

Love me, FUSELI

A Play about Mary Wollstonecraft
and her Circle of Friends

[NOTE: Acts I and II are proposed to become the pilot episodes for a twelve part, limited series based on the emergence of universal civil liberties.]

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Synopsis

"Nearly all revolutions begin on a stage," is a line from "Love me, FUSELI," and this play demonstrates how that is especially so with regard to **sexual ones**.

Its other main objective is to humanize the **proto-feminist** Mary Wollstonecraft -- to let her speak for herself without any "ism" attachments and dramatize how her undaunted passion in pursuit of happiness and justice transformed her into our pathfinder as well.

Set in 1791 the play is fact-based and explores the inter-influencing of Mary with William Blake, and his wife Cate, Henry Fuseli, and his wife Sophia, Thomas Paine and Joseph Johnson, their least known though most important mutual benefactor-publisher.

It more fundamentally explores the gender expanding themes of the competing love triangles between Wollstonecraft, Fuseli and his current wife, Sophia, and Wollstonecraft, Fuseli and his once and future lover-companion, Joseph. Fuseli's most famous painting, "The Nightmare," had been hanging on Johnson's apartment wall for more than ten years.

There are interludes drawn from actual trial transcripts from the Old Bailey circa 1790's which contextualize the political nature of this secret meeting of pro-republicans conferring with Thomas Paine before his departure to join the revolution in France.

Spies abound, people are arrested and liberated, Jack finds his Jack again and Jill is launched to help create the world that we now inhabit.

Virginia Woolf wrote:

*“One form of immortality is hers undoubtedly: **Mary Wollstonecraft** is alive and active; she argues and experiments; we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living.”*

Margaret Mead wrote:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Cast of Characters

[NOTE: doubled as a play but separately cast as a film.]

William Blake, (WILL) the engraver, poet, artist, mystic in his mid 30's, already tending to portliness. (Also the **Bailiff** and **Cornelius Swift** in the courtroom scenes.)

Catherine Blake, (CATE) his wife, soul mate and business partner; slightly younger than William. (Also **the screaming woman** in the courtroom scene.)

Fanny Flute, (FANNY) the Blakes' elderly and hard of hearing house servant, a comic character a la Moliere. (Also **the woman in the gallery who throws vegetables** at the judge.)

Mary Wollstonecraft, (MARY) the feminist writer of the "Vindication of the Rights of Woman," spiritual mistress of Fuseli, and chief assistant for the printer-publisher Joseph Johnson approximately in her early 30's.

Joseph Johnson, (JOSEPH) the progressive publisher and benefactor extraordinaire of practically everyone in the room in his mid 50's. The once and future lover of Fuseli. His manner should be Father Christmas or the benevolent uncle out of a Jane Austen novel. (Also **Judge Justice** in the courtroom scenes.)

Henry Fuseli, (HENRY) the gnomish Swiss born artist in his early 50's but trying desperately to pass for much younger; has a slight German accent; everyone is oddly obsessed with his charisma. (Also, **Moses Fortune** and **Constable Singleton** in the courtroom scenes.)

Sophia Fuseli, (SOPHIA) Fuseli's strikingly beautiful wife and studio model in her 20's; her Titania costume makes the most of her breasts as was the style. (Also **Ann Brooks** in the courtroom scene.)

Thomas Paine (PAINE) *the global revolutionary and bridge designer; aka the mystery guest and vagrant in Act I in his 40's (Also **Simon Sutherland**, **William Reid** and **the man in the gallery** in the courtroom scenes.)*

Spy (SPY) *(Also **delivery man**, **lamplighter** and **George Wetton**, **Thomas Monkhouse** and **Thomas Cox** in the courtroom scenes.)*

BENJAMIN BROWN, (BENJAMIN) *a ten year old boy still in grimy clothing.*

ACT I

Scene 1

SETTING

Fall 1791 in Lambeth, a working craftsman section of London.

A combination parlor, work room and dining room of William and Catherine Blake is on one side of the stage.

On the other side is the judge's high bench from the Old Bailey with the judge already seated in his robes and wig.

Cate is water-coloring a sheet of Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" at one end of the dining room table with a number of other sheets from the same page hung by wire draped across the room to dry.

In front of the table are unopened packages of savory pies and bottles sent earlier by Blake's publisher, Joseph Johnson.

Will sits by the fireplace over which hangs his large portrait of Mary in Jerusalem. On his head is the red wool cap of the French Revolution.

As the lights lower, the trio "Soave il vento" from Mozart's "Cosi Fan Tutti" – <https://vimeo.com/user8588759/review/158993778/8776ae98b8> is heard.

When the piece ends a spotlight shines on Will as he reads aloud from his Notebook:

WILL

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!'
So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Darcy, who cried when his head,
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved: so I said,
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

And so he was quiet; and that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight, -
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.

And by came an angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins and set them all free;
Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run,
And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.

Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind;
And the angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father, and never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags and our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm;
So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.

*The last line is the cue for three sharp raps of
the judge's gavel as the lighting shifts to the
court-room section of the set.*

BAILIFF (WILL)

“Hear ye, hear ye. This Court is now in session at Old Bailey Hall this 29^h day of September 1791; the 30th year of the reign of His Royal Majesty, King George the Third. The Honorable Judge Justice presiding.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Dispense with the formalities, bailiff. Get on with it.

BAILIFF (WILL)

CASE Number 316 ANN BROOKS aged 17 profession unknown has been indicted for stealing, on the 6th day of September , a watch, value 2 pounds., the goods of George Wetton , from his person .

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Go on Mr. Wetton tell us your story.

GEORGE WETTON (SPY)

I am a baker, and live with my father in Devonshire-street, Mile-end. I am nineteen years of age. I met the prisoner, who was alone, about half-past six o'clock on the evening of the third of September, in Whitechapel. I was quite sober. She asked me to go down Wentworth-street with her.

I went to a house in Woodgate-court, into a room on the left hand, up one pair of stairs. We were there alone. I had sixpence in my pocket, and that I gave her, and a few halfpence to get a candle.

I took my breeches off, and folded them up carefully, and put them on a chair. I am certain my watch was then in the fob, because I tucked the ribbon of it down. I was not in the room above five minutes when another girl came in, and held me while the prisoner took my breeches out of the room. I got down as soon as I could, and got hold of the tail of my breeches. The prisoner swore at me like a trooper, and hit me over the head. I got the breeches, but the watch was gone.

I am quite certain of her person. She was taken into custody two days afterwards, by my describing her person to an officer.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Is the officer in the court?

MOSES FORTUNE (HENRY)

I be that officer, your honor. Moses Fortune by name. The prosecutor here came to me on this night. He appeared perfectly sober. I talked with him for ten minutes. He described the two girls to me, and having some slight knowledge of such girls, I took them two days afterwards in Whitechapel. I discovered no watch where they was at at the time.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Young man, I hope you learned a valuable lesson about whores. It cost you only your watch, now this time, didn't it? And girl, have you anything to say before I pass sentence?

ANN BROOKS (SOPHIA)

Can't even remember who he was. I know I ain't guilty of nicking no one's watch.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Well I believe you are. And if not, surely of other pernicious acts that have yet to be uncovered. The sentence of this court is guilty as charged. The punishment is transportation for life to labor at the farm colony on the Leeward Islands.

