Chapter note 5: women

Chapter 5: women groups together MWS scripts, a majority on 1839 watermark paper, and original documents from Godwin’s correspondence in the 1790s. The topic of this chapter is Mary Shelley’s consideration of Godwin’s relationships with women, his views on sexual relations and marriage, and his major writings on the life, marriage, and death of Mary Wollstonecraft. The chapter consists of Mary Shelley holograph scripts, in two Bodleian folders, Dep. c.606/4 and Dep. c.532/8; of MWS transcriptions of letters on 1839 watermark paper, from Dep. c.607/6; of Mary Jane Godwin’s transcriptions of extracts from Godwin’s Memoirs of the Author (1798) in Dep. c.532/8; and of letters to and from Godwin located in Deps. b.227/2(b), b.227/8(a), and Duke reel 5. Endnotes cite references to b.214/3, and *documents are presented from c.607/2, Duke reel 5, c.607/5, b.227/8(a), b.227/2(b), and Duke reel 13.

All sheets in Dep. c.606/4 are MWS holograph script written on watermarked Joynson 1839 papier satine. The endnote to the unnumbered page with which the section on Mary Wollstonecraft opens gives: ‘*Bodleian folder rubric Dep. c.606/4, MWS hand, unnumbered quarto fold, wove paper, written recto and verso, watermark Joynson 1839. All 14 sheets in this folder are MWS script, on wove paper with watermark Joynson 1839’.

Mary Jane Godwin’s hand is represented in the chapter, from the folder c.532/8. She was employed under Mary Shelley’s supervision in transcribing long passages of the 1st edition Godwin’s Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, his tribute to Wollstonecraft, published 10 January 1798, four months after her death. Of the various watermarked and unmarked papers in Dep. c.532/8, those on which Mary Jane Godwin has transcribed parts of chapters 6, 9 and 10 of Memoirs (1798) are written on recto only, which may indicate that they have been copied by the wetpress machine owned by Godwin, though there are no visible signs on the papers in the folder that they have been put through this process.

The practice of removing original letters from the Bodleian folders labelled ‘Life of William Godwin’ (and in many cases, cutting off the signatures) has been extended, for the folders that compose chapter 5: women, to removing MWS transcriptions of those originals. These transcriptions, when they turn up in other folders, such as c.607/6, prove to be written on the same watermark Joynson 1839 paper as those in c.606/4 and c.532/8.
One document from c.606/4, a brief memorandum or draft letter on 1839 paper in MWS hand, dated from Richmond 6 May 1840, sheds light on the progress of the project of *Life of William Godwin* at this date:

> These are the materials, I conceive of the first volume.
> It is not complete & ready for the press. Not that there is any thing to add - 
> but there are many letters to be reconsidered - all that is here is not to be 
> published - though the exceptions are few - all that I at once determined to 
> reject, have already been taken away. But some are to be reconsidered, & I 
> think withdrawn, that I have now left.

This is the latest documentary evidence we have located of Mary Shelley at work on the Godwin biography. At the same time it signals a blockage in the path to publication. The *Bodleian rubric c.606/4 identifies this draft as ‘an introduction ... [to] a biography of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft*, but the contrary is clearly the case; this is the moment to pause and ‘reconsider’ the whole project.

The editor of Mary Shelley’s letters, Betty T. Bennett, provides clues to a likely addressee for this draft letter, if such it is. John Hobart Caunter, a co-signatory with Mary Jane to the July 1836 contract with Henry Colburn, had assisted Mary Shelley to place her stories and articles in journals during the 1830s; and Godwin had written to him as late as 18 March 1836 about negotiations for the sale of Mary Shelley’s novel *Falkner* (Bennett, ii, 268, n1). Another letter from Mary Shelley to Caunter, provisionally dated by Bennett ‘[c26 March–c5 June, 1840]’, mentions: ‘the subject of my publication - which Mrs Godwin & myself both so much wish you to as you are good enough to offer arrange’. Bennett notes ‘Unidentified’ for ‘the subject of my publication’ (Bennett, ii, 383-4, and n2). It seems very probable that in May 1840 Caunter was assisting Mary Shelley to finalise the single volume she had so far composed of *Life of William Godwin*; and was asked to wait until she had reconsidered whether or not to include several problematic letters.

