CHAPTER 7

"HEROIC RESISTANCE": HELEN MARIA WILLIAMS' REVOLUTIONARY DISCOURSE

PAULA YURSS LASANTA, UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA

Helen Maria Williams is mostly known for her chronicles of the French Revolution. Although she wrote several volumes of *Letters from France* between the 1790s and the 1820s, her first volume, entitled *Letters Written in France* (1790), has attracted most critical attention. An example of this is Angela Keane's *Revolutionary Women Writers, Charlotte Smith & Helen Maria Williams* (2013). In its section dedicated to *Letters*, Keane specifies that "the first volume [...] is the main focus of […] discussion" (99). Scholars such as Louise Duckling, Jacqueline Leblanc, or Mary A. Favret, have analysed the strategies employed by Williams to portray the French Revolution, focusing on her use of theatrical elements and paying attention mainly to the 1790 volume.

Williams' strategy changes substantially in its following volumes and therefore *Letters Written in France* cannot, in itself, be considered representative of Williams' style and method. In 1790, Williams was a traveller visiting France for the first time. By contrast, after 1792, she settled in Paris and spent the rest of her life there. As a result, there is a shift of perspective; she is no longer a casual traveller but, rather, a French resident. The political situation had also dramatically changed since her first visit. As a supporter of the Girondins, Williams experienced with horror the political affairs that took place during Robespierre's rule and 'the Reign of Terror'. Although she always defended the revolutionary cause, after 1792 Williams is stimulated by different impulses, such as the defence of the Girondins. She therefore adopts a critical perspective and distances herself from the celebratory spirit of two years before.

Scholars such as Vivien Jones and Deborah Kennedy coincide that Williams was a leading authority in Britain on the French Revolution. In Jones' words, Williams' "accounts of revolutionary and postrevolutionary France [...] established her as one of the major recorders and mediators of the French Revolution for a British public" (1992, 179). Helen Maria

Williams' participation in the intellectual debate of her time through her writing deserves further attention. This paper analyses the strategies employed by Williams to assert authorial control and construct her political discourse. My purpose is not to analyse Williams' political ideas, but to explore how she conveys these ideas while constructing self-representation as an intellectual writer. However, an enquiry into Williams' ideology is relevant in order to best examine the arguments that she gives to validate herself as a writer.

In "From Liberty to Lechery Performance, Reputation and the 'Marvellous History' of Helen Maria Williams", Louise Duckling asserts that Williams established "her own brand of political philosophy" (2010, 74). Likewise, Vivien Jones considers that "the *Letters* offer an authoritative analysis of the revolutionary debates" (1992, 191). In contrast, Jacqueline Leblanc is of the view that Williams' "'emotional ecstasies' as of political restructuring often strike readers as lacking serious critical perspective" (1997, 26). Angela Keane follows the same direction when she affirms that Williams' early works are lacking in "depth and variety in social discourse" (2013, 87). In *Crisis in Representation*, Steven Blakemore presents Williams' strong emotions as an antithesis of Wollstonecraft's rationality and suggests that *Letters* should be read as a work of fiction rather than a historical account (1997, 174). The difficulty with this line of argument is that it neglects Williams' invaluable contribution to the lively debate sparked by the French Revolution in Britain. While I position myself in line with Duckling and Jones, I consider it necessary to provide a further analysis of the political and intellectual dimension of Williams' texts.

Before travelling to France, Williams was known as a sensibility writer for a series of poems published in the 1780s and for her novel *Julia* (1790). In these writings, Williams appeals to strong feelings of empathy when she articulates her political opinions. Williams undeniably employs certain conventions of the literature of sensibility in her chronicles of the French Revolution and this is particularly evident in the first volume. In the second, although she starts to detach herself from pure emotion, sensibility still frames her discussion of political issues. Vivian Jones applies the term 'Active Sensibility' (1992, 193) to the writings of Wollstonecraft and Williams, and this term is certainly suitable to describe one of Williams' strategies. In *Letters*, sensibility works as a call to political involvement. Williams was imprisoned for several months in 1793 and was released thanks to a French connection whose motive is to relieve her friend's suffering: "He [...] saw a long procession of coaches pass through the streets filled with English prisoners, whom, just torn from their families and their homes, were weeping bitterly. Deeply affected by this spectacle, he flew to Paris with the resolution of obtaining our liberty, or of sharing our prison" (1795: 204). This is an example of 'active sensibility', since his empathy

towards those who suffer works as his driving force to take political action. Similarly, the scenes that the author witnessed awakened the feelings that moved her to take part in the defence of the cause: “I shall only observe, that it is difficult, with common sensibility, to avoid sympathizing in general happiness. My love of the French Revolution, is the natural result of this sympathy” (1790, 66). In the same manner, since emotions attach her to the revolution, she used feelings to convince her readers to support the revolutionary cause.

