomes immediately aware of gender inequalities explaining that "at supper my host told me bluntly that I was a woman of observation, for I asked him *men's questions"* (15). Here, Wollstonecraft demonstrates her frustration with societal assumptions about inferior female rationality. Reflecting on her experiences in Sweden, she writes: "The Swedes pique themselves on their politeness; but far from being the polish of a cultivated mind, it consists merely of tiresome forms and ceremonies" (20). Furthermore, she believes that Swedish men "stand up for the dignity of man by oppressing the women" (23). She believes they are power hungry people who unfairly treat marginalized individuals and suffocate citizens with taxation. From Sweden, Wollstonecraft journeys to Norway by sea. She enjoys her time here, but states that the Norwegians fall behind in scientific and literary advancement (49). She describes Norway as an enchanting and simple place filled with resilient, hospitable people. However, she also recognizes economic disparities in the country and advocates for improved conditions. Finally, Wollstonecraft embarks to Denmark to finish her travels. She criticizes its inhabitants for their lifestyles, filled with drinking and smoking. After this leg of the journey, Wollstonecraft heads home to London, passionate about advocating for equality domestically and abroad.

Public Perceptions of *Letters*

Mary Wollstonecraft's epistolary travelogue, packed full of political views, was highly successful among eighteenth-century readers. As Christine Chaney states: "Written at a time when interest in travel was high and travel books were well in demand" Wollstonecraft assumed the journal would be a success. "She was quite right. Her text was arguably the most popular and successful book she ever wrote" (Chaney 277). The book was translated into other European

languages and circulated across the continent. However, Wollstonecraft describes the countries she passed through as a means to influence English society and advocate for change within her own nation. Therefore, her primary audience was English thinkers with the ability to enact the change for which she advocated. In one of her last letters, she writes, “from what I have seen throughout my journey, I do not think the situation of the poor in England is much, if at all, superior to that of the same class in different parts of the world” (Wollstonecraft 132). In this, she recenters her arguments away from the countries she explores and back to the place she calls home. Therefore, most of her rhetorical choices in terms of genre point back toward her understanding of English audiences, choices that proved successful as her book was wildly popular among this population.

The public was drawn to the text for several reasons: for one, her love affair was viewed as scandalous and counter-cultural. The fact a single, love-stricken woman was traveling alone with her illegitimate daughter and writing to the man who broke her heart was enough to attract the interest of the public. As I will further explicate, this performative intimacy, or public display of the private, undoubtedly drew invested audiences to the pages of Wollstonecraft’s publication (especially as the text’s content centered around a female embarking on a journey typically reserved for men). Secondly, audiences were interested in her philosophical views. Amelia Alderson, an English romantic author wrote to Wollstonecraft that “as soon as I read your letters from Norway, the cold awe which the philosopher had excited, was lost in the tender sympathy call forth by the woman—I saw nothing but the interesting creature of feeling, and imagination” (Eberle 325). In other words, the mix of intellect and emotion was of interest to philosophical readers and helped them to understand how the two attributes could coexist. Finally, readers were simply interested in Wollstonecraft and felt moved by her words and contemplations.

Overall, Wollstonecraft achieves her rhetorical goals, successfully inserting her voice into political spheres and delineating progressive ideas in a well-received, widely read text. While it is hard to say just how influential the text was amidst the revolution, its contributions to progress should not be overlooked. *Letters* certainly influenced revolutionary writers and thinkers, and according to Richard Holmes, was referenced in "the journals, poems, or correspondence of Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth and Hazlitt" (Chaney 278). *Letters* should be regarded as a foundational addition to historic understandings of the French Revolution and stand as a reminder to scholars that influential rhetorical discourse comes in many forms from diverse sources.

