Note

AN UNDISCOVERED LETTER BY MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Mary Wollstonecraft's social and intellectual encounters with the Neo-Platonist philosopher Thomas Taylor have long interested scholars. Renowned as the 'apostle of paganism' for his enthusiastic devotion to Platonism and his industry in translating ancient Greek philosophy, Thomas Taylor has been posited as a crucial influence on Wollstonecraft's own Platonism.[1] Indeed, Thomas Taylor recalled in his 1798 account of his own life that when Wollstonecraft stayed with him for three months, probably in 1777, she was 'always pleased' to hear him 'explain the doctrines of Plato' and found his study to be an 'abode of peace'.[2] There were further connections between the two authors. They shared mutual acquaintances, such as the poet and engraver William Blake. Wollstonecraft's writings echoed many of the Platonist ideas outlined in Thomas Taylor's classical translations. Amidst the stormy politics of the 1790s, Thomas Taylor's initially favourable impression of Wollstonecraft was shattered by her adherence to more radical political ideals. By 1792, he had published a *Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* as a *reductio ad absurdum* of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).[3] However, much remains unknown about the relationship between 'England's gentile priest' and the 'female incendiary'.[4] The apparent lack of any evidence of Wollstonecraft's perspective on Thomas Taylor leaves open questions about the depth of their friendship and the precise nature of the philosophical ideas they discussed together.

This research note decisively answers these questions by analyzing a previously undiscovered letter from Wollstonecraft to Thomas Taylor's wife and partner in his philosophical endeavours: Mary Taylor (née Morton).[5] This letter—the text of which has been provided at the end of this note—only survives because Thomas Taylor sent it to the *New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register* with his own illuminating preface, where it was published on 1 March 1816.[6] Warm and convivial, Wollstonecraft's epistle made a variety of humorous allusions to Aristotelian and Platonist ideas and continually exhibited the close connections between her social circle and the Taylors. As the letter appears to have been sent on 9 November 1783 when Wollstonecraft was only twenty-four, it displays the earliest known evidence of her engaging with philosophical ideas, which were foundational to her mature writings.

This dating of this epistle, however, is only probable. Thomas Taylor's preface stated that it was sent 'between thirty and forty years ago' around the time that he had begun 'to study the writings of Aristotle and Plato'. The letter contains a place and a day of composition—'*Rotherhithe*' on '*Nov.* 9'—but not the year in which it was written.[7] Nevertheless, it is highly likely that the letter was sent in 1783 because Wollstonecraft only had

[1] The epithet was bestowed upon Taylor in: *The Analytical Review* (29 vols., London, 1788–98), XVIII, 58.

[2] [T. Taylor], 'Mr. Taylor, The Platonist', in *British Public Characters of 1798* (London, 1798), 100–124, at 113–14. Taylor identified himself as the author of this life in an October 1798 letter: G. E. Bentley, Jr., 'Thomas Taylor's Biography', *SB*, xiv (1961), 234–36. It has been proposed that Wollstonecraft stayed with Thomas Taylor at some point between 1780 and 1782: G. M. Harper, 'Mary Wollstonecraft's Residence with Thomas Taylor the Platonist', *NQ*, ix (1962), 461–63. However, there does not seem to have been time for her to have stayed with the Taylors in this period: J. Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (London, 2000), 461, n. 13.

[3] For further discussion of Wollstonecraft's Platonism see especially: S. Tomaselli, '"Have Ye Not Heard That We Cannot Serve Two Masters?" The Platonism of Mary Wollstonecraft', in D. Hedley and D. Leech (eds.) *Revisioning Cambridge Platonism: Sources and Legacy* (Cham, Switzerland, 2019), 175–89; B. Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge, 2003), 108–10, 277; S. Hutton, 'The Ethical Background of the Rights of Women', in W. Sweet (ed.), *Philosophical Theory and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Ottawa, 2003), 27–40.

[4] T. J. Mathias, *The Pursuits of Literature, or What You Will. A Satirical Poem in Dialogue. With Notes. Part the Third* (London, 1796), 5; *The Looker-On: A Periodical Paper* (3 vols., London, 1794), II, 275.