MAN IN the GALLERY (PAINE)

(supported by catcalls)

They're makin' black slaves outta us.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

(pounding of the gavel)

Order in the court. (aside) Hurry up with the next case.

BAILIFF (WILL)

Case Number 317 is called to the docket. One BENJAMIN BROWN aged 10, profession chimney sweep, has been indicted for feloniously stealing, on the

4th of August, one silk handkerchief, value 10 shillings the property of Thomas Monkhouse, gentleman.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Is the defendant in the court? I don't see him in the dock. Oh, there he is. Bailiff, would you get him a box or something to stand on? . . . Call the first witness.

BAILIFF (WILL)

Calling Thomas Monkhouse. Please approach the bench and raise your right hand. Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

THOMAS MONKHOUSE (SPY)

I so swear.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Mr. Monkhouse, would you tell the court what the defendant did to you?

THOMAS MONKHOUSE (SPY)

Coming along Upper Mary-le-Bone Street hill, the prisoner at the bar over there took a handkerchief out of my pocket. It was so dexterously done I did not immediately miss it, till Mr. Sutherland called me back, and he had the boy by the scruff of the neck. I turned round, and saw my handkerchief in his hand. The boy, I think, was taken to Guildhall Prison. The constable took possession of the handkerchief which is on the table over there.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Bailiff would you hold up the handkerchief so that we all can see it?

Is this Mr. Sutherland in the court?

SIMON SUTHERLAND (PAINE)

I am your honor.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Can you substantiate Mr. Monkhouse's account of the events?

SIMON SUTHERLAND (PAINE)

I can. I'm a grocer what resides on Fish-street-hill. My shop faces Upper Mary-le-Bone. Not being very busy, I was looking out, and observed Mr. Monkhouse go by, and the prisoner following him rather suspicious like. So I watched 'em smartly and saw the boy take the handkerchief very deliberately out of his pocket in a very compleat way and put it under his own sotty shirt. I took ahold of the boy and called Mr. Monkhouse back, although I didn't know his name then, and asked him, if he had lost a handkerchief. He felt in his pockets and said, "Yes, for I had a handkerchief about a minute or two ago and now I have none."

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

And is that the self-same handkerchief here produced?

SIMON SUTHERLAND (PAINE)

It is, my lord.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

And to the prisoner in the dock, what say you to these charges?

BAILIFF (BLAKE)

(aside to the judge)

Sir, oughten I swear him in?

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Of course.

BAILIFF (WILL)

Do you, Benjamin Brown, swear to tell the truth so help you God?

BENJAMIN (BOY)

Right.

BAILIFF (WILL)

You need to say, "I do so swear to tell the truth."

BENJAMIN (BOY)

Right. (*parroting*) I do so swear to tell the truth.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Do you know what will become of you, Benjamin, if you tell an untruth?

BENJAMIN (BOY)

Contemned to everlasting fire and damnation, they tells us. Kinda like the prison cell you put us in.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Enough insolence. You have heard what these men have told this court about what you did. Why shouldn't we find you guilty of the crime of theft?

BENJAMIN (BOY)

Because they didn't tell you what really happened. I was coming up Fish-street-hill about one o'clock just as the gentleman says and I saw a handkerchief layin under a cart, and I went and picked it up like anyone else woulda. And he came up, and laid hold of me, and said I took it out of that other gentleman's pocket. But I hadn't. It was under the cart like I said.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

And is your father here in court today?

BENJAMIN (BOY)

No sir, he ain't. Is yours?

There is laughter from the gallery.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

(pounding the gavel)

That's quite enough. It's obvious the boy is lying and the sentence of this court is GUILTY as charged.

BAILIFF (WILL)

(in an aside)

Your honor, now that the boy has been convicted, it would be proper to inform you, that this boy here has a brother who is bound over for transport to the prison farms in Australia. I heard the constables are also watching an older sister who they suspect aided him in robbing that Newport-alley house of two hundred pounds.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

(continuing the aside)

It seems we need to send the family a sterner warning.

He places a black cloth over his wig.

Benjamin Brown, your punishment for the felonious crime that you are found guilty of is to within the fortnight hang by your neck until dead.

BENJAMIN (BOY)

Sweet Jasus.

The boy faints and hits the floor.

GALLERY PEOPLE

(uproar of boo's and cat calls)

Child killer! . . . Bloody bastards. They wants to kill us all!

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Bailiff, get that boy out of here and quiet the damn gallery.

(banging his gavel loudly.)

Quiet I say or back on the streets with the lot of you.

Lights fade out.

ACT I

Scene 2

Exterior

As the pounding of the gavel stops, a Vagrant dressed in rags makes his stage entrance on the street in front of the Blake's apartment. He curls around the lamppost covering himself with a tattered blanket.

The Spy makes his entrance, leans against the lamppost and lights his pipe. When he realizes that the vagrant is lying at his feet, he starts kicking him to move him on.

Mary Wollstonecraft enters as if sleep-walking. Although it is late September, she is wearing a diaphanous Greek goddess gown. She is dramatically over made up and carrying an envelope. As Mary approaches Blake's door, she is stopped by the Spy.

SPY

Oiy, Dolly. Oiy, I'm talking at you. What does you want for it?

MARY

(Silent.)

Mary freezes standing still as a statue.

SPY

Playing dumb are ya? Maybe I'm in the wrong and you're really a fine lady what lost her way to the prince's grand ball. I need to sniff out what you is.

He starts smelling her from head to toe. While he's doing this the Vagrant takes out his knife, pretends to stab him in the back but instead

cuts the strings of his money pouch and begins to slip away with it.

SPY

Nope, you smells like a tart and looks like a tart; so a tart you must be. How much for the old back and forth?

MARY

(Still silent.)

SPY

Maybe the size of me purse will unlock your lips. Bloody hell.

The Spy reaches for his money bag and finds it missing. The Vagrant stands within view and taunts the Spy with the purse. The Vagrant plays “keep away” with the Spy in a comic chase until he runs off with the Spy following him.

As they run off, Mary awakens from her trance and approaches Blake's door but instead of knocking she hides in the shrubbery occasionally peeking in the window.

Lights come up in the apartment.

WILL

(in a singing voice)

When voices of children are heard on the green,

CATE

(similarly singing)

The sow came in with a saddle.

WILL

And laughing is heard on the hill,

CATE

The little pig rocked the cradle.

WILL

My heart is at rest within my breast,
And everything else is still.
The little ones leaped, and shouted, and lau - ghed,
(making it two syllables)

And . . . all . . . the hills . . . e-cho- ed.
(making "echoed" three syllables)

CATE

The dish jumped over the table

She illustrates this line by making an arc with her brush in the air in a child-like manner splattering the water on the table itself carefully away from the sheet that she is working on.

She wets her brush from colored water in a beaker that is identical to the one that will soon arrive from the apothecary containing the etching acid.

CATE

To see . . . to see what, Will, how does it go?

WILL

. . . see the brass pot, swallow the ladle.

CATE

. . . swallow the ladle.

The old pot behind the door
Called the kettle a black a moor.

Will, are you weeping?

WILL

The angels have all left the trees. Look out of the window, Don't you see,
Cate? Cate, do you pity me?

CATE

Yes, I do.

WILL

Then I love you.

Cate returns to her water-coloring. Fanny enters tiptoeing through the front door trying not to be seen with a basket full of vegetables.

CATE

Fanny, I really needed you, today of all days, to get ready for Mr. Johnson's tea. Just look at everything that he has sent over. Where were you?