If this is not a letter to Caunter, it could be a private memo from an anxious Mary Shelley to herself. Pamela Clemit (1999: 95) terms it ‘a note in Mary Shelley’s hand’, and one that confirms Clemit’s own description of the ‘fragmentary’ and ‘unfinished’ ‘nature of the work’ on *Life of William Godwin*. This has warrant in Mary Shelley’s personal circumstances at this date, including the need she felt for a propitious beginning to her son Percy Florence’s adult life during his university years at Cambridge. Recuperating from a severe illness at Richmond in May 1840, Shelley is
faced with continuing work on the Godwin biography alone and unassisted by stepmother Godwin by this stage. Indeed Mary Jane’s health is now so poor that her daughter Claire Clairmont is returning from Vienna to care for her domestic needs. Mary Shelley herself is suffering symptoms of the brain cancer that was to end her life eleven years later, and undecided as to how, or indeed if ever, to proceed to publication of ‘my Father’s Life’. Her fears about public and press reactions to the radical politics and heterodox religious views of Godwin’s writings had already found expression in her private journal (Duke reel 11: ‘Mary Shelley’s Journal, 1826 intermittently till 1844’), and in letters to close friends. On 26 January 1837, Shelley wrote to Edward Trelawny:

> With regard to my Father’s life - I certainly could not answer it to my conscience to give it up ... A sense of duty towards my father, whose passion was posthumous fame makes me ready - as far as I only am concerned, to meet the misery that must be mine if I become the object of scurrility & attacks - for the rest - for my own private satisfaction all I ask is obscurity (Bennett ii, 280-1)

By 1839-1840, while composing the scripts on 1839 watermark paper, in chapters 5: women and 6: writing of this edition, Mary Shelley’s fears had received all too solid confirmation in the hostile reviews of her monumental edition of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poetry and prose, published by Edward Moxon at the close of 1839.

In my chapter note to Chapter 6: writing, I suggest that the letters giving Mary Shelley most trouble in 1840 were those in the cache of 1798 correspondence between Godwin and Harriet Lee (now in b.228/4). The folding-in of ‘Richmond 6 May 1840’ with her carefully phrased account of her parents’ marriage in the same folder c.606/4, might suggest that letters between Godwin and Wollstonecraft were also in question. Whatever Mary Shelley’s private emotions in reading of her parents’ courtship and her mother’s death, and of Godwin’s pursuit of Harriet Lee so soon after that, the public issues of sexual and religious orthodoxy, and Godwin’s departures from such orthodoxies, were of paramount importance on the question of publication.

Mary Shelley handled the Godwin-Lee letters (in chapter 6: writing) differently from the Godwin-Wollstonecraft letters (in this chapter 5: women). She neither transcribed them nor quoted and paraphrased them into the terms of her framing narrative. Instead, after a brief preamble, she reverted to the technique of pinning them together. This lends the Godwin-Lee affair the air of an appendix, contingent to the memorial tribute to Wollstonecraft (in this chapter 5). Our presentation of the Godwin-Lee letters in a separate chapter 6: writing, is designed to reinforce this separation.
Chapter 5: women opens with a document headed ‘Mrs G’s Letters’, in c.532/8, MWS holograph script on Joynson 1839 watermark paper. This is a series of numbered jottings that Mary Shelley compiled from the papers that her stepmother Mary Jane Godwin put at her disposal. The ‘letters’ themselves remain opaque, MWS script selecting here and there the names of acquaintances that might be worked up into connecting passages with Godwin’s extant autobiographies. This document provides the only occasion on which the phrase ‘your father’ indicates Mary Jane speaking to Mary Shelley and referring to Godwin (‘When ever your father spoke of [Arnott], he extolled his intellectual powers’).