[5] The letter has not been referenced in her collected letters or in any modern work on Wollstonecraft, including but not limited to: M. Wollstonecraft, *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. J. Todd (London, 2003); B. Ayres, *Becoming Wollstonecraft: the Interconnection of her Life and Works* (New York, 2024); J. Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*, 3rd edn (London, 2014); J. Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: An Annotated Bibliography*, 2nd edn (London, 2012); C. Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, rev. edn (London, 1992); R. M. Wardle, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography* (Lawrence, 1951).

[6] *The New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register* (10 vols., London, 1814–18), V, 107.

[7] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

reason to visit Rotherhithe that year. After her sister Eliza married Meredith Bishop, a shipbuilder in Rotherhithe, on 20 October 1782, she visited the Bishops' residence in nearby Bermondsey—a little over a mile from Rotherhithe—in late 1783. She aimed to provide succour for her sister who had just given birth and was in 'a most unsettled state' over her marriage. As Eliza had left Meredith by January 1784, Wollstonecraft probably sent the letter on 9 November 1783 whilst she was still staying with the Bishops.[8] Wollstonecraft concluded the letter by declaring that 'My sister's compliments attend you', which seems to further indicate that she was staying with Eliza at the time of writing. She also noted that her close friend Frances Blood was still living in Walham Green, so the letter must have been written before she joined Wollstonecraft to help Eliza in January 1784 and certainly before she left for Lisbon in 1785.[9]

Wollstonecraft's epistle to Mary Taylor was elicited by the fact that she had 'received a letter yesterday which you were so obliging as to forward'. Wollstonecraft remarked that she was 'a little mortified at your not writing a line with it'. Nevertheless, she admitted that she 'hardly could expect such a favor, after my *seeming neglect* in not answering your last friendly epistle'.[10] Wollstonecraft's excuse for not writing to Mary Taylor occasioned a series of humorous allusions to ancient Greek philosophical ideas. The reason that she had not replied immediately was that:

> As Mr. Taylor is confined to a regimen, I wished to have sent him a couple of chickens, in order to regale his *animal soul*, and to invigorate his *vegetable* one. The *intellect* I know has continual treat; but, (contrary to the general practice,) poor body is by him neglected.[11]

In this passage, Wollstonecraft light-heartedly disclosed her desire to send Thomas Taylor some chickens to improve his health, which had been harmed by his neglect of the 'body' to provide his '*intellect*' with the 'continual treat' of studying ancient philosophy. Later in the letter, Wollstonecraft emphasized her concern about Thomas Taylor's working habits. She asked Mary Taylor to pass on her caution that Thomas Taylor should not continue staying 'up late at night' in reference to his practice of reading ancient writings after working as a bank clerk until at least seven in the evening.[12]

Wollstonecraft's suggestion that the gift of chickens would aid Thomas Taylor's health was framed as a subtle jest about Aristotle's distinction between the three faculties of the human soul. According to Aristotle, human beings share with plants a nutritive faculty or '*vegetable*' soul, which constitutes the capacity for nourishment and growth. They also possess in common with non-reflective animals an appetitive faculty or '*animal soul*', which reacts instinctively to immediate sensory impressions. But human beings are distinguished from such brute beasts by a deliberative faculty or '*intellect*', which can reason about abstract ideas and chart different courses of action.[13] Wollstonecraft thus deployed these Aristotelian concepts to joke that her chickens would sustain Thomas Taylor's 'animal' and '*vegetable*' faculties, which he had disregarded in his endeavours to improve his higher intellectual capacities. Wollstonecraft's use of 'regale' in relation to the '*animal soul*' and 'invigorate' in relation to the '*vegetable*' soul displayed a sophisticated understanding of the fact that the former is stimulated whilst the latter is merely nourished.[14] Wollstonecraft's comment that Thomas Taylor's prioritization of his rational soul was 'contrary to general practice' pertained to the belief held by many ancient and Christian philosophers that most human beings were governed by an immediate appetite for bodily pleasure, rather than their reason.[15]

Considering Thomas Taylor's reputation as a Neo-Platonist, it might seem surprising that Wollstonecraft appropriated Aristotle's theory of the soul, rather than Plato's subtly different account. Plato had after all argued for a distinct threefold division of the soul between an appetitive part that seeks immediate pleasure; a spirited

[8] Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, 38–50.