FANNY

(heavy Eastender accent)

I was to the barber's on the Circus to get me tooth pulled -- the broken off one in back here. See. Then I walks to the market then all the way to the Bailey to keep me thinking off of the pain. Nothing helped so I went up to the court gallery. There was this one dirty little lad maybe nine or ten years old who could barely see over the dock got the hanging sentence, he did, just for nicking a handkerchief. It was a beauty, it was, with a big yellow flower on't. . . but the best part. . . *(seemingly distracted by the pain of the pulled tooth)*

CATE

Fanny, what is the rest of the story?

FANNY

Right. See so there was this riot . . .

A delivery man with a small package wrapped in brown paper knocks at the front door. Mary sees him coming and hides deeper in the shrubbery. He knocks.

CATE

Fanny, would you mind seeing who that is?

FANNY

(again rubbing her cheek over the pulled tooth)

I can't see no one, mum.

CATE

That's because you have to open it first. Never mind.

How may we help you?

DELIVERY MAN

This is for Mr. William Blake himself.

CATE

I'm his wife. I'll make sure he gets it.

DELIVERY MAN

Can't. The chemist says I need to give it only to him. He says if any of it spills it'll eat you skin and bones.

CATE

Mr. Blake is sitting right over there. Come in if you want and hand it to him

yourself.

DELIVERY MAN

That's good enough for me. Here ma'm. I'll put it down right on this here table for you. Ma'm, one more thing. The chemist says I was to bring him back a shilling, ten without fail.

CATE

Will, Will, would you pay the man?

Blake rips a page out of his Notebook.

WILL

Is that anything? It's my best drawing of the man climbing a ladder to reach the moon.

DELIVERY MAN

Fraid not. Nothin' to me.

CATE

Here's a half crown. Keep the difference for your trouble.

DELIVERY MAN

Much appreciated m'am.

The delivery man exits.

CATE

The money is a goin', Mr. Blake. Are you only going to be happy when we haven't a single penny in the house?

ACT I

Scene 3

*The night watchman lights the gas street lamp.
Joseph Johnson approaches Blake's front door
dragging a bag like Father Christmas. Because
of the lit street lamp he spots Mary
Wollstonecraft still spying through the window.*

JOSEPH

Mary, I was so worried about you. I'm glad you received my message.

MARY

Johnson, you bastard. I'd rather be a common slut than the wife of any man I did not love and respect. The very effrontery of the man to presume such an intimacy with my person. What could have possibly given him such an notion, you may ask. But you already know the answer.

How could you, my only friend, the only person that I trust in this world, do something so . . . so dastardly?

Maybe I'm the ungrateful one. I am embarrassed to think of all my childish complaints when you provide me with such important employment.

My life is such a joke. I spent last night switching between laughing and crying.

When I received your invitation, I decided to way-lay you. Did you bring that German grammar?

JOSEPH

What grammar? Never mind that. My dearest Mary, please accept my sincere apologies. My objective only was to insure your well-being long after I'm gone.

MARY

After three years of working every day side by side, you don't know me at all, do you? I knew I would be too agitated to explain myself clearly when we

met; so I wrote it all out this morning in a letter addressed to Lowry. Can I read it to you now without any interruptions?

JOSEPH

Of course, Mary.

MARY

“Mr. Lowry, It is inexpressibly disagreeable to me to be obliged to enter again on a subject, that has already raised a tumult of indignant emotions in my bosom, which I was laboring to suppress when I received your letter.

I shall now condescend to answer your epistle; but let me first tell you, that, in my 'unprotected' situation, I make a point of never forgiving a deliberate insult – and in that light I consider your late officious conduct.

JOSEPH

How can you consider a proposal of honorable marriage “officious” conduct?

MARY

I need no interrogator.

JOSEPH

My apologies.

MARY

I shall read on . . .

“It is not according to my nature to mince matters – I will tell you in plain terms what I think. I have ever considered you merely a 'civil' acquaintance. How could you be so rude as to presume an intimacy more than that?

If my “friend,” Mr. Johnson, had made such a proposal, I should have been severely hurt – have thought him unkind and unfeeling, but not 'impertinent.'

In as few words as possible, what I can not tolerate is the bare supposition that I could for a moment think of prostituting my person for a maintenance; for in

that point of view does such a marriage appear to me.

An apology is not necessary – if you were inclined to make one – nor any further expostulations. I again repeat, I cannot overlook an affront. Few indeed have sufficient delicacy to respect poverty, even when it gives luster to a character.

And I can tell you quite openly, sir, I am POOR but can live infinitely better without your 'benevolent' exertions. Signed Mary W.”

JOSEPH

I never imagined that my good intentions would cause you such distress.

MARY

Well they have. Independence is the grandest blessing of life. It is the last thing that I shall ever sacrifice though I had to live on a barren heath to preserve it.

JOSEPH

I shall be your guarantor that that will never be necessary.

MARY

Oh and one more thing. I need for you to deliver this letter personally to Lowery and tell him to his face that if ever he and I should meet that I shall either leave the room instantly or else pull him out by the nose.

JOSEPH

I shall do it.

MARY

Now that our storm has passed, let there always be honesty and harmony between us.

JOSEPH

Except for this Fuseli affair and what it is doing to you.

*Fuseli and Sophia are heard from a distance
approaching the door laughing raucously.*

Quick hide. Here they come.

ACT I

Scene 4

Henry Fuseli and wife make their grand entrance. He is layered in colorful gentleman's lacy finery like a squat frosted cake and is carrying a stage Bottom's ass' head. Fuseli and Sophia both have on powdered wigs. Hers as tall as a rifle. Fuseli opens the door without knocking and pounds his cane on the stage three times.

HENRY

All rise and make way for the fairy queen, Titania, and her fairyland paramour, the Royal Ass, Bottom is my name.

FANNY

I never seen a real fairy before. No nor a queen neither.

Attempting a deep bow, Fanny goes to her knees and requires Cate's help in getting back up. Sophia struggles to get through the doorway with her enormous wig on.

HENRY

Are we the first to arrive? What a wasted entrance. Blake, who's our mystery guest? . . . And that painting over the fireplace is new. What is "that"?

WILL

The Blessed Virgin.

HENRY

Really? It is sacrilegious at best and a little hideous otherwise.

WILL

The Virgin Mary herself told me it was very fine. What say you to that?

HENRY

Why nothing – other than her divine ladyship obviously does not possess immaculate perception.

EXTERIOR

MARY

Fuseli is my only passion and hope for joy in this life. I have never known another man who possessed more grandeur of soul, a quicker comprehension or a livelier sympathy than he. I always catch something from the rich torrent of his conversation worth treasuring.

JOSEPH

Mary, your reason has become enslaved by your passion for that pompous, little man. And there is that other small impediment – he is married.

MARY

If I thought my passion criminal, I would conquer it or die in the attempt. Rather I believe it is divinely directed.

JOSEPH

How could that possibly be?

MARY

Remember last week when you forced me to finish Milton's "Divorce Tracts" galleys?

JOSEPH

Yes. And?

MARY

"And," while correcting them I came across this, "The apt and cheerful conversation of man with woman is the chief and noblest purpose of marriage. . . . Where loving conversation cannot be, there can be left of wedlock nothing but the empty husk." After much thought, I truly believe that God meant for me to read that passage exactly when I did.