Scholars have also highlighted Williams’ perspective as a spectator of the events. This applies to the first volume in which Williams was a casual traveller in France. In 1793 she also presents her writing from this point of view:

> While you observe from a distance the great drama which is acting in France, I am a spectator of the representation-. I am placed near enough the scene to discern every look and every gesture of the actors, and every passion excited in the minds of the audience (1793, 2).

Blakemore and Leblanc, among others, have argued that Williams presents the events as a spectacle, a mere theatrical representation which diminishes her point of view as lacking accuracy. In contrast, I observe that this strategy responds to a tradition that was well extended in the eighteenth century. For instance, Edmund Burke, renowned for condemning the French Revolution in his writings, adopts this same position in his correspondence: “As to us here our thoughts of everything at home are suspended, by our astonishment at the wonderful Spectacle which is exhibited in a Neighbouring and rival Country—what Spectators, and what actors!” (in Macleod 2013, 377).

The position of the ‘spectator’ here implies an emphasis on observation. By contrast with Burke, Williams was observing the revolution in the midst. Williams emphasizes that she has experienced the events first-hand and she can provide a truthful testimony of the real situation. In the first volume, she writes that “one must have been present, to form any judgment of a scene” (1790, 5). For Williams, the British distrust of the French Revolution would not be such if they were able to participate in it and witness it by themselves. Eventually, she becomes increasingly closer to the events to the extent that she ends up participating in them through her political writings:

> The English newspapers came regularly to the committee of public safety, in which passages from my letters were frequently transcribed, and the work mentioned as mine; and those papers were translated into French for the members of the committee [...]. Thus I passed the winter at Paris with the knife of the guillotine suspended over me by a frail thread (1795, 173-4).

She stresses her involvement in the events and the relevance of her writing by claiming how it is used by political organisms. She presents herself as an influential writer whose texts not only reach a common audience but also, in addition, receive political consideration. In this way, she assures the reader that she is giving a truthful account. By implying that she is aware of the political repercussions of her writing, Williams presents it as a political act in itself.

Williams reveals her political position from the beginning of her chronicle. In the first volume, she places herself as a sympathiser of the French Revolution. From second volume onwards, she aligns herself explicitly with the Girondins, and thus situates her ideology within the then-current French historical context and intellectual climate, since in Britain the debate was principally divided between the supporters of the revolution and its detractors, the Anti-Jacobins. As she is no longer a traveller, she now no longer sees the conflict from a British perspective. Williams always believed in the revolution as a necessary stage to obtain freedom and social equality; however, this does not restrain her from being critical of those who, according to her, betray the revolutionary ideals. Robespierre is presented as a dictator and the greatest enemy of the revolution:

> At the head of this band of conspirators is Robespierre [...] fanatical and exaggerated imprudence in his avowed principles of liberty, possessing that species of eloquence which gives him power over the passions, and that cool determined temper which regulates the most ferocious designs with the most calm and temperate. His crimes do not appear to be the result of passion, but of some deep and extraordinary malignity, and he seems formed to subvert and to destroy (1793, 7).

From the first pages of the book, she repudiates a leader that she portrays as fanatical and manipulative. Furthermore, it is his lack of feelings that makes him a dangerous figure inasmuch as in Williams' 'active sensibility', emotions are necessary to attain a just revolution. Once again, Williams connects feelings with positive qualities and the their absence acquires negative connotations. She always employs strident language when describing Robespierre, and even calls him "a vulgar and sanguinary despot on the ruins of a throne" (1795, 2). Williams uses the term "despot" to refer to Robespierre and by extension to the Jacobin faction as they appear more repressive than the monarchical despotism they initially fought against: "Tyranny had now changed its instruments" (1795, 31). The Jacobins have produced a deviation in the ideals of the revolution: "Those disorders which may for awhile convulse the infant republic, will cease with the lives of their perpetrators, who can assassinate individuals, but cannot assassinate opinions, which appear to be widely diffused" (1793, 17-18). Williams clarifies for the British public that the ideas of the French Revolution are

not a synonym of Jacobinism, despite most counter-revolutionaries in Britain labelling themselves anti-Jacobins, as the name of a contemporary newspaper—the *Anti-Jacobin Review*—attests. Williams firmly ensures her position on one hand as a supporter of the revolution and, on the other, as contrary to the Jacobin regime.