[9] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107; Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, 43–44, 46–50.

[10] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

[11] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

[12] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107; [Taylor], 'The Platonist', 110–11.

[13] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107; Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. C. Shields (Oxford, 2016), 27, 28–32, 55–8. For a similar eighteenth-century usage see: S. Colliber, *Free Thoughts Concerning Souls* (London, 1734), 1.

[14] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

[15] See, for instance, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. S. Broadie and C. Rowe (Oxford, 2002), 97–8.

part that reacts against affronts to honour; and an intellectual part that reflects upon truth and the good.[16] However, Wollstonecraft's adoption of Aristotelian notions in her jests probably reflected the fact that Thomas Taylor was unusual amongst his contemporaries in situating Aristotle firmly within the Platonist tradition. In his *Dissertation on the Philosophy of Aristotle* (1812), for instance, he sought to prove that 'Aristotle accords with Plato in the principal dogmas of his philosophy' and contended that both philosophers shared a belief in the soul's incorporeality.[17] As Thomas Taylor's preface to the letter remarked that it was written when he was studying 'the writings of Aristotle and Plato', he seems to have been suggesting that both authors were an important context for Wollstonecraft's discourse.[18]

Indeed, later in the letter, Wollstonecraft alluded to more specifically Platonist ideas. She declared that if she and Frances Blood could contribute to Thomas Taylor's recovery, they 'should in our turn, thank our "*Guardian Angels*" for directing us to you'.[19] Written in a letter permeated with ancient philosophy to neo-pagan recipients, this comment appears to at least partly relate to Plato and Xenophon's belief that Socrates was guided by a daemon or benevolent spirit, which Thomas Taylor would later describe as 'in modern language, a guardian angel'.[20] As the letter displayed '''*Guardian Angels*"' in quotation marks, Wollstonecraft appears to have consciously distinguished the comment from an allusion to guardian angels in Christianity.[21] Wollstonecraft then proceeded to make an amusing comment about another Platonist theory: the notion that animals possess immortal souls separable from the body.[22] Returning to the subject of the 'chickens', Wollstonecraft declared that 'the servant tells me, they are not yet fat enough to kill, so they must enjoy the vital air a little longer; but when they are fit for the spit, I shall send their *bodies* to you, and the souls may go where they please'.[23] This conceptualization of bestial souls surviving death diverged from the Aristotelian notion that animal souls are the principles of, and inseparably tied to, their bodies as well as the Cartesian theory that animals are soulless biological machines.[24]

These jests displayed a remarkably subtle understanding of the nuances of ancient Greek theories of the soul and provide some of the earliest evidence of Wollstonecraft's engagement with any philosophical concepts.[25] Strikingly, she believed Mary Taylor to be sufficiently familiar with ancient Greek philosophy to be entertained by her witticisms. For though Wollstonecraft appears to have expected Mary Taylor to pass along some of her remarks to her husband, she also seems to have been making light of Thomas Taylor's foibles for the private amusement of his wife. As Thomas Taylor praised Mary Taylor's 'elegant education' and tenderly lauded their partnership as the 'platonick pair', it is perhaps unsurprising that she would be well-versed in such Aristotelian and Platonist ideas.[26] Nevertheless, this letter constitutes the most direct evidence that Mary Taylor participated in the philosophical discussions at Walworth.

Throughout the epistle, Wollstonecraft's affectionate tone and references to mutual acquaintances testified to the close connections between her social circle and the Taylors. Wollstonecraft's apology for not responding immediately to Mary Taylor indicated an expectation that they would keep up a friendly correspondence. Likewise, Wollstonecraft's positive view of Mary Taylor was reflected in her declaration that 'it would vex me to lose any part of your good opinion'. Their closeness was further suggested by the fact that the epistle was occasioned by Mary Taylor forwarding another acquaintance's letter to Wollstonecraft.[27] Indeed, Wollstonecraft's letter referred to two other mutual acquaintances.

[16] Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy (2 vols., Cambridge, MA, 2013), I, 401–27. For a similar eighteenth-century usage see: Plato, *The Works of Plato Abridg'd*, trans. A. F. Dacier (2 vols., London, 1701), I, 122–23.

