

Helen Maria Williams

LEONARD-ROQUES Véronique



Mots-clés

Correspondence

France

French Revolution

Politics

Women

Résumé

‘In every country it is social pleasure that sheds the most delicious flowers which grow on the path of life’ (H.M. Williams, *Letters*, 1790, 140). This British author, who settled in Paris in 1792, contributed greatly to the circulation of ideas between France and England through her intellectual and political circles as well as through her publications. She was a tireless chronicler of social practices and historical events from the Revolution to the Restoration.

Helen Maria Williams (1761-1827) showed a sustained appetite for literary and political circles. She frequented many salons in Paris and London before becoming a *salonnière* herself in both capitals. Born to a Scottish father and Welsh mother and from an upper middle-class background, she arrived in London in 1781. Through her acquaintance with the dissident clergyman Andrew Kippis, who encouraged her literary activity, she met Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, who were also members of nonconformist circles and closely associated with the Whigs. She joined the salon of Elizabeth Robinson Montagu (who became her patron) in Portman Square and frequented Hester Lynch Thrale's salon in Streatham Park, where she became friendly with Samuel Johnson, John Moore, Charlotte Smith and Anna Seward. Recognised as a promising poet (*An Ode of the Peace*, 1783; *Peru*, 1784), she soon opened her own salon in Southampton Row (Bloomsbury), where she received a number of intellectuals generally committed to progressive ideas, including Edward Jerningham, John Moore, Fanny Burney, Charlotte Smith, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and William Godwin. As an abolitionist (*A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade*, 1788) and pacifist, Williams expressed sympathy in her works for the American Revolution (*An American Tale*, 1786) and, after learning about the absolutist policies of the Bourbons from a French couple who had been victims of that regime, for the French Revolution (*Julia*, 1790). With their rights reinstated after the fall of the Bastille, the Du Fossé family invited Williams to stay with them so that she could observe for herself how the fledgling Revolution was progressing. The visit was to prove decisive. Her first chronicle of events across the Channel dates to this trip. This first volume was followed by seven more, forming *Letters from France* (1790-1796), which was published in London by T. Cadell (then G. G. and J. Robinson).¹ The first opus (1790) caused a considerable stir. Favourably received,² it was translated into French and Dutch in 1791 and then into German in 1798. From that point on, Williams was recognised on the European stage for the significant part she played in the controversy surrounding the French Revolution (*The Revolution Debate*). This is evidenced by the anonymous satirical cartoon *Don Dismallo Running the Literary Gantlet* (1 December 1790), where she is depicted alongside Richard Price, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Richard Sheridan, John Horne Tooke and Catharine Macaulay, all mobilised against Edmund Burke, the author of an impactful anti-revolutionary pamphlet in 1790 (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*).



‘Don Dismallo running the literary gantlet’, Library of Congress, n° 2004669855, 1790.

Introduced to Félicité de Genlis³ by Edward Jerningham,⁴ she initially socialised when in France with people connected to the House of Orléans (1790-1791) and then struck up a friendship with Manon Roland⁵ (whose husband was to be appointed interior minister in two Girondist governments), who introduced her to some leading politicians (Brissot, Pétion, Vergniaud, Buzot, Bancal des Issarts). She opened her own salon in Rue Helvétius, a cosmopolitan place frequented by supporters of the Girondists, French men of letters (Sébastien Chamfort, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, the Chénier brothers), a number of English-speaking radicals (Thomas Paine, Charles Fox, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Wolf Tone, John Hurford Stone, William Christie) and the Venezuelan general Francisco de Miranda. According to American Joel Barlow,⁶ she received between 30 and 50 people every evening. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote a famous testimony on Williams and her salon:

[...] Miss Williams has behaved very civilly to me and I shall visit her frequently, I *rather* like her, and I meet French company at her house. Her manners are affected, yet the simple *goodness* of her hearts [*sic*] continually breaks through the varnish, so that one would be more inclined, at least I should, to love than to admire her.⁷

As a member of the Amis des Noirs's first society in Paris, Williams had close connections with the members of the British Club 'The Friends of the Rights of Man, associated in Paris'. The British Club's membership included English, Irish and American supporters of the

Girondists, such as John Hurford Stone and Joel Barlow, who would meet at White's hotel. On 18 November 1792, at a party organised by the club members to celebrate General Dumouriez's victory at Jemappes over the Austrian army, a toast was made to Charlotte Smith and Helen Maria Williams in recognition of their commitment to the French Revolution.