JOSEPH

That would only be logical if I myself were God. Then in this fairy-tale of your contriving you become the grain, and Sophia is the husk. I certainly

concur with the second part of your premise. But do you believe that God's destiny for you is to fatten Henry's already distended vanity?

MARY

He's a great man.

JOSEPH

You could be the greater woman. But he is no longer any concern of mine. You I shall always care about. How does he treat you?

MARY

The last time we were together he simply left the room without a word as if I were a chair. But that was really my fault. His presence sometimes strikes me dumb like in the poem,

If I meet you suddenly,
I cannot speak —
my tongue is broken;
a thin flame runs under
my skin; seeing nothing,

hearing only my own ears
drumming, I drip with sweat;
trembling shakes my body
and I turn paler than
dry grass. At such times
death isn't far from me.

That is me. I am Sappho.

JOSEPH

(in a stage whisper)

I feel a dagger in my stomach too whenever I see him. *(aloud to Mary)* But what's the resolution? Sappho doesn't give any.

MARY

But I thought I told you. Milton does.

JOSEPH

You're talking like the sphinx now. Fuseli's drunk so much of Sophia's blood that she'll never leave him.

MARY

Extend Milton's argument and it makes irrefragable sense. She copulates with his baser instincts, and I will couple with his mind. Ergo like the trinity I shall complete him by marrying them both.

INTERIOR

HENRY

. . . so Sir Joshua cuts my canvas with his knife and screams, "These are mere toys, where is generalized truth?"

WILL

That's what idiots know.

HENRY

Which is as much to say that the great Sir Joshua Reynolds is an idiot. My dear boy, I can see why they gave you the boot.

WILL

My enthusiasms were derided as childish glee.

HENRY

(gossipy tone)

I had heard that you told Sir Joshua to his face that you despised his oils.

WILL

A lie. I simply stated I preferred the fresco style.

HENRY

Which ipso facto meant you hated his style. You never understood the Academy's high purposes -- to manufacture the kind of art worthy of our great

Empire -- like Greece's -- like Rome's.

WILL

Artists imagine empires not the other way around. We imagined those worlds long before the politicians confiscated them for their own pleasures.

HENRY

I agree with you there. My pleasurable imaginings are being confiscated by constables at print shops across the city even as we speak. And most of those originated as royal commissions. . . Can you smell what is in Bottom's ass' head?

Fuseli holds the opening of the ass' head under Blake's nose.

WILL

All too well.

HENRY

That's the perfume that the Duke of Clarence was wearing tonight. After Sophia and I arrived, he was so taken with our costumes that he insisted that he and his companion take over our parts in the tableau vivant. In compensation Reynolds asked me to render it for a large painting for the Academy.

You would have loved it, Will. An heir to the throne on all fours with my head on his shoulders, ridden hard across the marble floor by Dorothy Jordan, the Queen Whore of Covent Gardens. It surely excited me, didn't it Sophia?

SOPHIA

Hard as a rock, you was.

FANNY

I wish I could'a seen it.

HENRY

And so you shall.

Fuseli impulsively puts on the head, and very awkwardly gets down on his hands and knees.

Come, my Titania, your stead awaits.

WILL

More donkey, rather.

SOPHIA

Are you sure you're up to it?

Sophia climbs on his back holding her wig precariously on the top of her head.

HENRY

UFFF

Fuseli collapses and doesn't move. Sophia's wig falls off and she is sprawled disheveled on the floor.

Mary and Johnson rush in. Joseph removes the ass' head from Fuseli which he hands to Mary who passes it on back to Cate.

JOSEPH

Henry, can you hear me? Are you dead?

HENRY

(waiting then laughing)

What a stupid question. Although I did think that I'd have to be dead before I'd see you again, my old bugger, . . . in hell.

JOSEPH

You are an oafish toad.

HENRY

I see my Helena has finally arrived way too late for her cue I might add. Mary, will you see that Madam Fuseli is all right?

CATE

You can put yourself back together in our bedroom, luv. Come on now it might take all of us.

All of the women exit.

WILL

A belated welcome to our humble home, Joseph, You must excuse me, gentlemen, I must a note to make.

Blake returns to his chair by the fire.

HENRY

(whispering)

Joseph, I'm simply dying to know the identity of our mystery guest.

JOSEPH

In the fullness of time. I have a more important matter to settle with you. Why do you treat Mary so badly? Have you no shame?

HENRY

You are a genuinely sweet man, Joseph. And sooo English. We unsentimental Swiss answer you, *Scham ist für Kinder*. Let me ask you this, is the cat ever ashamed when it toys with the mouse that it will eat? I think not.

JOSEPH

Henry, are we talking about mice or our beloved Mary?

HENRY

Is that Mary you speak of your assistant, your governess or your child?

JOSEPH

Just stop what you are doing.

HENRY

Stop ignoring her do you mean? There is right now a small stack of her letters on the stand near the door untouched except by Sophie. She had so much trouble with the handwriting on one that I had to read it to her. What a cyclone it stirred. I still bear the scratches here on my neck.

Joseph touches the scars.

JOSEPH

Have you seen a surgeon? They look inflamed.

HENRY

Mary stalks my every step. You should pity me not her.

Johnson pulls back somewhat embarrassed when Mary and the others return without Sophia's wig.

HENRY

Gather around everyone. Since Mary did not appear at the ball tonight, Sir Joshua cut our Midsummer Night's Dream scene. The Duke stole our Bottom and Titania spots in the tableau as I was telling the others, and some silly boy garbled Puck's lines so badly that no one knew what was going on. I would have made an amazing Puck.

JOSEPH

I can well imagine you flitting about the hall like a rolling pumpkin.

HENRY

That hurt. Was that a poke at my corpulence?

JOSEPH

No, this is a poke at your corpulence.

Johnson pokes Fuseli rather hard in the stomach.

HENRY

UFF That really did hurt.

JOSEPH

Stop stuffing yourself.

HENRY

It seems that fate decreed that I would be run to ground at the Blakes' by my dear little hyena . . . pardonez moi . . . I meant to say Helena. Let's take full advantage of Mary's presence, now, and play out our scene while we wait for Johnson's mystery guest to appear.

Ladies and gentlemen, take your seats. The Bard awaits our bidding. Who converses with Shakespeare is not an actor, he is a “god” in my eyes.

JOSEPH

Mary, He's stealing from your friend Sappho this time.

HENRY

Our scene is between Mary as Helena and I as Demetrius, her lover but not he, hers. Or her, his. I still have difficulty with your prepositions and pronouns. Anyway you'll see what I mean.

Fuseli takes out a little book from his vest and displays it for the guests.

Note the fine printing by Mounsieur (“mon – sewer”) J. Johnson and Company which shall serve as my prompt copy. Enter Demetrius; Helena following him.

DEMETRIUS / (HENRY)

(reading haltingly)

I love thee not, therefore pursue me not.
Where is Lysander and fair Hermia?
Get thee gone, and follow me no more.

HELENA / (MARY)

(speaking from the heart)

You draw me, you hard-hearted lodestone;
But yet you draw not iron, for my heart
Is true as steel. Leave your power to draw,
And I shall have no power to follow you.

DEMETRIUS / (HENRY)

Do I entice you? Do I speak you fair?
Or, rather, do I not in plainest truth
Tell you I do not nor I cannot love you?