Rhetorically Analyzing *Letters* as a Travelogue

Wollstonecraft's *Letters* have been described as having several different purposes. Literary scholars have argued that the text is a demonstration of her "intellectual labor [directed toward] the cosmopolitan good" (Steiner 13); a "confrontation with her lover" while doing his business (Sorenson 34); an opportunity to write a money-earning text that could help support her daughter, enabling her to leave Imlay (Hust 483); and an emotional journey described through the "traits of literary Romanticism" (Boos 279). I believe that these scholars are correct in their assertions and that Wollstonecraft's motivation for writing *Letters* was multitudinous. Wollstonecraft's text displays her deep emotional outpourings, commitment to her daughter Fanny, adventurous spirit wandering into unknown territories, and ultimately, frustrations concerning the inequities she witnessed throughout her journey. Overall, I believe that she intentionally chose to write in the form of an epistolary travelogue to achieve all these purposes in a form that necessarily engages geo-political conversations. Wollstonecraft leans into the conventions of the travelogue to forward her revolutionary ideas. Specifically, I posit that she

utilizes autobiographical expressions as a subversive means of elevating feminist causes, multifaceted descriptions of the self as a nuanced demonstration of womanhood, and depictions of nature as a metaphor for natural equality. Through each of these moves, Wollstonecraft creates rhetorical space to criticize governments, cultures, and societies.

The Autobiographical Self as Hero

One key feature of the travelogue genre is that it is a personal account of the narrator's own experience in a new space. The first-person orientation is central to the genre because it places the writer in the role of the adventurer and establishes a framework for readers to look through when encountering the text. This perspective provides readers with the understanding that the text they are reading is a subjective account of a journey. Therefore, trusting the narrator's insights about a destination is really an act of trusting the narrator. Wollstonecraft recognizes this and works to ensure that her readers feel as though they are in a relationship with her as she journeys. To open her text, Wollstonecraft writes an "Advertisement," or a brief introduction to the travelogue that orients readers to the text and provides them with an explanation of her purposes in writing it. In this advertisement, she writes that she "could not avoid being continually the first person—'the little hero of each tale'" (Wollstonecraft 11). She continues by stating that her "readers alone can judge" if her travelogue deserves high esteem, but she intends "to give a just view of the present state of the countries [she] has passed through" without unnecessary details that would be "insipid to those who only accompany [her] in their chair" (12). In this, Wollstonecraft acknowledges that her perspectives are subjective and centered on herself, but she works to establish a personal relationship with her audience and create with them a connection built on trust. In her advertisement, Wollstonecraft takes important steps in her establishment of a trustworthy ethos. She recognizes that there is power in her

subjective viewpoint and leans into this perspective to gain rhetorical strength. Travelogues are by nature autobiographical accounts from the perspective of the writer. Authors, like Wollstonecraft, can craft themselves as the trustworthy hero and thus, invite readers to participate with them in their adventures. When readers feel as though they can trust the hero of the tale, they can partner with them in their discoveries and have confidence in their evaluations of the world.

Once Wollstonecraft has established this relationship, she must retain ethos by continually working to sustain trust throughout the entirety of her travelogue. As legal scholar Melissa H. Weresh writes, "trust is a persuasive, source-relational attribute of ethos." Therefore, a speaker's "decisions must be guided by and, to some extent reflect, the relationship the advocate establishes with her audience" (Weresh 252). In other words, relationship is a rhetorical choice that must be sustained throughout a text to be fully persuasive. While this is not to say that the relationship established in *Letters* is a disingenuous attempt to manipulate readers, Wollstonecraft chose a genre that invites the first-person perspective as a means of expressing the fullness of her political views in a way that was received in trust. For example, in Letter 18, Wollstonecraft describes her experiences traveling to Copenhagen and states: "I cannot describe to you the effect it has had on me to see this puppet of a monarch moved by the strings of which Count Bernstoff holds fast [. . .] What a farce is life" (Wollstonecraft 112). In this, she critiques the blind actions of Denmark's governmental bodies as they submit to poor leadership by expressing the personal pain it causes her to witness injustice. She is passionately invested in the country she inhabits and utilizes a personal tone to talk to her audience. Readers, who have felt as though they have come to know Wollstonecraft intimately through her journal reflections are likely to care more about a political situation if they know it is causing her emotional distress.

Therefore, Wollstonecraft appeals to this relational orientation and calls her readers to care about politics because they first care about her.