[17] T. Taylor, *A Dissertation on the Philosophy of Aristotle* (London, 1812), 6, 6–12, 12–14.

[18] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

[19] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

[20] T. Taylor, 'Remarks on the Daemon of Socrates', *The Classical Journal*, xxxi (1817), 160–64, at 160. Socrates's daemon was a prominent theme in many of the Neo-Platonist works translated by Taylor, such as: Maximus of Tyre, *The Dissertations of Maximus of Tyre*, trans. T. Taylor (2 vols., London, 1804), II, 59–82.

[21] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

[22] See, for instance, Plotinus, *Select Works of Plotinus*, trans. T. Taylor (London, 1817), 399–40.

[23] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

[24] For further discussion see: P. Harrison, 'Animal Souls, Metempsychosis, and Theodicy in Seventeenth-Century English Thought', *JHP*, xxxi (1993), 519–544.

[25] Except for some other early moral reflections: Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, 16, 22, 27, 34.

[26] [Taylor], 'The Platonist', 101, 106.

[27] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

She passed on good wishes and a note from Frances Blood, who had stayed with the Taylors at the same time as Wollstonecraft. She also hoped that Thomas Taylor would follow the 'prescriptions' of the wealthy Quaker physician John Coakley Lettsome whom she later alluded to in a 20 July 1785 letter to George Blood.[28]

More importantly, the letter reveals that Wollstonecraft was friendly with Thomas Taylor as well as Mary Taylor. Wollstonecraft asked Mary Taylor to pass on that 'I shall think him destitute of both friendship and affection, if he neglects any method of regaining health'. Later in the letter, she remarked: 'you may expect to see me, very soon, I shall be glad to steal from nonsense and parade to your fire-side'. She also commented: 'I should be very happy to see him if the walk would not be too fatiguing'.[29] Evidently, Wollstonecraft expected to have an ongoing association with Thomas Taylor and to meet him at a future date. Their friendship did indeed persist for a time. He remembered in his account of his life that he visited her George Street lodgings, where she resided from 1787 to the autumn of 1791.[30]

If this letter only revealed more about Wollstonecraft's youthful acquaintances and intellectual interests, it would still provide a fascinating window into her early life. But the epistle has a much wider significance: it divulges a philosophical exchange that was an important influence on the conceptual content of her later writings. Indeed, the distinctive blend of Platonist and Aristotelian ideas of the soul presented in the letter to Mary Taylor formed a golden thread from Wollstonecraft's early educational writings to the *Rights of Woman*. Her encounter with Thomas Taylor's eclectic Neo-Platonism was particularly important because it was unusual in the 1780s to adhere to these ancient Greek philosophical concepts. Aristotelian and Platonist notions of a tripartite soul had been steadily falling out of fashion since the late seventeenth century. John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) had derided the notion of '*vegetative Souls*' as meaningless jargon.[31] Few, if any, influential writers between the early 1700s and the 1780s had defended what was widely regarded as an outdated conceptualization of the soul.[32]

Wollstonecraft's unconventional interest in Platonist and Aristotelian ideas might have facilitated the friendship that she formed with the prominent Dissenting writer Richard Price after setting up a girls' school at Newington Green in 1784. After all, Price's own writings revealed a strong interest in Plato, the later Platonists, and seventeenth-century Neo-Platonists, such as Ralph Cudworth.[33] Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft's early intellectual interests were not simply subsumed into Price's own idiosyncratic system. Although Price's writings argued for the mind's immateriality and exalted the harmony of the passions ruled by reason, he never clearly outlined either the Aristotelian or Platonist threefold division of the soul's faculties.[34] In contrast, Wollstonecraft was continually adapting Thomas Taylor's original synthesis of Aristotelian and Platonist theories from her first publications to her mature interventions.