HELENA / (MARY)

And even for that do I love you the more.
I am your spaniel; and, Demetrius,
The more you beat me, I will fawn on you.
Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me,
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,
Unworthy as I am, to follow you.
What worser place can I beg in your love,
And yet a place of high respect with me,
Than to be used as you use your dog?

DEMETRIUS / (HENRY)

I am sick when I do look on thee.

HELENA / (MARY)

And I am sick when I look not on you.

DEMETRIUS / (HENRY)

I'll run from thee and hide me in the brakes,
And leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts.
Let me go;
Or, if thou follow me, do not believe

But I shall do thee mischief in the wood.

HELENA / (MARY)

Ay, in the temple, in the town, in the fields
You do me mischief. Fie, Demetrius!
Your wrongs do set a scandal on my sex.
We cannot fight for love as men may do;
We should be woo'd, and were not made to woo.

HENRY

“Exit DEMETRIUS”

HELENA / (MARY)

I'll follow thee, and make a heaven of hell,
To die upon the hand I love so well.

Mary in real tears rushes off stage.

HENRY

“Exit HELENA.” Where has Mary evaporated to now? I love this scene.
What do you think, Johnson? I was rather good wasn't I?

JOSEPH

I think you should be much kinder to Mary. Can't you see how tortured she is?

HENRY

She? Haven't I just told you how she aggravates me? It's the same with all women. They suck me dry. Notice how thin and ghostly pale I have become. I'm like Orpheus hunted by the Bacchae.

JOSEPH

Why do you lead her on?.

HENRY

When I first met her at your shop she was in the coarse habit of a hermit, black worsted stockings, wearing a beaver hat with her hair lank on top of her shoulders. When Sophie and I first visited her little room, she served such a horrible wine in unmatched tea cups.

JOSEPH

Then why is she always following you around?

HENRY

You heard Shakespeare. Is it the magnet's fault that iron flies to it? But did you see, tonight, how magnificent she has become?

JOSEPH

She is unrecognizable. She is useless at the shop staring blankly, spilling ink. She's gone for days at a time. I had to goad her every day just to finish the "Vindication" which has now made her so famous.

HENRY

And I want her to recant it entirely. I take it as a personal affront for her to attack my patrons. How ridiculous she makes me and herself. The coquetting of a strident, female philosopher can never prove agreeable.

SOPHIA

(loudly interrupting)

When is it my turn?

Mary re-enters from the bedroom.

JOSEPH

Mary, you look much restored.

MARY

Henry and Sophia, please forgive me for having disturbed the quiet tenor of your lives.

HENRY

Just a modicum of peace and quiet is all I desire and require.

MARY

I have pondered and believe I have arrived at a resolution that will accomplish much more than that. Since Mrs. Fuseli has the right to the physical person of her husband, I claim only a unification with that *terra incognita* of his mind. It is only reasonable, then, that I become your in-mate residing with you as a family.

And as I want to be above reproach or deceit, Sophia, this marriage proposal arises from the sincere affection which I have for your husband, for I find that I cannot live without the satisfaction of seeing and conversing with him daily. You may do with me as you wish – treat me as your scullery servant or employ me as the governess of any children that you might have.

SOPHIA

Wot? Wot a bleedin' nightmare. You don't visit my house; you haunt it. Someone is always bumping into you. A vase gets broken. There are whole handfuls of salt in the soup. The curtains . . . the curtains . . . Henry, I can't breathe . . . I can't breathe.

Sophia melodramatically staggers out the front door.

MARY

Henry, please let me love you..

HENRY

I can no longer stay.

Fuseli pauses for a moment then goes out of the door without a backward glance.

MARY

Thy will be done.

Mary drinks from the beaker containing the coloured water that Cate was using rather than the clear one containing the acid.

JOSEPH

(yelling)

Mary, don't drink that! . . . Oh, my God!

BLACKOUT – SHORT INTERMISSION

ACT II

Scene 1

In the dim light Mary is seen lying on an old settee with Cate putting compresses on her forehead.

Fanny is sitting on a three legged stool facing them chattering away.

Blake is across the room looking up occasionally writing and sketching in his Notebook.

The scene is interrupted by the loud pounding of the judge's gavel as lights come up on the court-room.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Order in the court. And you in the gallery, if there is another outburst like the last one I'll put you all in jail.

MAN FROM THE GALLERY (PAINE)

The 'ell you will.

(general laughter)

There's too many of us.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Officers, remove that man.

(Gallery crowd boos.)

Now, Bailiff, will you call the next case.

BAILIFF (WILL)

Case Number 318 is called to the docket: One William Reid aged 33. Mr. Reid has been indicted for feloniously stealing, on the 19th of July this year, six pounds weight of white pewter, value 10 pounds sterling, the goods of his

master Cornelius Swift. The first witness is Thomas Cox. Do you, Thomas Cox, swear to tell the truth, so help you God?

COX (SPY)

I do so swear.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Relate to the court what occurred on the 19th of July pursuant to the accused.

COX (SPY)

I be prenticed to Mr. Swift, the pewterer on Shoe-lane. On that particular Friday, I had an occasion to go out of the shop. I seen Thomas was off his stool, which he had no business to be. I went where his coat is usually hung up to see if he was still there, and saw his coat was bulging out most strangely which caused a suspicion in my mind. My master being out, I went and fetched Singleton, the constable, straight away and pointed out the coat to him where he found pewter in every one of the pockets. The constable asked me where Mr. Reid was and I searched down to the kitchen. He was talking with me mistress and Mr. Bland, from across the way.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

What regular business had Mr. Reid to do on that stool?

COX (SPY)

He was the journeyman polishing pots for sale.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Where were you to be when he was polishing the pots?

COX (SPY)

Tending the fires in the room below.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Bailiff, call the next witness.

BAILIFF (WILL)

Calling Constable Singleton. Do you swear to tell the truth as God is your witness?

SINGLETON (HENRY)

I swear.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

And Singleton, what can you add to Mr. Cox's testimony?

SINGLETON (HENRY)

As you know, your honor, I am constable of St. Andrew's. I was sent for to investigate what Mr. Cox there said. I live directly opposite the shop. He showed me where Mr. Reid's coat was hanging and I pulled all that pewter on the table over there out of his different pockets. When Mr. Cox led me to where the defendant was he said he was very sorry for what he done. I asked him, if ever he had done the like before. He said, he never had but that him and his wife and young ones was being put out on the street for not paying his rents on account of a sick one what died.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

That's quite enough. Is Master Cornelius Swift in the court-room today?

SWIFT (WILL)

I am your honor.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Master Swift, is that your property lying on the table.

SWIFT (WILL)

There is my mark on the bottom of each piece. But I can't believe that Mr. Reid would steal it.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

And why is that?

SWIFT (WILL)

Because William has been with me since he was a boy. It must be almost twenty years. And nothing has ever gone missing from the shop in all that time.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

You are dismissed. Does the prisoner have anything to say in his own defense?

REID (PAINE)

I did not put them things into my pockets. Master Swift has always treated me right. I've been locked up in jail more than two months with no way to provide for my wife and children. And I never said them things to the constable but swore my innocence from the first. I've seen him and Cox drinking together many a time at the Hairy Owl. And Cox has often played tricks with me.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

This is much more serious than a "trick," Mr. Reid. Why would Mr. Cox do such a thing?

REID (PAINE)

It's cuz he wants to get as far away from that infernal furnace as he can and take my job.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Mr. Cox, the accused here says you often played tricks on him. You're still under oath, did you put that pewter into his pockets?