The turning point in the Revolution came with the September Massacres in 1792, which set it on an increasingly bloody path, as evidenced by the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793. The political surveillance that culminated in The Terror led to the disappearance of society sociability in Paris between 1792 and 1795.⁸ Williams's choice to remain in France (where she caused a huge scandal by living with John Hurford Stone) and her continued belief in the ideals of the first Revolution increasingly isolated her from her fellow Britons and even caused a rift between her and her friends Hester Thrale⁹ and Anna Seward. In a virulent book,¹⁰ Laetitia Matilda Hawkins explicitly attacked Williams, calling her a 'fishwife' (Hawkins 1, 98). At the height of The Terror, Williams, who was well known for her Girondist sympathies and her public criticism of the Jacobins in volumes 3 and 4 of her *Letters* (published in 1793), was forced into exile in Switzerland and only returned to Paris in December 1794, four months after the fall of Robespierre. She wrote that the Thermidorian response had led to the resurgence of the 'social world [which had] reappeared more splendid than ever (Williams, *Souvenirs*, 1827, 85).

The Treaty of Amiens signed on 25 March 1802 marked the return of foreign and particularly British travellers to France. Williams, who soon shed any illusions she might have had with regard to Napoleon Bonaparte's policy,¹² opened a cosmopolitan salon on the Quai Malaquais that could accommodate up to 70 guests. Known for its republican leanings (and placed under the surveillance of the First Consul's police), it was frequented by liberals such as Abbé Grégoire, Lazare Carnot, the Polish general Thaddeus Kosciuszko, the Irish radicals Arthur O'Connor and Edward Blaquiere and the British lawyer and Whig Thomas Erskine. It was also popular with artists, including the English Amelia Opie, Maria Cosway and Joseph Farington and the German *salonnière* Caroline von Wolzogen. Maria Edgeworth's conservative stance may explain why she refused to go to Paris.¹³

Williams stopped writing political works during the Empire, a period of strong censorship. It was not until the fall of Napoleon that British visitors were able to return to France. Although Stone's bankruptcy in 1815 reduced Williams's reception schedule, she continued to welcome politicians, intellectuals and artists at her home every Sunday throughout 1816 and 1817, as evidenced by accounts provided by the Irish Lady Morgan¹⁴ and Mary Jane Godwin (William Godwin's second wife). In October 1820, she received William Wordsworth for the first time. He was a long-time admirer of her work and had paid tribute to her in the first of his published poems.¹⁵ His visit reignited memories of her youth in the London circles. Having not returned to England since 1792, she had however cut herself off from some of her compatriots during the tensions between France and the United Kingdom (she had nevertheless kept up epistolary contact with Penelope Pennington and Ruth Barlow).