These philosophical notions were seamlessly integrated into the moral lessons of Wollstonecraft's early educational writings. Her didactic novel *Mary* (1788) characterized its protagonists by the extent to which they had developed the different faculties of their souls. The eponymous heroine Mary's selfish mother Eliza was described in Aristotelian terms as prioritizing her animal soul over her rational one: 'she ran over those most delightful substitutes for bodily dissipation, novels. I say bodily, or the animal soul, for a rational one can find no employment in polite circles'. In contrast, Mary taught herself many of the Platonist beliefs that Wollstonecraft had expounded in her letter to Mary Taylor. She imagined 'wandering spirits' in every part of nature and 'concluded animals had souls'. Mary, an idealized portrayal of Wollstonecraft herself, prioritized her rational soul.

[28] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107; Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, 55.

[29] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

[30] [Taylor], 'The Platonist', 113–14. On Wollstonecraft's George Street residence see: D. Hay, *Dinner with Joseph Johnson: Books and Friendship in a Revolutionary Age* (New Haven, 2022), 153–6; Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, 188.

[31] J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 497.

[32] Locke's critique was often echoed: I. Watts, *Logick* (London, 1725), 143–4; C. Wolff, *Logic* (London, 1770), 56.

[33] As noted in: M. K. Zebrowski, 'Richard Price: British Platonist of the Eighteenth Century', *JHI*, lv (1994), 17–35.

[34] See, for instance, R. Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, ed. D. D. Raphael (Oxford, 1974), 229–30; R. Price, *A Sermon Preached at St. Thomas's, January the First, 1766* (London, 1766), 11–12; R. Price and J. Priestley, *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism* (London, 1778), 49–126.

She conquered her passions 'entirely' and therefore suffered from the same predicament as Thomas Taylor: 'she almost forgot she had a body which required nourishment'.[35] In Wollstonecraft's educational *Original Stories* (1788), moreover, Mrs Mason, the governess of two unruly children Mary and Caroline, began to educate her charges by correcting their cruelty to animals. She supported her arguments with an Aristotelian account of animal souls. She argued that animal impulses 'are like our inferior emotions, which do not depend entirely on our will, but are involuntary; they seem to have been implanted to preserve the species, and make the individual grateful for actual kindness'. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft's *Analytic Review* article on the Whig historian Catharine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790) lauded this work for making arguments 'in favour of the future existence of brutes'.[36]

Wollstonecraft turned these ancient Greek philosophical ideas to more radical political purposes in the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789. She redeployed her earlier conception of the soul in her critique of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). As Sylvana Tomaselli has argued, Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Men* echoed the depiction of the soul's immersion in matter in Thomas Taylor's translation of Plotinus's *Concerning the Beautiful* (1787) and appears to have drawn its portrayal of the soul's ascent from his 1788 translation of Plato's *Phaedrus*.[37] Crucially, Wollstonecraft also utilized Aristotelian ideas of the soul to refute what she regarded as Burke's passionate errors. She contended that 'there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties'. Relying upon this distinction between rational and animal natures, she argued that Burke's emphasis on instinctual '*common sense*' and '*sensibility*' reduced human actions to 'a congregate of sensations and passions', degrading humanity to the level of brute beasts. After all, 'Brutes hope and fear, love and hate; but, without a capacity to improve'. Later, she reiterated that the 'common affections and passions equally bind brutes together' but human beings are distinguished by 'the operations of that reason which you contemn with flippant disrespect'.[38] In this way, Wollstonecraft depicted what she regarded as Burke's valorization of irrational sentiment as condemning humanity to only following the unreasoning desires of the Aristotelian bestial soul.

Even more importantly, the Aristotelian and Platonist ideas of the soul that Wollstonecraft had joked about in her letter to Mary Taylor were foundational to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In the first chapter of this work, Wollstonecraft declared that her argument relied upon certain axiomatic principles. Her first and most important principle was that humanity's 'pre-eminence over the brute creation' consists in 'Reason'. This fundamental truth underpinned the continual refrain of the *Rights of Woman* that women were, like men, distinguished from animals in having a rational soul and ought to perfect that most distinctive part of themselves. She argued that as 'rational creatures' the '*knowledge* of the two sexes should be the same in nature'. She frequently referred to specifically Platonist ideas about the soul pre-existing the body to ridicule gendered notions of education. She mocked the idea that 'in a pre-existent state the soul was fond of dress' and declared that 'if it be not philosophical to think of sex when the soul is mentioned, the inferiority must depend upon the organs'. She must have been conscious of her own emphasis on women's rational souls because she referred explicitly to her 'old argument' that 'if woman be allowed to have an immortal soul, she must have, as the employment of life, an understanding to improve'. She contended that the structures of women's education in her time were particularly pernicious because they reduced women to the level of 'brutes' who possess 'a soul, though not a reasonable one' and rely on 'the exercise of instinct and sensibility'.[39] In other words, patriarchal systems of education irrationally compelled women to prioritize, in Aristotelian terms, their animal souls over their rational ones.