COX (SPY)

I swear before almighty God I did not, sir.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

And Constable Singleton, did the accused indeed confess his guilt to you exactly in the manner that you testified to?

SINGLETON (HENRY)

Right he did every last word of it.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

If there are no other witnesses, I am ready to pass judgment. Are there any more? Going once, going twice. . .

BAILIFF (WILL)

No, your honor that's the lot of them.

JUDGE (JOSEPH)

Then Mr. William Reid, I find you guilty of felonious theft based on your prior confession of the crime to the constable. And your punishment is to be transported to the prison farms at Botany Bay for no fewer than fourteen years' servitude.

WOMAN IN THE GALLERY (CATE)

(screaming)

It's a death sentence for us all!

OTHERS IN THE GALLERY

“We're not their bloody slaves.” . . . “We'll be dead.” “God save the revolution.” “Revolution” “Revolution,” “Revolution.”

*They start throwing vegetables at the judge
in time with each shouting of the word
“revolution.”
Lights come up on the Blake's parlor.*

ACT II

Scene 2

FANNY

. . . and the man's wife screams like a banshee, "It's a death sentence for us all." And all their little ones call out, "We'll be dead . We'll be dead. We'll be dead." Just like that. I couldn't understand why they was so upset. Where is this Botany Bay? Someone told me it was just west of Brighton where she said they're building a fancy palace to rival Versailles ("Ver-sails.") .

MARY

Your source was partially correct, Fanny, Botany Bay is indeed west of Brighton – about ten thousand miles west in our Australian colony.

FANNY

That explains why the folks in the gallery starts throwing whatever we brought at the judge. I threw a bunch of carrots meself. Then the other bailiffs rush in. I try to grab whatever vegetables I can to put back in my sack, but the crowd carries me out the door. When we're outside, one of the men digs up this cobble stone from the road and hurls it at the Bailey. It just bounced off the brick wall. He then shinnies up a lamp post and starts yelling at the crowd something like, "They're going to hang every one of us or send us off like black slaves to work for nothing on their farms. Let's kill as many of them as we can before they get us." That frightened me a bit.

MARY

That's horrible.

FANNY

It did do one good thing, though.

MARY

What's that?

FANNY

I had forgot my tooth was hurting.

CATE

I think you're upsetting Mary too much with your story. Fanny, why don't you finish setting places for our tea. And, Mary, try to sit up. Joseph said he'll return as soon as he tells Henry that you are all right.

MARY

I'm sure that news will disappoint him.

FANNY

Don't suffer yourself so, luv. Men just wants a wonk and a wank. The devil made 'em and the devil can have 'em.

MARY

That's certainly not true of Mr. Johnson or Mr. Blake. Speak up, Will, defend your sex. But, Fanny, please go on with your story.

FANNY

Now, where was I?

MARY

Cobble stones.

FANNY

Right, after the man threw the cobble stone others start picking up smaller stones and aiming them more carefully at the windows. I heard a couple crash but then the soldiers came. Then some of the woman's friends led her and the children quickly away towards her home I imagined.

A few of us tagged along. When we arrived everything that she owned was being brought out by the constables and tossed onto the street. Chairs, spoons, tiny shoes. Then a shameful thing happened. We landed on it like a flock of crows grabbing and pecking at each other until the street was picked bare. I got this comb here.

*Fanny takes the comb out of her apron pocket
and places it on the sideboard to distance
herself from it.*

MARY

What happened to the woman?

FANNY

The last I seen of her she was kneeling in the alley with her children kind of praying. I had to get back to help out Mrs. Blake.

MARY

Do you know where to find them?

FANNY

I can take you to the alley but I doubt they're still there.

MARY

They can live with me. We can't sit idly by letting the courts exterminate us one by one. God created us as human as they. Maybe more so.

FANNY

Please Mrs., don't get rid of the courts and the gallows. Where would we poor folks go for a lark and a spark?

MARY

Don't fret, Fanny, that'll never happen.

FANNY

It's not the court's fault for what happened to that woman. Blame marriage. Get rid of that and its dirty little consequences and you'll fix nearly all of women's troubles. As a young slavey I vowed never to make that mistake and

have been able to take care of myself and many others like the Blakes very nicely ever since.

MARY

But surely you will agree that Will and Cate's marriage is a shining rebuttal to what you are saying.

FANNY

What does my shining butt hole have to do with it?

WILL

Mary, Care to hear a sonnet I just composed for you?

MARY

I'd be honored.

WILL

My dedication is “to Mary, the most scandalous virgin in Albion”

Some said she was proud, some call'd her a whore,

CATE

Will!

WILL

And some, when she passèd just shut the door;
A damp cold came o'er her, her blushes all fled;
Her lilies and roses are blighted and shed.

O, why was I born with a different face?
Why was I not born like the rest of the race?
When I look, each one starts; When I speak, I offend.
Then I'm silent and passive and lose every friend.

Why did Heaven adorn me with bountiful hand,
And then set me down in such an envious land?

I will humble my beauty, I will not dress fine,
I will keep from the ball, and my eyes shall not shine;

And if any girl's lover forsakes her for me
I'll refuse him my hand, and from envy thus be free.

CATE

Will, that's terrible..

WILL

You're right. The lines are a jangled muddle.

MARY

I love it. William, you and I are truly a different genus. We should only breed
with our own kind.

CATE

On my dead body. Leave my husband be.

MARY

Dear Cate, I was speaking metaphorically.

CATE

Then you'll have to meta-fornicate on my dead body.

WILL

Mary, Catherine's a little sensitive about this subject.

CATE

Sensitive my arse. Last year Will came to his barren wife with an inspired
solution. It's only requirement was the divine intervention of the human body
of our servant girl Molly.

WILL

As God is my witness. . .

CATE

Don't you dare use God for your pimp, Mr. Blake.

MARY

What happened?

CATE

My perfect husband over there tried to convince me that our path lay in the prophecy of the Bible. He almost had me convinced by that Abraham, Sarah and Hagar story. But Will made the mistake of teaching me how to read. I read the rest of the story that Will forgot to mention. Sarah, although tricked at first, becomes furious and throws her servant Hagar and her little bastard out into the desert. Abraham then gets his rightful heir and the Jewish tribes get begot. But the story doesn't end there, this Ishmael fathers the Arab tribes and the two are still at war to this day. All because Abraham thought he was smarter than God.

MARY

What did you do?

CATE

Like Sarah, threw Molly out on her ear. Joseph sent Fanny over when he saw we needed the help. (*raising her voice a bit*) You haven't asked Fanny to bear any children yet, have you, Will?

MARY

Cate, You do know that was not what I was proposing to Henry and Sophia. Just the reverse really. I will make no sexual demands on him. Being near him is all the pleasure in this life that I require. I'd be their amanuensis.

CATE

A man u what's it?

MARY

I'm sorry. It's Latin meaning someone “within a hand's reach” to provide personal services for his master. In Rome they were the most trusted of slaves. Many more Romans were poisoned by their wives than by their amanuensi.

WILL

I know Henry would be tickled to have as many people within a hand's reach as he can get.

There is the background sound of rain from here until the end of the play. There is a knocking on the door.

ACT II

Scene 3

CATE

Fanny, will you go to the door and open it this time.

PAINE

Spare a ha-penny for a starving man?

FANNY

Shoo, shoo you smelly old thing.