The first-person nature of the travelogue not only reflects Wollstonecraft's motives but also Wollstonecraft herself. Mitzi Meyers writes, "Wollstonecraft's book is in fact a generic hybrid, a kind of subjective autobiography superimposed on a travelogue" (Myers 166). She continues by explaining Wollstonecraft's reflections are instantaneous and simple, thus demonstrating that her "criteria for travel literature are thus in line with her general ideology, which is based on direct observation and independent thought. Always stressing naturalness, originality, and thinking for oneself" (167). This adds an important dimension to the consideration of genres: they can be extensions of the writer employing them. Miller writes: "what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have" (Miller 165). For rhetorical scholars examining genre, this understanding acts as a critical lens to apply to the texts studied. Choosing a genre through which to write is an act of choosing a set of rhetorical choices to compose one's thoughts. When Wollstonecraft chooses to document her thoughts in an autobiographical travelogue, she actively embraces a form that allows for independent reflection, relational orientations to readers, political contributions, and societal critique while also being an acceptable means of writing as a woman. This first choice of deciding to write a travelogue is arguably one of the most significant rhetorical choices Wollstonecraft makes in a highly rhetorical work.

Multifaceted Identities: Wollstonecraft as Mother, Adventurer, and Activist

The autobiographical orientation of the travelogue also allows Wollstonecraft to construct her own identity in the text. In this, she can define herself on her own terms and choose how she

will relate to society's perceptions of womanhood. Literary scholar, Valentina Pramaggiore, writes that "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" (Pramaggiore 839). Recognizing this complexity, Wollstonecraft is strategic with her identity formation. I believe that Wollstonecraft formulates two key identities throughout her *Letters*: the adventurer and the mother. First, she establishes herself as an adventuring woman taking the front seat in her own personal heroic journey. This act in and of itself can be interpreted as a subversive and protesting act against the gendered constraints placed on women in eighteenth-century Europe. Second, Wollstonecraft presents herself as a nurturing mother who wants to protect her infant child. This reflects both a genuine affection for her daughter as well as an understanding of society's expectations of her as a woman. As an independent traveler and caregiver, Wollstonecraft never ceases to uplift important societal issues. In these seemingly unconnected characterizations of herself, Wollstonecraft defies binary perceptions of gender and presents a robust model of womanhood.

First, as stated previously, the travelogue allows her to be the "hero" of her own adventure, an inherently subversive position for women to assume in the face of patriarchy. The travelogue is an adventurous genre filled with reflections of journeyers on their exciting expeditions. According to Susan Lamb, "all eighteenth-century tourists were aristocratic men. Girls and women, in this account, did not travel (unless they were subversives like [. . .] Wollstonecraft)" (Lamb 16). Wollstonecraft's decision to travel, and publicize it, was arguably a form of protest against the inequitable standards of women in her time. She enters a space that

was reserved for upper-class males as a single woman and commits herself to adventure and political involvement.

This heroism is exemplified consistently throughout the text as she uses her subversive role of traveler to advocate for greater equity. When in Norway, she reflects on her experience being observed as a woman traveling alone and states that “the Norwegians do not frequently see travellers” and that “a woman coming alone interested them” (Wollstonecraft 42). In this, she acknowledges that her actions are abnormal for women, but she does not shy away in fear. Instead, she reflects on this experience joyfully, unconcerned that they viewed her choice to travel alone as strange. However, she quickly shifts the focus away from their views of her and comments on the educational situation she observes in Norway. She explains that “the Norwegians appear to me a sensible, shrewd people, with little scientific knowledge, and still less taste for literature; but they are arriving at the epoch which precedes the introduction of the arts and sciences” (49). She chooses not to focus on conforming to the men’s expectations of womanhood, but instead on advocating for the establishment of strong educational systems in Norwegian society. In another example, Wollstonecraft observes the tyranny of men over women in Denmark and exclaims, “How can I avoid it, when most of the struggles of an eventful life have been occasioned by the oppressed state of my sex? We reason deeply when we feel forcibly” (116). Instead of shying away from inequity, she confronts it and expresses the need for structural changes in European society. She places herself into this statement, uniting herself with Danish women through the first-person “we.” As the heroine of her own tale, Wollstonecraft embodies the masculinized role of the traveler and uses this role to advocate for the improvement of systems that disadvantage marginalized people.