This document is followed in c.532/8 by Mary Shelley’s account of Godwin’s friendships with Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Inchbald, Amelia Alderson, later Mrs Opie, and (after a brief but important entry on Mary Wollstonecraft), Mary Hays and Sarah-Anne Parr. The sequence of papers from c.532/8 ends with MWS transcriptions of excerpts from the ‘notes’ that travelled from early summer to December 1796 between Godwin’s and Wollstonecraft’s lodgings in north London. After Wollstonecraft’s death, while he was editing her posthumous works, these and the rest of the notes were arranged and numbered by Godwin, not always in correct sequence, and are published in Wollstonecraft’s Collected Letters (Wardle Letters 225, 238, 243, 250). In all likelihood, Mary Shelley would have transcribed more of these brief missives for inclusion in the Godwin biography than the paltry sample remaining in the Bodleian folders.

The midsection of this chapter 5: women is compiled from MWS script in Dep. c.606/4. Here is the first document:

At the beginning of this year Mr. Godwin married Mary Wollstonecraft. The precise date is not known - he does not mention it in his journal and it took the ceremony  had taken place some time before the marriage was declared. This secrecy partly arose from a ^slight^ shrinking on Mr. Godwin’s part to avow that he had acted in contradiction to his theories. Such ^contradictions occur^ things are indeed done every day & are applauded. But the fervour & unbending uncompromising tone of the assumed by the Author of Political Justice in promulgating his opinions made his followers demand a rigid adherence of them in action - (c.606/4: [unnumbered])
St Clair provides an endnote to MWS statement: ‘The precise date is not known - he does not mention it in his journal and it took the ceremony had taken place some time before the marriage was declared’:

Godwin’s journal entry for 29 Mar. 1797, ‘Panc’, records his visit to St Pancras Church to be married’ (C530).

After this midsection from c.606/4, we have placed a further section taken from c.532/8. This is an account, on paper with no watermark, of Godwin’s relationship with Maria Reveley, who after she remarried, as Maria Gisborne, was the only woman friend of Mary Wollstonecraft with whom Mary Shelley was personally acquainted. Carrying a letter of introduction from Godwin, the Shelley couple met the Gisbornes in Italy in 1818, and after Mary Shelley left Italy in 1823, she sustained her friendship with them by correspondence until both husband and wife died within weeks of Godwin’s death in April 1836.

In her commentary on her parents’ marriage (in c.606/4), Mary Shelley allows a glimpse of the ‘afterlife’ to that marriage, her own life story:

Mrs. Reveley feared to lose a kind & constant friend, but becoming intimate with Mary Wollstonecraft, soon learnt to appreciate her virtues & to love her. She ^soon found, she told me in after days^ that instead of losing one, she had secured two friends.

The poetic ambiguity of ‘losing one and securing two’ points to Godwin at his marriage and to Wollstonecraft at her death, and later restoration, in the form of the married Shelleys, her daughter and son-in-law. This is the one section of MWS script that carries Godwin’s lifestory past the year 1798; and tells of his unsuccessful proposal of marriage to the newly widowed Mrs Reveley in 1799:

She at first refused to see him & ^several^ letters passed between them; I find none of the lady’s but several of my father’s as preserved by the copying machine

[blank]
The editorial mark ‘[blank]’ covers the letters now missing from the c.532/8 folder. MWS specifies the letterpress copies, and an endnote in St Clair locates them in c.513 (C200, n9, n11).