That Wollstonecraft reworked the philosophical notions of her letter to Mary Taylor in the *Rights of Woman* explains the vehemence of Thomas Taylor's *Rights of Brutes*. Confining himself to the contemplative solitude that befitted a Neo-Platonist, Thomas Taylor's only intervention in the politics of

[35] M. Wollstonecraft, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. J. Todd and M. Butler (7 vols., London, 1989), I, 8, 11, 17.
[36] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, IV, 372; VII, 309.
[37] Tomaselli, 'Platonism of Mary Wollstonecraft', 179–80.
[38] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, V, 14, 30, 31, 40.
[39] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, V, 81, 108, 97, 103, 132.

the 1790s was the *Rights of Brutes*. His relentless focus on Wollstonecraft's ideas about animal and rational souls suggests that his decision to respond to the work was personally motivated. Read in the light of the letter to Mary Taylor, the *Rights of Brutes* appears to divulge a more private argument directed specifically at Wollstonecraft: that she was misusing the ancient Greek philosophical notions he had discussed with her. Fundamentally, he sought to prove that Wollstonecraft and, to a lesser extent, Thomas Paine had erroneously collapsed the natural distinction between more and less rational human beings by demonstrating that their arguments could be applied to vindicate the rights of animals. At the very beginning of the *Rights of Brutes*, he gestured towards his own opinion. He remarked that some readers would object to the tract's arguments for the rights of brute beasts by appealing to '*the authority of Aristotle in his politics, where he endeavours to prove, that some men are naturally born slaves, and others free; and that the slavish part of mankind ought to be governed by the independent, in the same manner as the soul governs the body*'.[40]

Throughout the *Rights of Brutes*, Thomas Taylor satirized the proposition that such differences in the degree of rationality between human beings were unimportant by exalting the reasoning capacities of brute beasts. He argued that 'brutes possess reason in common with men, though not in quite so exquisite a degree'. Parodying Wollstonecraft's continual refrain that women have a duty to perfect their intellectual souls, he averred that animals likewise possess a soul that 'participates of reason and a certain intelligence'.[41] The *Rights of Brutes* drew considerably upon the philosophy of the Neo-Platonist Porphyry, who had argued that animals possess an imperfect capacity for reasoning and their own forms of language. As Thomas Taylor would later publish an admiring 1823 translation of Porphyry's works, he clearly accepted such a characterization of animal rationality.[42] In fact, Thomas Taylor's mockery of Wollstonecraft's argument about rational souls depended on the accuracy of his depiction of animal cognition. If, as Wollstonecraft had claimed, there was a sharp distinction between rational and brute creation, her arguments about the higher aims of rational souls would have been inapplicable to animals, which could not reason about such aims. Thus, Thomas Taylor deployed a Neo-Platonist vision of a world in which there were numerous subtle gradations of rational being to challenge what he regarded as Wollstonecraft's misuse of the Platonist tradition (inclusive, in his view, of Aristotle).

Thomas Taylor combined this philosophical critique of the *Rights of Woman* with a vicious personal attack on Wollstonecraft, which was permeated with all the venom of an estranged friend. For instance, Thomas Taylor sneered at what he regarded as Wollstonecraft's ridiculous proposal in her translation of Christian Gotthilf Salzman's *Elements of Morality for Children* (1791) that children ought to be persuaded not to masturbate by being given explanations of the ignoble nature of that act. He snidely commented that this proposition was 'a most striking proof of her uncommon capacity, and the truth of her grand theory, *the equality of the female nature with the male*'.[43] His distaste for Wollstonecraft's post-1790 writings persisted after 1792. On 16 October 1798, he sent a letter to the gentleman polymath George Cumberland. In this letter, he made a critical connection between Cumberland's depiction of the utopian island of Sophis in his novel *The Captive of the Castle of Sennaar* (1798) and the 'works of Mrs Woolstonecraft'. According to the Taylor, both Wollstonecraft's writings and Cumberland's depiction of the conduct of the Sophians were contributing to public 'lasciviousness'. He declared that the Sophians, who lived in comparative equality and formed marriages that only lasted as long as mutual affection endured, violated the Platonist doctrine that true love cannot consist in the 'gratification of our brutal part'.[44]