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft does not choose to operate solely within stereotypically masculine roles. Instead, she balances her subversive position of adventurer with the role of mother. This creates a complex example of eighteenth-century womanhood that is both domestic and daring. Throughout the text, Wollstonecraft often refers to her child, Fanny, with whom she travels, and describes the various emotions she feels toward her. In one tender moment, she describes her child as the personification of natural beauty stating that "my child was sleeping with equal calmness [as nature]—innocent and sweet as the closing flowers" (16). She adores her daughter and wants to protect her innocence, but she does not choose to do so within the confines of the home. Instead, Fanny's innocence empowers Wollstonecraft to advocate for the equal education of women in society. In letter six, she writes, "you know that, as a female, I am particularly attached to [Fanny]; I feel more than a mother's fondness and anxiety when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex" (43). Here, she pairs her motherly reflections with political assertions to subvert domestic expectations and argue for progress. According to Myers, Wollstonecraft "has no female literary patterns for the persona she is creating, one which can conflate a mother's and a philosopher's concern with human nurture" (Myers 176). For this very reason, she finds freedom in the non-binary nature of the travelogue genre, a categorical home where a writer is liberated to be both emotional and factual, both gentle and brave. This generic unboundedness reflects Wollstonecraft's own approach to womanhood. For one, she demonstrates that she possesses stereotypical feminine qualities and thus, can gain respect from her audience who might discredit her for her choices to bring her child along with her on such a difficult journey. Secondly, she proves that domesticity can exist outside of the home.

Nature Leads to Natural Discussions of Equality

Travelogues depict their writer's experiences in the natural landscapes of the lands they are exploring. It is commonplace among travelogue writers to go into depth describing the beauty they witness in the nature they are exploring, which attracts readers interested in travel. Wollstonecraft, recognizing the popularity of travelogues among adventurous readers, saw a deeper rhetorical importance to exploring nature and describing her findings. She recognizes that within the rhetorical situation of the French Revolution, her discussions of nature could produce metaphorical parallels to support her view that equality was a natural right. According to Hust, "in the rugged landscape and harsh life of the north, Wollstonecraft knew she would confront the fragile boundary between culture and nature, the same boundary she saw disintegrating in France" (Hust 484). In this, Wollstonecraft constructs her exigence based on both the revolution of man and the revelations of nature, thus leading to natural arguments for equality.

Wollstonecraft juxtaposes fanciful and romantic depictions of nature with harsh critiques of oppressive governments. When describing the landscapes she encounters, her language is whimsical, flowing, and awe filled. These descriptions are abruptly contrasted with critiques of the actions of man, as though inequitable governments and societies have tainted the natural order of equality in the world. While in Norway, she writes "passing through [the pine and fir groves] I have been struck with a mystic kind of reverence, and I did, as it were, homage to their venerable shadows. Not nymphs, but philosophers seemed to inhabit them [. . .] But I have almost forgot the matters of fact I meant to relate respecting the counts." She shifts her focus away from the beauty around her and begins to describe the evils of the Norwegian Crown as it sustains an inequitable work environment in the country. Eventually, she argues that the wealthy people, following the lead of their rulers, "neglect the interest and comfort of their families, so that in proportion as they attain a reputation for piety, they become idle" (Wollstonecraft 64, 66).

This shift is almost disorienting for readers who have been lost in her mystical descriptions of the landscape up until that point. Nature acts as Wollstonecraft's moral compass, and by describing the world around her as vast, free, and sublime, she reveals to readers that oppression violates the innate ways of creation.

One other notable example of Wollstonecraft's view of natural justice comes after she witnesses an execution in Denmark. She writes, "I could not help looking with horror around—the fields lost their verdure—and I turned with disgust from the well-dressed women who were returning with their children from this sight. What a spectacle for humanity! […] I am persuaded that till capital punishments are entirely abolished executions ought to have every appearance of horror given to them" (113). While discussing the horrors of capital punishment, she takes a moment to describe the dying fields surrounding the area. In this, she demonstrates a connection between natural order and justice. She metaphorically compares inequity in society to a field without verdure. The travelogue genre inherently invites conversations about nature as adventurers are expected to describe the scenery they witness. Wollstonecraft utilizes this aspect of the genre to support her views of natural justice.