At the same time, she claims proximity to the Girondins, and, consequently, is suggesting her own engagement in the same movement. The conversations and meetings that she holds with different pivotal political and military figures are recurrent in the narration of events. Sillery and La Source, to take one example, are “two persons in whose society we had passed some of the most agreeable hours” (1795, 40). As Amy Culley has shown, “This investment in articulating the stories of vulnerable communities is central to Williams’ political identity after 1793 as she imagines herself as the defender of the memory of the Girondin (2014, 165).

In all her writings Williams displays a particular attachment to Madame Roland, whom she describes as “one of the most accomplished women that France has produced” (1795, 195) and as a “celebrated woman” (1795, 197). Other contemporary women writers also praised Roland. For instance, Mary Hays’ *Female Biography* (1803) dedicates an entire chapter to her in which she is depicted as an “admirable woman” (103), “the heroine of the French revolution” (103) and as “truly philosophic and heroic” (292). Williams draws particular attention to the fact that she knew Madame Roland personally and even paid her a visit in prison before her execution. Her connection to Madame Roland develops still further through becoming her accomplice when she receives “some papers in her [Roland’s] justification, which she sent me from her prison” (1795, 198). Williams then continues to imply that she is risking her life for her friend’s cause despite the fatal consequences that this may have: “had they [the papers] been found in my possession, they would inevitably have involved me in her fate” (1795, 198). This time it is not her own text but another woman’s writing that involves her in the political affairs. Williams not only emphasizes her own sacrifice for the Girondin cause but she also underlines the fact that it is Madame Roland, a key figure for the movement, who trusts her for this task.

Another aspect that differentiates the first volume from the rest is the attention that Williams pays to footnotes and appendixes. Although footnotes are already in use in the 1790 text, these are usually employed to translate a French sentence into English or to make a French concept understandable to a British readership. In contrast, in the later volumes, footnotes tend to be employed to refer to her sources. In this manner, Williams claims political and historical authority by presenting herself as an informed writer. The sources that she quotes—Louvet, Adam Lux, Sheridan, amongst others—show that she is employing detailed and up-to-

date reports. Her writing is the result of her own experience, her readings, and the information that she has obtained directly from the protagonists of the events, such as Madame Roland or Sillery.

The polyphonic aspect of the second volume also makes it original when compared to the first. Culley comments on this aspect of Williams' work, observing that: "Her letters therefore accrue new layers of relational exchange and reinforce her earlier experiments with collaborative authorship" (2014, 165). Letters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 12 deal with military matters and are not written by Williams. Williams justifies these letters as being penned by authors who have "the best information on the subject that France could afford" (1793, advertisement). She provides her readership with what she considers valuable information and creates an account that appears to be less subjective. For the appendixes, Williams chooses to insert relevant documents such as Dumourier's letters—in the second volume—which prove his betrayal of the Girondins. Other texts that she includes are a manifesto by the Revolutionary Committee of Marseille, a protest by the deputies, or Madame Roland's claims of innocence. Within her *Letters*, the footnotes refer the reader to these appendixes and thus contextualize them. Williams is aware of the historical value of these texts and makes them available to the British public; at the same time, she records them for future generations.

Williams aims to establish that she is in the position to take part in the current political debate regardless of her gender. At the same time, she was aware that by writing about political history, she was overstepping the dividing line that made politics an unsuitable subject matter for women writers. In *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670-1820*, Devoney Looser examines women's contribution to historical writing. Looser writes that despite their valuable impact on historical discourse: "What women had to face that men did not, of course, was the "problem" of their sex, assigned by a culture that usually did not imagine for them an equivalent place in history or in history writing" (2000, 27).
In an increasingly conservative climate in Britain, it does not come as a surprise that Williams had to face negative criticism. British author Laetitia Matilda Hawkins addressed her *Letters on the Female Mind* (1793) to the author of *Letters from France*. One of the purposes of this book is to convince Williams that women should not write about political issues: "I would rather convince you that they are points neither you nor I can discuss with propriety or success" (1793, 5). Hawkins then proceeds to suggest numerous subjects that she considers to be more appropriate for a woman to write. Williams was also featured, along other contemporary women writers, in Richard Polwhele's *The Unsex'd Females*. Here she is described as "an intemperate advocate for Gallic licentiousness" ([1798] 1800, 19). These sexist remarks and disapproval in general had an impact on her social