Fanny immediately picks up a broom and starts beating him.

PAINE

I mean no harm. It's a hard rain. If I was a stray dog, you'd take me in.

CATE

Stop it, Fanny. Put the broom down and invite him in. We've got plenty.

Cate takes an apple and ripping off the end of a loaf of bread on the sideboard she gives them to Paine.

Come dry yourself by the fire a bit.

Blake looks up from his notebook and intently studies Paine's face. The actor playing Paine should wear a prosthetic nose similar to Paine's portrait at this time.

WILL

You've a very interesting face. Mind if I sketch you?

PAINE

You an artist?

WILL

I apprenticed as an engraver, but I discovered early on that only I could draw what I imagined.

PAINE

Posing is the least I can do to repay your hospitality.

WILL

Do you know who you look like?

PAINE

No, who?

WILL

No offense, but your face looks exactly like a caricature of Tom Paine.

PAINE

You're not the first one to tell me that, but I do take offense.

WILL

Why is that?

PAINE

I take offense because it is the face of Tom Paine. I'm honored to meet you, Mr. Blake.

WILL

Cate and Mary, I believe our guest has arrived. I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Thomas Paine.

FANNY

Are you the one that song's about?

PAINE

What song is that?

FANNY

*(to the tune of "God Save the King" i.e. "My country
tis of thee")*

God save great Thomas Paine
His 'Rights of Man' explain
To every soul.

He makes the blind to see
What dupes and slaves they be,
And points out liberty,
From pole to pole.

Thousands cry 'Church and King'
That well deserve to swing, . . .

PAINE

Stop, stop you'll get "me" hanged.

CATE

Fanny, get the wash-up bowl and some soap. And bolt that door.

PAINE

And Mary. Are you "the" Mary?

MARY

Which Mary is that?

PAINE

The first-vindicator-of-the-rights-of-man-in-England Mary.

MARY

Guilty as charged..

PAINE

You're the chief reason why I came back to London tonight.

MARY

Me? I'm nobody.

Through this scene Fanny brings a wash bowl and Cate brings a change of clothes, and Paine is cleaned up and changes costumes right on the stage stripping down all the way to his underwear while he is talking.

PAINE

As you can see, I'm nobody too.

MARY

Didn't you hear, you're the people's king.

PAINE

I'm the people's ferret. I learned long ago how to make such a racket in castle walls that none of them could get any sleep.

MARY

When I was a little girl my brother and I spent most of a day with glasses stuck to our ears following the scratchings within our walls. When the sounds stopped, my brother took an ax and bashed in the plaster, lathe and all. And there was this huge hissing rat. And beneath her body were these tiny pink faces – calm and secure. For some strange reason I had a rush of feeling that I wanted to change places with them. When my brother swung his ax again, I screamed so hard I think I passed out. I've never felt safe since.

Paine picks up the ass' head and studies

Wollstonecraft's theatrically made up face now streaked.

PAINE

What amusement did I miss?

MARY

Me, making a complete fool of myself.

PAINE

I try to do that every day of my life. And my friends inform me that I often succeed.

MARY

But you still haven't explained why you wanted to meet me.

PAINE

It's a little convoluted, but let me try. Once the protection of individual rights was sown on to the American constitution, I thought my work on revolutions was over. I then returned to my English homeland for one purpose and one purpose only and that was to gain a royal patent for my cast iron bridge design and begin building them wherever I could.

MARY

A bridge?

PAINE

A bridge. What value is a market place on the other side of a wide river, if you can't take your cart full of potatoes to it? Changing laws doesn't materially change people's lives one iota, but bridges certainly can.

MARY

The Romans built all those walls, but they should have built bridges instead. Is that it?

PAINE

The free exchange of goods is the real key to the poor raising themselves out of poverty and the guarantor of peace and mutual prosperity between nations. Just imagine what an actual bridge over the English Channel connecting England with France would do to change the world. It's that simple.

MARY

Could it be that simple?

PAINÉ

When the chief end of government is to build bridges rather than defending the wealth of the wealthiest, this is more than possible. It is inevitable.

MARY

I'll play your "simple" game. Let me make a simple proposal. Maybe all that we need to do to bring about the equality of black slaves with their masters, the poor with the rich, the young with the old and women with their husbands is simply to educate them equally.

PAINÉ

That is exactly what they're trying to do in Paris even as we speak.

MARY

I've been a little distracted lately. What is *happening*?

PAINÉ

This month the Assembly has emancipated all of the Negro slaves in French territories around the world and granted them the full rights of citizenship.

MARY

To both men and women?

PAINÉ

Is that a serious question? How could they enfranchise slave women when not

even the queen of France has the right to vote? And on the second matter Tallyrand has proposed universal education for all children regardless of means.

MARY

Boys and girls alike.

PAINÉ

Not exactly. Tallyrand's argument is that no girl needs to be educated beyond the eighth grade and only in those skills which please men, are useful to men, and make men's lives "easy and agreeable." I believe those are his words.

MARY

This is no more "enlightened" than Rousseau's "the female is the sex that ought to obey." Who do they imagine are the first teachers of these newly liberated sons? A cow? A sheep? No, a woman. How quickly you all forget that it was the poor women of Paris who had the courage to lead the attack on the army at Versailles? Would you convey my strenuous objections to your friend Tallyrand when you see him?

PAINÉ

I could never articulate them as persuasively as you just have. Why don't you address him directly?

MARY

You still haven't answered my question about why you wanted to meet me.

PAINÉ

You breathed life back into me. When I read your counterattack on Burke, I couldn't stand by and leave you the lone target on the barricades.

MARY

I see. And now that you're in their gunshots as well, you wanted to thank me in person?

PAINÉ

For setting me on fire again, yes, I thank you. Lafayette invited me to come to Paris and accept a seat on the new National Assembly. My imminent departure compelled me to have Johnson arrange our meeting tonight.

MARY

I don't know what to say.

PAINÉ

Say that you'll come to France with me to . . . to .. to help liberate all the women and girls there. And say that we'll first wash that rouge off of your face.

Paine beckons to Fanny to bring back the wash bowl and he gently washes the streaked make-up off of Mary's face.

And say that you'll get out of that absurd Greek goddess costume. Cate, will you help her?

Cate and Mary exit. Paine walks over to examine the pages hanging to dry from the wire.

PAINÉ

These pages are beautiful.*(reading)* "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell."
That's a little disturbing. What are these?

WILL

Our contribution to the revolution. This book will redeem the world.

PAINÉ

I've never seen anything like this. What is your method?

WILL

I chose corrosive acids which above on earth carry severe warnings but in hell are salutary and medicinal. They melt apparent surfaces away and display the infinite hid beneath them.

PAINÉ

Oh, I see. I don't want to sound like an old printer, but by engraving the body copy rather than using type you make it rather difficult to read.

WILL

Leave out that single line there and you leave out life itself. Chaos just spills back in.

PAINÉ

I see. Chaos you say. And by hand colouring each page you must severely limit the number of copies. How many can you produce like this?

WILL

Over a hundred a year depending on our health and all.

PAINÉ

I don't want to dampen your spirit, Will, but we printed a 100,000 copies of "Common-Sense" in the first three months alone and still reached only half of the northern colonies before the war's end. By my calculations it will take you a thousand years to reach that number. And if your ambition is . . .

WILL

Let me ask you a question.

PAINÉ

Ask me anything.

