



Wollstonecraft, Mary. **Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman. A Posthumous Fragment.** Philadelphia: Printed by James Carey, No. 16 Chestnut-street, 1799. 12mo, full modern calf, raised bands, gilt-stamped black lettering piece at spine. xii, [1], 14-232 pp.

CONDITION: Good, tears to several leaves repaired with archival tape, loss to lower right margin of F5 nicking two letters, loss to lower right corner of I3 (not affecting text), occasional light damp-staining.

First American edition and the first separate edition of this work, widely considered Mary Wollstonecraft's most radical feminist statement.

Ostensibly a Gothic novel, a genre subversively invoked in the opening paragraph contrasting the protagonist's real imprisonment in an insane asylum with the sentimental trope found in popular literature, *Maria* has also been characterized as a Jacobin novel, classing it with the works of radical fiction written by her husband, William Godwin, and other British radicals of the period intent on disseminating their ideas to the increasingly literate lower classes.

As Wollstonecraft notes in her preface, the purpose of the work is to illuminate "the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society." It relates the tale of an intelligent, but powerless woman, Maria Venables, wrongfully imprisoned by her husband, bringing her into contact with other women also victimized by the social and legal systems. These include Jemima, a servant and former prostitute, a sailor's widow, a boarding house owner, and a shopkeeper.

As in her earlier novel, *Mary : A Fiction* (1788) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft criticizes the patriarchal institution of marriage, “depicting Maria’s incarceration as an effect of coverture, which excluded women from owning property, making laws, being tried by a jury of their peers, or entering the legal profession. As critics have noted, Maria’s written testimony at the end of the novel challenges women’s exclusion, based on property rights, from participation in the justice process and underscores the importance of granting individuals the right to be heard in a legal setting.”--Fenno, Coleen. *Testimony, Trauma, and a Space for Victims: Mary Wollstonecraft’s Maria: Or the Wrongs of Woman*.

Unfinished at the time of Wollstonecraft’s death, *Maria* was originally published in London by William Godwin, as *The Wrongs of Woman, or, Maria : a Fragment in The Posthumous Works of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798). This separate American edition, printed by James Carey of Philadelphia, was the only edition of the work published in the United States at the time. In fact, it was not published in the US again until the twentieth century. It is very rare in the marketplace, with no copies recorded in American Book Prices Current for at least 37 years. OCLC records thirteen copies.

The scarcity of the work is not surprising. William Godwin’s publication of *The Posthumous Works*, most especially his revelations regarding his wife’s illegitimate children, love affairs and suicide attempts, inadvertently scandalized the reading public and ruined Wollstonecraft’s reputation for a century or more. Due to the revival of her work by feminist scholars, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, has, of course, received much critical attention in recent years.

REFERENCES: Fenno, Colleen. *Testimony, Trauma, and a Space for Victims: Mary Wollstonecraft’s Maria: Or the Wrongs of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*. Issue 8.2 (Summer 2012) @ <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue82/fenno.htm>
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