WOMEN IN ROMANTICISM

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Women Writers

WOMEN IN ROMANTICISM

Mary Wollstonecraft,
Dorothy Wordsworth
and Mary Shelley

Meena Alexander

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MACMILLAN

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For David

*‘Printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which
in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent
surfaces away.’*

William Blake

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1. Opie portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft.
Photograph © The National Portrait Gallery.
2. Blake frontispiece for Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories*.
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Photograph © Dove Cottage Trust, Grasmere.
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Editors' Preface

The study of women's writing has been long neglected by a male critical establishment both in academic circles and beyond. As a result, many women writers have either been unfairly neglected or have been marginalised in some way, so that their true influence and importance has been ignored. Other women writers have been accepted by male critics and academics, but on terms which seem, to many women readers of this generation, to be false or simplistic. In the past the internal conflicts involved in being a woman in a male-dominated society have been largely ignored by readers of both sexes, and this has affected our reading of women's work. The time has come for a serious reassessment of women's writing in the light of what we understand today.

This series is designed to help in that reassessment.

All the books are written by women because we believe that men's understanding of feminist critique is only, at best, partial. And besides, men have held the floor quite long enough.

EVA FIGES
ADELE KING

Preface

When I first began to read William Wordsworth and Romantic poetry, I was a young child in India. Like many other young children receiving an English education in a post-colonial world, I had to learn his 'Daffodils' poem by heart. I had no idea what the flower looked like. Many years later, with a shock of recognition, I caught sight of those fleshly yellow petals in a Nottingham wood. It was still years later, in North America now, that I read Dorothy Wordsworth. She stunned and delighted me. Little in my education had prepared me for the complex precision of her writing, or its fragmentary and feminine nature. Reading Dorothy, I turned round. I sought out the writings of that passionate woman Wollstonecraft and then the fierce work of her daughter Mary Shelley. I was reeducating myself, learning afresh about Romanticism, glimpsing covert strategies in those who had no power, sensing a more hidden turmoil than in the grand displays one prizes in the male poets. Reading and writing about these three women has brought me closer to home.

I am grateful to friends who have helped me through this project, listening and talking over a cup of coffee, pointing out difficulties, making further suggestions. Some have helped me read hard manuscripts, others have taken care and trouble to read these writings at various stages. To Svati Joshi, Walter Kendrick, Beth Darlington, Joel Porte, James Boulton, Yi-Fu Tuan, John Maynard, Florence Boos, Susan Sherman, Stephen Parrish, Norman Fruman, James Earl, Philip Sicker, Vivian Gornick, Alice Fredman, Martin Roth, Richard Leppert, James McGavran, J. Robert Barth S.J., Paul Betz, Richard Barickman, I send my thanks. My thanks to Adele King and Eva Figes, series editors and to

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Thanks are due to those who generously helped me at Grasmere: Jonathan Wordsworth, Chairman of the Wordsworth Trust and Terry McCormick, Resident Curator of the Wordsworth Library. I am grateful to The Dove Cottage Trust for permission to study and quote from the Dorothy Wordsworth manuscripts preserved in Grasmere. Thanks to the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library and to Donald Reiman and Mihai Handrea of The Carl H. Pforzheimer Shelley and his Circle Collection of the New York Public Library for access to relevant materials on Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley. I am grateful to Oxford University Press for permission to quote from the six volume set of *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*; Mary Moorman's *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*; Ernest de Selincourt's editions of *George and Sarah Green, A Narrative* and *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*; Mary E. Burton's edition of *The Letters of Mary Wordsworth*. I am grateful to W.W. Norton for permission to quote from Adrienne Rich's *Dream of a Common Language*. Some of the thoughts on Dorothy Wordsworth were first published in my essay 'Dorothy Wordsworth: The Grounds of Writing' which appeared in *Women's Studies* vol. 14, no. 3 (1988) and I am grateful for permission to reprint portions of it. I have benefited from a Summer Seminar Grant, and a Travel Grant from the NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities), a Grant-in-Aid from the ACLS (American Council of Learned Societies) and a Fordham Faculty Research Grant, each of which helped the work along.

In the course of my writing, my son Adam Kuruvilla grew up and my little daughter Svati Mariam was born. The heart of what I have learnt about maternity, a recurrent theme in this book, comes from them. My husband David

Lelyveld has cared for me and supported my poems and prose writings. I have learnt more from him than I could ever put into words.