prestige and Williams, who had previously been perceived as a heroine of sensibility, fell out of favour in British eyes. Her work was forgotten by the following generations and her contribution to the debate on the French Revolution passed unnoticed. What stands out nonetheless is that Williams was never discouraged by this criticism and she continued to devote her writing to the French Revolution until the end of her life. Her last work, entitled *Souvenirs de la Révolution Française* was published in the year of her death, 1827. Clearly, she possessed the same ‘historic resistance’ as those who, in her words, opposed the despotism in France.

Although *Letters Written in France* is considered to be Williams’ magna opus, the subsequent chronicles of the French Revolution published in the decade of the 1790s show how Williams’ style and method changed over time. In her letters, Williams starts to consolidate a role as a first-hand political analyst and historian. What is compelling about this is that she personally experienced the consequences of the political turmoil—she was imprisoned—and that she was able to interview some of the key political figures at the core of the events. At the same time, she writes in an assertive voice to claim the relevance of her work in the political landscape of the time. Williams is aware that she is experiencing a pivotal moment in history and in politics. In 1819, she wrote that: “We are not among those happy generations who live in times of which there is nothing to relate, which close upon mankind, and leave no memorial as they pass” (1). She takes on the responsibility to record the events that she witnesses for future generations despite the negative reception that she encountered. Williams’ work goes beyond the sensibility of her early texts to progressively show both her political engagement and the intellectual leanings of her writings.

Works Cited

Blakemore, Steven. 1997. *Crisis in Representation: Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, and the Rewriting of the French Revolution.* Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP; London; Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP.

Culley, Amy. 2014. *British Women’s Life Writing, 1760-1840. Friendship, Community, and Collaboration*. Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Duckling, Louise. 2010.“From Liberty to Lechery: Performance, Reputation and the “Marvelous Story” of Helen Maria Williams”. *Women’s Writing*, 17(1): 74-92.

Favret, Mary A. 1993. *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Hays, Mary. 1803.*Female Biography; or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of All Ages and Countries*. London: Richard Phillips.

Hawkins, Laetitia Matilda. 1793. *Letters on the Female Mind, Its Powers and Pursuits Addressed to Miss H. M. Williams, with Particular Reference to her Letters from France*. London: Hookham and Carpenter.

Jones, Vivien. 1992. "Women Writing Revolution: Narratives of History and Sexuality in Wollstonecraft and Williams". In *Beyond Romanticism. New Approaches to Texts and Contexts 1780-1832*, edited by Stephen Copley and John Wale, 178-199. London: Routledge.

Keane, Angela. 2013. *Revolutionary Women Writers. Charlotte Smith & Helen Maria Williams*. Devon: Northcote House Publishers.

Kennedy, Deborah. 2002. *Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP.

Looser, Devoney. 2000. *British Women Writers and the Writing of History: 1670-1820*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.

Leblanc, Jacqueline. 1997. "Politics and Commercial Sensibility in Helen Maria Williams' *Letters from France*". *Eighteenth-Century Life* 21(1): 26-44.

Macleod, Emma. 2013. "British Spectators of the French Revolution: the View from Across the Channel". *Groniek* 197: 377-392.

Polwhele, Richard, ed. 1800 (1798). *The Unsex'd Females; A Poem Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature*. New York: WM. Cobbett.

Williams, Helen Maria. 1790. *Julia, a Novel; Interspersed with some Poetical Pieces*. London: Thomas Cadell, 1790.

_______. 1795. *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France*, vol. 1. London: G.G and J.Robinson, 1795.

_______. 1793. *Letters from France: Containing a Great Variety of Interesting and Original Information Concerning the Most Important Events that Have Lately Occurred in that Country*. London: G.G. and J. Robinson.

_______. 1819. *Letters on the Events which Have Passed in France Since the Restoration in 1815*. London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy.

_______. 1790. *Letters Written in France in the Summer 1790, to a Friend in England*. London: T. Cadell.

_______. 1827. *Souvenirs de la Révolution Française*. Translated by Charles Coquerel. Paris: Dondey-Dupré.