One connection made in this section of chapter 5: women deserves closer attention. MWS scripting of the story of Maria Reveley, later Maria Gisborne, is followed by MWS transcription (c.532/8), of Godwin’s letter to herself just after the Shelley couple and their two young children had arrived in Italy, in June 1818. Godwin reminisces fondly about Maria Gisborne, and alludes to his current work-in-progress, Of Population: Answer to Malthus, published two years later by Longmans. Of Population was translated into French by Dr Francisco Solano Constancio, who consulted Mary Shelley in 1837 before publishing a brief biography of Godwin.¹

This connection was first noted in The Clairmont Correspondence, ed. Marion Kingston Stocking and David Stocking (1995), 116 n11, as follows:

Francisco Solano Constancio (1777-1846), distinguished Portuguese physician... In 1820 he had translated Godwin’s On Population into French. On 18 December 1837 Harriet de Boinville wrote to Mary Shelley to request help for Dr Constancio in preparing a memoir of Godwin for “a very respectable biographical publication”. She added that “someone will certainly write this article & we desire it should come from a lover of his fame & a just appreciator of his doctrines” (Abinger, Bodleian, dep. c516). The article appeared as by “C-o et Z”, the anonymous Z being Mary Shelley.

The next section of 5: women, ‘The death of Mary Wollstonecraft’ is compiled from letters to and from Godwin in Deps. b.227/2 and b.227/8, and Duke reel 5, some of them extant only in blurred letterpress copies. These were written in the immediate aftermath of the death of Wollstonecraft and are introduced by MWS commentary on unnumbered sheets of 1839 Joynson paper in c.606/4 and c532/8. A token of her emotional involvement in the death recorded here is that she introduces the letters with
a caveat, admitting that she has moved the letters from 1797, when they were written, to the commencement of ‘this year’ 1798.

I commence this year with a few letters dated at the conclusion of the last, but which would have interfered with the subject that set its dark seal on that year. The letters from Thomas Wedgewood besides being almost necessary to the understanding those of his correspondent, are so full of noble & generous feeling of intelligence & interesting display of character that they cannot be considered superfluous. (c.606/4)

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The final section of 5: women is a transcription of parts of chapters 6, 9 and 10 of Godwin’s Memoirs of the Author (1798), in Dep. c.532/8. This was the heaviest task undertaken by Mary Jane Godwin for the Life of William Godwin. It is also the latest documentary evidence of her collaboration on the project.

This calls for a summary of her participation over the four years of composition of Life of William Godwin. She contributed in 1: writing, the transcription from Godwin’s novel Damon and Delia 1784 (c.606/5); in 4: pedagogy, the collation and annotations on eight of Amelia Alderson’s letters to Godwin, 1795 to 1797 (b. 210/6); and in this chapter 5: women, her comments on the collection of ‘Mrs G’s Letters’, and the transcription from Memoirs of the Author (1798), both in c.532/8. The drudgery of transcription and fair copying, and the custodianship of men’s private lives, was considered women’s work. Negatively, Mary Jane’s life with Godwin from 1801 to 1836 was placed entirely out of text by her stepdaughter. Mary Jane’s share of the work of memorialising Godwin is only not negligible in view of the fact that Mary Shelley shared the work with no one else.

When religious belief rears its head amongst these life and death and love affairs, it has the last word of what we have brought together as chapter 5: women. This ‘last word’ is, ironically enough, a missing word, the page of Godwin’s Memoirs of the Author, 1st

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Mr Carlisle left us no more from Wednesday evening, to the hour of her death. It was impossible to exceed his kindness and affectionate attention. It excited in every spectator a sentiment like adoration. His conduct was uniformly tender and anxious

This unfinished paragraph ends the chapter 5: women, and our endnote gives the reference to the 1st edition of Godwin’s Memoirs, at the page of the printed edition where the MJG manuscript script breaks off:

Memoirs (1798), Chap x, page 187 continues ‘ever upon the watch’ and so to the end of the book at page 199. The page of script signalled with the drop-word ‘ever’, and any subsequent pages of script, are now missing from Bodleian folder c.532/8. Subsequent pages of Memoirs (1798) include the controversial statement on page 190: ‘On these two days her faculties were in too decayed a state, to be able to follow any train of ideas with force or any accuracy of connection. Her religion, as I have already shown, was not calculated to be the torment of a sick bed; and, in fact, during her whole illness, not a word of a religious cast fell from her lips’. 

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