Dear Everyone: Wollstonecraft's Performative Intimacy

While the travelogue genre serves as the primary vessel that Wollstonecraft uses to share her political commentaries, she bends the conventions of this category by writing her adventures in epistolary form. Unlike the travelogue, the epistolary genre has long been a vessel women use to express their thoughts, views, and relational desires. While her writing of a travelogue is countercultural, her decision to write it in a series of letters to an unnamed lover could be viewed as her rhetorical choice to conform to societal expectations for broader acceptance and readership. In the eighteenth-century, love letters were viewed as a deeply feminine mode of

writing. According to Mary Trouille, “the association of women's writing with the love-letter genre is perhaps the most tenacious gender-genre connection in the history of literature” (Trouille 108). In fact, “male commentators have viewed women as superior letter writers because of the alleged ‘naturalness,’ spontaneity, and greater expressiveness of their style. This view was reinforced by the important role women played in the salon as arbiters of taste” (106). In the same way women mediated conversations in parlors, they could display their wisdom and knowledge in letters. Female-written letters were seen as the pinnacle of the genre and their work became central to its increased popularity among romantic writers. While this gendered view of the genre furthers socially constructed views of women (viewing them as more emotional than their male counterparts), some female writers capitalized on their access to the genre to publish their perspectives.

Letters are intimate. They are written to family members, friends, and in Wollstonecraft’s case, although indirectly, (estranged) lovers. When a letter is published, it retains its personal nature, but becomes universal in access. To the outside reader, letters feel like an exposed secret, a peeling back of the curtain into the author’s relationships and mind. This public display of the private is what I refer to as performative intimacy. According to Lenore Manderson, Mark Davis, Chip Colwell, and Yanja Ahlin, “the revelation of a secret is performative [. . .] Telling a secret has a goal, such as to create intimacy, to seek forgiveness, to witness and pursue justice. There are psychological and emotional benefits for many in telling, but sharing secrets may also be calculated” (Manderson, et al. S186). In this, the authors emphasize that secret telling can be strategic. Bringing the outside world into a seemingly confidential conversation can make the public feel as though they are on the inside of a restricted space. This is intriguing to many who desire to be included and in the know. However, when something personal is written to be

published, the author chooses what to disclose and retains a level of control over the secret's perception. In pseudo-private spaces, writers can construct their identities and influence the ways in which their readers comprehend them and their experiences.

Wollstonecraft's use of performative intimacy in the epistolary genre serves two main rhetorical purposes: for one, she intrigues readers through a calculated revelation of her personal life. Secondly, the emotional nature of the letters allows her to demonstrate her rational capabilities in a traditionally "feminine" mode.

First, Wollstonecraft acknowledges that readers are interested in her private life, filled with the secrets of her controversial love affair with Imlay, and capitalizes on this fact to voice her political views to a captivated audience. By writing letters presumably addressed to an unknown lover, Wollstonecraft takes advantage of the fascination readers have in her private life and uses this attention to gain political agency. She performs intimacy with Imlay by leaning into her characterization of a scorned lover and rhetorically choosing to place her love affair on display to gain political platforms. In her eighth letter, Wollstonecraft writes, "You have sometimes wondered, my dear friend, at the extreme affection of my nature [. . .] For years have I endeavoured to calm an impetuous tide, labouring to make my feelings take an orderly course. It was striving against the stream. I must love and admire with warmth, or I sink into sadness" (Wollstonecraft 57). Here, she demonstrates the depth of her emotions, decisively choosing to appreciate her feelings instead of shying away from them. She speaks of Imlay as a "dear friend," demonstrating intimacy, honesty, and longing. However, Wollstonecraft knew that these letters were not just for Imlay, and therefore, this appeal can be viewed as a broader attempt to connect to her audiences, make them feel emotionally attached to her, and utilize this intimacy to increase their trust in her viewpoints.

Regrettably, Wollstonecraft returned from her adventures to find that Imlay had moved on to a new lover. Cynthia Richards writes that "when calculated [as an attempt] to win back Imlay 's love, the letters fail miserably" (Richards 73). However, if they are viewed as an attempt to earn the love and respect of English audiences, *Letters* was deeply successful. William Godwin, an English philosopher and Wollstonecraft's future husband, wrote that "if ever there was a book calculated to make a man fall in love with its author, [*Letters*] appears to me to be the book. She speaks of her sorrows, in a way that fills us with melancholy, and dissolves us in tenderness, at the same time that she displays a genius which commands all our admiration" (Chaney 290). In this, Godwin explains that the work had a certain magnetic quality to which readers felt drawn. While this remark is patriarchal in the fact that it assumes the work of a woman is intended for the pleasure of man, it does exemplify that Wollstonecraft was successful at getting the book into the hands of politically involved men (who were able to enact agency in political spaces) and demonstrates that women were rational beings who were capable of genius. Wollstonecraft's rhetorical use of the romantic epistolary charmed readers and made them fall in love with her as an adventurer, writer, mother, and philosopher.