Acting as a bridge between different languages, Williams, who described herself in 1790 as a 'citizen of the world' (Williams, 2001, 69) translated the works of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (*Paul and Virginia*, 1795), Alexander von Humboldt (*Researches Concerning Inhabitants of America*, 1814) and Xavier de Maistre (*The Leper of the City of Aoste*, 1817) into English. Having witnessed the historical events of the Revolution first-hand, she developed a largely affective approach to the subject in her *Letters from France*. Using the first opus's make-believe friendship as a discursive device (*Letters Written in France in the Summer 1790 to a Friend in England*), she sought to convert her compatriots to what she presented as a quest for liberty and social justice in the wake of the Glorious Revolution in England (1688). The principal value of Williams's works lies in the fact that her perspective on French culture (from the Revolution to the Restoration) was delivered to her English readers through the lens of English culture. References to British authors (including key figures such as Shakespeare, Sterne, Pope and Burke) and comparisons between French and English sociabilities (individuals, practices, places, objects, etc.) are frequent. The utterance situation is marked by decentring and deterritorialisation. It constantly combines distance and proximity, identity and otherness and external and internal viewpoints, and it exploits the position of cultural intermediary between England and France that she had forged for herself. Williams's eyewitness account of the evolution of social practices during this troubled period is particularly rich. She talks of promenades (LF I, 1, 10 ; I, 2, 14 ; II, 1, 6), theatrical entertainments (LF I, 1, 12 ; I, 2, 12), frequenting cafés,¹⁶ the Lycée (LF I, 2, 18)¹⁷ and spa towns (LF I, 1, 23 ; I, 2, 21), experimenting with new forms of sociability through revolutionary celebrations¹⁸ for the purposes of social regeneration, the development of a prison sociability (LF II, 1, 3 ; II, 2, 3) brought about by multiple imprisonments, the disappearance of society sociability, and so on.

While sociability was central to *Letters* as a whole, the epistolary form had evolved significantly over the course of the violence and the trials of the Revolution. From volumes 3 and 4 of the first series onwards, which Williams wrote after Louis XVI's execution, the utterance is based on a multiple auctorality, and sentimental accounts appear alongside the minutes of trials, military reports and the testimonies of various victims. Through a composite¹⁹ and repetitive poetics combined with the disruptiveness of historical experience, Williams seems to express the difficulties – indeed the impossibility – of circumscribing the acceleration, complexity, multiplicity and even chaos of revolutionary events. Offering a literary tomb to the Girondists, whose memory she was to uphold (as can be seen in *Souvenirs*), the volumes of the second series grew increasingly dark as the spiral of violence escalated. Hauntingly, they emphasised the 'sinister duality of the festival':²⁰ with the processions leading prisoners to the guillotine, the spectacle of executions in the Place de la Révolution (now the Place de la Concorde) and the Lyon and Vendée massacres. Williams also wrote about her imprisonment and deportation as a British national²¹ and, more generally, about her lived experience as a foreigner²² in a country that was at war with most of the other European powers. She also recounted her exile in Switzerland²³ in 1794. Sometimes forced to publish anonymously (as in the case of the two volumes published in 1793), she tried to maintain contact with the British public and sought to build fragile bridges between France and the United Kingdom at a time when (until the fall of Napoleon) the two countries were regularly engaged in armed conflict and there was increasing Francophobia and Anglophobia on both sides of the Channel.

In her chronicles recounting the latter years of the Revolution (*Sketches of the State of Manners and Opinions in the French Republic*, 1801), Williams remained faithful to the epistolary model.²⁴ Although she wrote mainly on political, military and religious,²⁵ subjects, she also gave an account of the social fashions and practices of the time, including society leisure activities in Paris (masked balls, promenades²⁶ patriotic entertainments (national festivals) (*Sketches*, lettre 41), scientific curiosities and visits to the museum (now the Louvre) (*Sketches*, letter 34). She also paid tribute to the *salonnière* Madame Helvétius, whom she regularly visited in Auteuil (*Sketches*, letter 37). In her works on the Empire, Williams expressed her contempt for the etiquette established at the Tuileries court, in particular criticising Napoleon's inability to 'understand the charm of a witty, refined society' (Williams, *Souvenirs*, 1827, 158). Hailing the Restoration for ending imperial despotism, she also believed that the Constitutional Charter of 1814 represented a continuation of the Revolution. When *Letters on the Events Which Have Passed in France Since the Restoration in 1815* was published in 1819, British conservatives (in particular the *British Critic*) accused Williams, who had always professed republican ideas, of royalism and ultra-racism. Indeed, Williams expressed her hopes in this work for the new regime's liberal concessions and the progress of the Independents' party. She thus reported on the success of the political debates that had been made possible by the relaxation of the press laws (increased number of newspapers and reading rooms), mentioning in particular the lectures delivered at the Athénée (the Lycée's new name since 1802,²⁷ which was where Benjamin Constant (one of the leaders of the Independents) gave his famous lecture 'De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes'.²⁸ The assassination of the Duc de Berry (13 February 1820), however, was to put an end to the liberal period of the Restoration.