The ferocity of Thomas Taylor's turn against Wollstonecraft raises the question: why did he later decide to publish a letter that showed her in a positive light? Thomas Taylor presented his own reasons for displaying Wollstonecraft's letter in his

[40] [T. Taylor], *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* (London, 1792), p. v.

[41] [Taylor], *Rights of Brutes*, 13, 30.

[42] [Taylor], *Rights of Brutes*, 74, 75; Porphyry, *Select Works of Porphyry*, trans. T. Taylor (London, 1823), 94–7, 112, 120.

[43] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, II, 9; [Taylor], *Rights of Brutes*, 82–83.

[44] Harper, 'Wollstonecraft's Residence', 463; G. Cumberland, *The Captive of the Castle of Sennaar An African Tale* (London, 1798), 79–80, 101–2, 148, 155–6.

preface to it. He remarked that he was sending the letter to the periodical because 'many of the readers of your entertaining miscellany will doubtless be gratified by the perusal of any thing which was written by the celebrated Mrs Wollstonecraft'.[45] There was indeed a fashion for printing extracts from Wollstonecraft's writings in periodicals and, as Thomas Taylor also contributed other articles to the *New Monthly Magazine*, he probably wished to enhance the magazine's popularity.[46]

Thomas Taylor also might have been using the letter to depict the morally corrupting effects of revolutionary ideas—an aim that was suited to a periodical renowned for its 'high Tory principles'.[47] Thomas Taylor's anti-Jacobin orientation was displayed in his preface to the letter, where he remarked that it was sent when 'her mind had not been poisoned by those democratic principles and that revolutionary philosophy which afterwards proved so fatal to her and so destructive to Europe'. He further emphasized the pernicious tendencies of these principles by presenting what appears to have been his own poem on France's '*lawless* sons'.[48] Thomas Taylor's comments echoed a common refrain in anti-Jacobin works, such as the evangelical campaigner Hannah More's *History of Mr Fantom* (1797), that the immoral principles of the French revolutionaries naturally and inevitably ruin the lives of those who believe in them.[49] After Wollstonecraft's husband William Godwin published his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) with its scandalous details about her relationship with Gilbert Imlay, her life was often depicted as emblematic of the corrupting effects of radical philosophy.[50] By revealing Wollstonecraft before what he regarded as her fall, Thomas Taylor foregrounded the calamitous consequences of new revolutionary ideals.

However, Thomas Taylor's motivations seem to have extended far beyond simply holding up Wollstonecraft's life as a cautionary tale. After all, he refrained from making such an admonition in his first contribution to Wollstonecraft's posthumous reputation: his digression on his encounters with Wollstonecraft in his 1798 account of his own life. Although Thomas Taylor did hint at the controversies of her later life by declaring that he had admired her virtues specifically 'during her stay with him', he focused entirely on presenting a positive portrait of her during this early period. He thought her 'a very modest, sensible, and agreeable young lady' who was 'pleased' by his explanations of Platonism, though she 'confessed herself more inclined to an active than a contemplative life'. He offered two entertaining anecdotes about Wollstonecraft. First, when he called upon her at George Street, he drank 'wine with her out of a *tea cup*' because she was so careless of social convention. Second, she had declared that she would only marry a man who 'should never presume to enter the room in which she was sitting, till he had first knocked on the door'.[51] That Thomas Taylor, in the immediate aftermath of the publication of Godwin's *Memoirs*, dedicated a substantial proportion of his account of his life to this charmingly eccentric portrait of Wollstonecraft seems to indicate a genuine desire to rescue his former friend from the disfiguring effects of a controversial reputation. It therefore appears that his publication of the letter to Mary Taylor was at least partly motivated by a sincere wish to reveal Wollstonecraft as he had once known her, making kind inquiries about his health and humorous remarks about the ancient Greek philosophies they had discussed together. Such delightful documentation of Wollstonecraft's early social life and intellectual encounters should be of even greater interest to the modern reader who seeks to understand her writings in their rich historical contexts.[52]