Secondly, Wollstonecraft leans into stereotypical conventions of feminine emotion and subverts them through reason, rationality, and politics. According to Pramaggiore, although *Letters* is formatted as a series of letters written to a man, "it does not conform to the stereotypical eighteenth-century discourse of women and love letters" because it "challenges both androcentric and feminist 'genderings' of travel and epistolarity'" (Pramaggiore 838). In her groundbreaking work, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft argues that women are capable of rational thought and therefore, should be educated in the same manner as men. I view *Letters* as an extension of this work that proves in both word and action the

intellectual capabilities of educated women to recognize, articulate, and alleviate injustices in society. According to Pramaggiore, Wollstonecraft "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" (838). Wollstonecraft demonstrates the duality of the female mind as she embodies both political understanding and poise, societal criticism and motherly compassion, romantic desire and heroic courage. For example, as she travels through Norway, she writes that "England and America owe their liberty to commerce, which created new species of power to undermine the feudal system. But let them beware of the consequence; the tyranny of wealth is still more galling and debasing than that of rank" (Wollstonecraft 95). Here, she demonstrates her complex understanding of the intersections between commerce, freedom, and power while also warning against moral downfalls. With simplicity and tact, she molds the love letter genre into a pedestal for democratic progress. She personifies the complexity of womanhood and invites readers to grapple with nuance.

Unfortunately, modern rhetorical scholars might overlook texts like *Letters* due to their artistic, romantic styles and miss the ways that they contributed to crucial historical conversations. Although *Letters* is non-fiction, it has rarely been analyzed outside of the context of literature. It is viewed as an early example of romantic literature defined by awe-inspiring descriptions of life, nature, and mankind. According to Pramaggiore, "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 [. . .] closer to poetry than to a regular prose letter" (Pramaggiore 839). In this characterization, it becomes clear that Wollstonecraft's writing style mirrors the artistic quality of the time. As a woman of philosophy, education, and rhetoric, she

was inspired by and inspires the literary progression of her age. However, beyond conversations of romantic style, *Letters* is a rhetorically significant social critique that should be studied in broad circles and included in discussions of taste, feminist progress, and revolutionary thought. Limiting the text to the sphere of literature reduces its integration into historical discussions. Therefore, the text's romantic nature, demonstrated through Wollstonecraft's use of performative intimacy, should be viewed as a rhetorical tactic increasing the text's appeal for Rhetoric and Writing scholars, not as a limiting feature defining the text as purely literary.

Beyond Mary: The Broader Application of Genre in Rhetoric

Throughout her life and work, Mary Wollstonecraft paved the way for the advancement and education of women within English society. However, it is important to recognize that many of Wollstonecraft's views were Euro-centric and derogatory toward indigenous people and people of color. Her views of feminism, while advanced for her time, neglect intersectional understandings of womanhood and equality. This being said, history written without voices like hers is incomplete. Eighteenth century women were not merely passive beings sitting on the sidelines of change. They were active participants in bringing about a better, more inclusive world. This truth makes it necessary for rhetorical scholars to seek a profound inclusion of various genres to include more pertinent voices in the remembrance of history. Because positions of political power have always been, and continue to be, disproportionately allotted to white men, marginalized people have found unique ways to shape the worlds around them in significant and creative ways. For example, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sarah and Angelina Grimke looked to religious preaching within the Quaker church as an avenue to advocate for abolition and women's rights (Lerner). Furthermore, Frederick Douglass, a Black man who escaped slavery in America, looked to preaching and autobiographical works as a

means to advocate for abolition (Douglass). While these examples are well-known within academia, their existence should inspire rhetorical scholars to seek out new genres to incorporate into their research. In doing so, our understanding of history will be shaped by meaningful contributions of individuals otherwise overlooked in our textbooks. I hope this exploration of Wollstonecraft's *Letters* inspires rhetorical scholars to examine often-overlooked historic genres and continue to incorporate excluded voices into our understanding of progress.

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