In her political testament, *Souvenirs*, she finally believed that despite possible reversals, 'the march of modern peoples is towards liberty and consequently towards happiness' (Williams, *Souvenirs*, 1827, 200). Williams, who was made a French citizen in 1817, remained convinced that Britain had paved the way for progressive politics: 'France and England, where all the good minds are allied, will travel together that glorious path where England has gained so much renown' (Williams, *Souvenirs*, 1827, 200-201). Her generous and committed work (at the end of her life, like many Romantics, she defended the Greeks' struggle for independence,²⁹ and the scale of her networks of enlightened sociability made Williams an emblematic representative of a Republic of Letters that transcended national borders and upheld the ideals of the Enlightenment and the 1789 Revolution in the face of the many upheavals of a rapidly changing world.

1. In a modern, facsimile edition, *Letters from France (LF)* forms two series comprising four volumes each (*Letters from France* by Helen Maria Williams, 2 vols, Introduction by Janet M. Todd, Delmar, New York: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975). Unless otherwise stated, our references will be formatted as series number, volume number, letter number.

2. The *Analytical Review*, December 1790; The *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, December 1790; The *Critical Review*, January 1791; The *English Review*, January 1791; Letter to H. M. Williams from the *Société des Amis de la Constitution de Rouen*, July 1791.

3. Author of *Adèle et Théodore ou Lettres sur l'éducation* (1782), which was successful in Great Britain, Mme de Genlis was received at court in London in 1785 along with Louis Philippe II, Duc d'Orléans. Williams then visited several properties belonging to the Duc d'Orléans, including the Palais-Royal (LF I,1,5) and the Château du Raincy (LF I,2,13).