MR. EDITOR,

[45] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

[46] See for instance, J. D. Chatterjee, 'Some Overlooked Extracts from Mary Wollstonecraft's Writings Published in Britain, 1792–1795', *ANQ*, xxxviii (2025), 351–53; *New Monthly Magazine*, VI, 12–14, 304; VIII, 16–17, 195–6, 391–2.

[47] C. Redding, *Fifty Years' Recollections* (3 vols., London, 1858), II, 168.

[48] *New Monthly Magazine*, V, 107.

[49] [H. More], *The History of Mr. Fantom* (London, 1797), 21–22.

[50] R. Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem* (London, 1798), 28–30; [W. Godwin], *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London, 1798), 137–8, 190.

[51] [Taylor], 'The Platonist', 113–14.

[52] I am grateful for the very helpful comments of Sylvana Tomaselli, Sarah Hutton, Jon Parkin, Janet Todd, Robin Lane Fox, and the anonymous reviewer for *Notes & Queries* on the ideas presented in this research note.

AS many of the readers of your entertaining miscellany will doubtless be gratified by the perusal of any thing which was written by the celebrated Mrs. Wollstonecraft, I send you the following letter for insertion. It was written by her to my wife, between thirty and forty years ago, and at the period when in a situation particularly adverse to philosophy, I began to study the writings of Aristotle and Plato. At the time she wrote this letter her mind had not been poisoned by those democratic principles and that revolutionary philosophy which afterwards proved so fatal to her, and so destructive to Europe—

When France by myriads pour'd her *lawless*

sons,

More fierce than Goths, than Alans, or than

Huns.

Manor-place, Walworth. Thos. Taylor.

MY DEAR MADAM,

I received a letter yesterday which you were so obliging as to forward. I must own I was a little mortified at your not writing a line with it, tho' I hardly could expect such a favor, after my *seeming neglect* in not answering your last friendly epistle. And as it would vex me to lose any part of your good opinion, I am in a hurry to exculpate myself, and to assure you that it was not the want of either time or inclination; but merely an accident that prevented my writing. As Mr. Taylor is confined to a regimen, I wished to have sent him a couple of chickens, in order to regale his *animal soul*, and to invigorate his *vegetable* one. The *intellect* I know has a continual treat; but, (contrary to the general practice,) poor body is by him neglected. He really uses it very cruelly, not allowing it a sufficient recruit of rest and sleep. I hope he attends minutely to Dr. Lettsom's prescriptions, and I sincerely wish they may have the desired effect, and remove his disease, and your care. It would give Frances and myself the greatest pleasure to be, in the smallest degree, instrumental in bringing about so desirable an event, and we should in our turn, thank our ''*Guardian Angels*'' for directing us to you. I hope, and believe Mr Taylor takes care of himself, and above all, that he does not set up late at night, tell him, I shall think him destitute of both friendship and affection, if he neglects any method of regaining health. I had almost forgot the chickens, they are feeding in the yard, and the servant tells me, they are not yet fat enough to kill, so they must enjoy the vital air a little longer; but when they are fit for the spit, I shall send their *bodies* to you, and the souls may go where they please.

I have heard several times from Miss Blood, and in her first letter she enclosed a note to you, I send it to you, it will, I suppose, give you some account of her health; but her cold still I find continues to tease her and if it does not soon leave her I shall set off for W—— Green, and try to nurse it away.

The weather is so extremely cold, I can hardly stir out, yet you may expect to see me, very soon, I shall be glad to steal from nonsense and parade to your fire-side, and hope to find Mr. Taylor much better. Remember me to him, and say something very civil for me, in your own pretty way. I should be very happy to see him if the walk would not be too fatiguing.

My sister's compliments attend you, as do the best wishes of your affectionate friend,

Rotherhithe, *Nov.* 9. M. Wollstonecraft.

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