4. *Souvenirs de la Révolution française*, par Hélène Maria Williams, traduit de l'Anglais [par Charles Coquerel], (Paris: Dondey-Dupré, 1827), p. 70.
5. Manon Roland, whom Williams considered to be the paragon of female heroism during the Revolution, mentioned Williams in three letters. See *Lettres de Madame Roland*, Claude Perroud (ed.), vol. 2, (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), p. 194, 467, 469.
6. Cited by M. Ray Adams, 'Helen Maria Williams and the French Revolution', in Earl Leslie Griggs, ed., *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Studies in Honor of George McLean Harper*, (New York: Russel, 1967), p. 89.
7. Mary to Everina Wollstonecraft, 24 December 1792, in ed. Ralph M. Wardle, *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 226.
8. Cited by M. Ray Adams, 'Helen Maria Williams and the French Revolution', in Earl Leslie Griggs, ed., *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Studies in Honor of George McLean Harper*, (New York: Russel, 1967), p. 89.
9. Hester Thrale, *Thraliana : The Diary of Mrs Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs Piozzi), 1777-1809*, vol.2, 20 Sept. 1794, ed. Katherine C. Balderston (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), p. 894.
10. Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, *Letters on the Female Mind, Its Powers and Pursuits. Addressed to Miss H. M. Williams, with Particular Reference to Her Letters from France*. 2 vols. (London: Hookham and Carpenter, 1793).
11. See in particular the preface to *A Narrative of the Events Which Have Taken Place in France from the Landing of Napoleon Bonaparte on the 1st of March, 1815, till the Restoration of Louis XVIII* (London: John Murray, 1815).
12. Maria Edgeworth to Sophie Ruxton, 8 December 1802, in *Maria Edgeworth in France and Switzerland, Selections from the Edgeworth family letters*, in ed. Christina Colvin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 53.
13. *Lady Morgan, France*, vol.2 (London: Colburn, 1817), p. 397.
14. William Wordsworth, 'Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress', *The European Magazine*, March 1787.
15. Williams highlighted the diversity in the Parisian cafés of 1791 by emphasising the importance of the female presence in French social practices: 'Women, as well as men, are admitted to these coffee-houses; for the English idea of finding ease, comfort or felicity, in societies where women are excluded, never enters into the imagination of a Frenchman', *Letters from France Containing Many New Anecdotes Relative to the French Revolution and the Present State of French Manners*, (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1792), p. 80.
16. A cultural establishment that delivered lectures in various disciplines. It was open to both sexes and promoted liberty, equality and cosmopolitanism. See LF I,2,18.
17. In LF I,1,2-3, she described the Fête de la Fédération, which was held in Paris on the Champ-de-Mars on 14 July 1790. In LF I,2,19, she wrote about the festival held in Paris on 15 April 1792 in honour of the mutinous soldiers of Châteauneuf. In LF II,2,6 and II,2,3, respectively, she referred to the Fêtes de la Raison, which were organised during The Terror, and the Fête de l'Etre Suprême, which was held on 8 June 1794. She also gave an account of tree-planting ceremonies to celebrate liberty (I,2,23) and of some non-institutional, popular, transgressive, anti-religious festivals that peaked during The Terror (II,2,6).
18. Williams thus reconfigured several literary forms (letters, travelogues, romance) that were more assimilated to the feminine than to the masculine in gender norms and increasingly asserted an auctorial consciousness and a writing authority that were identified (in the United Kingdom) in her later works on the final years of the Revolution and on the Hundred Days.
19. Béatrice Didier, *La Littérature de la Révolution française* (Paris: PUF, 1989), p. 16.
20. When the French fleet, which was dominated by royalist insurgents, surrendered to British troops during the Siege of Toulon on 1 October 1793, Williams was imprisoned for three months from October to December. See *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France*, vol.1, (London: G. G. J. Robinson, 1795).
21. In April 1794, she had to move away from Paris and settled in Marly. See *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France*, vol.2, (London: G. G. J. Robinson, 1795).
22. See *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France*, vol.1, op. cit. In letter 3, volume 1, in *Sketches of the State of Manners and Opinions in the French Republic, towards the Close of the Eighteenth Century*, (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1801), she paid tribute to the hospitality offered to exiles and emigrants by the prince-abbot of

Engelberg.

23. She used it again in *On the Late Persecution of the Protestants in the South of France* (London: T. and G. Underwood, 1816) and in *Letters on the Events Which Have Passed in France Since the Restoration in 1815* (London: Baldwin, 1819).

24. This question was central in her condemnation of the violence against the Protestants in the Midi after the defeat at Waterloo during the White Terror of 1815 (*On the Late Persecution of the Protestants...*, op. cit.).

25. See *Sketches of the State of Manners and Opinions in the French Republic, towards the Close of the Eighteenth Century*, (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1801), vol.2, letters 25 and 30.

26. See Hervé Guénot, 'Musées et lycées parisiens (1780-1830)', (*Dix-huitième Siècle*, no18, 1986), p. 249-267.

27. 'Paris is filled with reading-rooms, which are crowded from morning till night [...] At the Athénée, a long established literary institution, nothing attracts so brilliant a crowd of both sexes as the discussion of some political question by M. Benjamin Constant', *Letters on the Events Which Have Passed in France Since the Restoration in 1815*, op. cit., p. 108. For Williams, sociability had always implied diversity.

28. See *Lines on the Fall of Missolonghi*, in *Souvenirs de la Révolution française*, op. cit., p. 203-208.

Citer cet article

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[On her social practices \(1792-1820\)](#)

[Theatres and Cafés in revolutionary Paris \(1792\)](#)

[On Conversation \(1790\)](#)

[On the Lycée \(1792\)](#)