WILL

How many people were there in the Roman Empire . . . at its height, let's say?

PAINÉ

I don't know, surely many millions.

WILL

And how important would you say Jerusalem was to that empire?

PAINÉ

A flea to a lion maybe

WILL

And how dangerous to the powers that ruled that insignificant Jerusalem was a village carpenter armed only with the sound of his voice?

PAINÉ

Will, I'm a plain man. Just say what it is.

WILL

That our one hundred illuminated copies have a hundred times better chance of success than Christ's words blown about by the wind.

PAINÉ

You also have another problem.

WILL

What's that?

PAINÉ

In all of human history, there has been just one real Christian and the religions killed him.

WILL

I guess now, it's my turn.

PAINE

To be killed or be him?

WILL

I also know one more thing than you do.

PAINE

(a little exasperated)

And what is that?

WILL

Robert told me last night that two hundred years from now I will be read more than anyone else in my generation. I guess that includes you too, Mister Paine.

Mary enters dressed very similarly to Paine in men's clothing. She has her hair tied back with a ribbon similar to his.

PAINE

What have we here?

MARY

(speaking Shakespeare)

I have lately shipwrecked on your shores, my lord. My name's Cesario. I'm at your service.

PAINE

What a marvelous transformation.

(whispering)

By the way, Cate, who's Robert?

CATE

Will's dead brother. You're both wearing his clothes.

WILL

Our short "live – ed" butterfly has become a more durable creature. And more your twin, Thomas, than someone at your service.

PAINÉ

Mary, Will has given me an idea. We could gain safe passage from London to Paris disguised in our present costumes as brothers.

There is fairly loud arguing between Johnson and Fuseli as they return to the Blakes. Mary's name is used a number of times.

ACT II

Scene 4

WILL

Here comes your first test.

Fuseli tries the door. It is bolted.

HENRY

Let us in for Christsake before we drown!

CATE

Fanny, Let them in.

HENRY

What took you so long? We're drenched. Oh, I see you were entertaining company. Joseph, I thought you said there'd be one mystery guest not two.

JOSEPH

(slightly irritated)

Apparently my "guest" decided to bring a friend. Henry, I'd like to introduce you to Citizen Thomas Paine.

HENRY

Shiste, Joseph, have you lost your mind? My life will be ruined in a matter of minutes. They'll hang us all! I'm . . .I'mmm.

JOSEPH

Stay calm, my old grasshopper. We're safe enough here in Lambeth.

HENRY

The duke boasted that his spies know Paine is coming back to London. The Attorney General has already issued the arrest warrant. Don't you see my life

is in extreme danger? They'll hang us all.

PAINE

You “must” be that famous painter – Henry Fuseli. Joseph has told me how much he admires your work.

HENRY

(won over instantly)

He did?

JOSEPH

I . . . I . . . Yes, I did.

HENRY

My apologies, Monsieur Paine, for any discourtesy. I rather lost my bearings this evening bouncing between worlds. I do envy your factional enclaves.

JOSEPH

Ma Chere. You can always come back to us.

HENRY

You are such a firebrand, Paine, that I expected you'd be much younger. More like your companion.

PAINE

War exacts its tolls.

HENRY

(referring to Mary)

And why is no one introducing me to this gorgeous fellow?

PAINE

His name is Cesario.

HENRY

Ce – sa – ri – o. Oh, we Swiss love the Italian. Their saltiness pairs so well with our chocolate.

WILL

And I believe you have met him before.

HENRY

I cannot believe that is so. I would have never forgotten such a handsome face and figure. I must paint you.

MARY

Signore, you maka me blush.

HENRY

You are blushing. Have we indeed met before?

MARY

Ina the temple, ina the town, ina the fields you have done me mischief.

HENRY

I love riddles. “In the temple”? Are you Jewish then? That I would remember. “In the fields”?

Henry bends Mary's head down to see if the top of her head looks familiar.

That's it. We met in the park Sunday last.

JOSEPH

Henry, do you really not recognize the hyena in petticoats who plagued you so these many months and not even an hour ago?

Mary undoes the ribbon that held her hair back to shake it out in Fuseli's face and laughs.

MARY

Voila, he is she!

HENRY

Mary! Did you all conspire to concoct this rude trick on me?

JOSEPH

Oh yes, Henry, everything that has happened this evening was about making a fool out of you. Paine came all the way from Manchester risking imprisonment for the performance.

HENRY

(musing)

Tonight makes me think that it was very similar – but not as embarrassing – to what Mrs. Jordan did when she first met the Duke.

JOSEPH

Sit down everybody. I believe Henry has gotten his second wind and there'll be no stopping him. Mary, did you see where they put that bag that I brought with me?

MARY

Cate put it by the fireplace.

HENRY

When the Duke and his masked Hippolyta were announced earlier in this evening, Lady Facile practically ripped the sleeve from my blouse dragging me into a corner. Her face was inflating and reddening so like a balloon I thought her head would burst.

JOSEPH

Henry, more matter, with less art.

HENRY

Madam, I swear I use no art at all. All right. The gist was that Lady Facile told me that Hippolyta was none other than that piece of Irish baggage from Covent Gardens – the notorious Mrs. (and I use that term very casually), Jordan or Mrs. Ford or whatever name she is using now.

Lady Facile also filled me in on the strumpet trick that Mrs. Jordan used a few weeks earlier to ensnare the Duke. She claims she was an eye witness to the escapade. I know Joseph isn't interested, but does anyone else want to hear the delicious details?

CATE

I do.

FANNY

Me too.

MARY

Mrs. Jordan fascinates me.

HENRY

Anyone else? No? Yes? It is settled then.

Courtesy doth truly demand
That a lady's wish is a gentleman's command.

JOSEPH

Mary, what do you think? Moliere?

MARY

Definitely Moliere.

HENRY

The story from the mouth of the horse is that Lady Bumfrey approached Mrs. Jordan after a performance of “She Would and She Would Not” with an invitation to one of her grand teas. The inciting news, that she shared with her, was that the Duke of Clarence, himself, had requested it. This was, of course, de rigeur and a familiar occupation for her ladyship.

PAINE

You mean to say she's the duke's panderer.

HENRY

Crudely put but accurate. Well then I am just getting to the delicious part. That was Mrs. Jordan's counter-proposal. And guess what that was?

JOSEPH

Just get on with it.

HENRY

You really are such a Puritan. You never appreciated my flourishes. Well then here it is. Mrs. Jordan wanted to attend the tea in the livery of an under-butler and while serving the Duke whisper to him that he – Mrs. Jordan that is – had a sister working below stairs who was so enamoured with the Duke's person, that she longed to give herself to him right there and then. In brief the inflamed Duke was told to sneak off in a half hour equipped with the location and a key to the room.

Oh, and one more detail, the butler told the Duke that his sister was shy, being a virgin, and required to wear a veil throughout their engagement. Rutting nature took its course, and within an hour the Duke returned a bit disheveled but smiling like the cat who swallowed the furry mouse as Lady Facile so poetically described him.

FANNY

Then wot happened?

HENRY

Mrs. Jordan made her formal entrance in a dress only suitable for a milk maid as Lady Facile put it. And I must add refused his advances toward her until after he moved her into Bushy House to live with him. Nice name that.

MARY

And the Duke has never been made the wiser, has he by you chattering geese? But what you call her strumpet's trick reveals her true genius.

HENRY

How so?

MARY

Regard everything that she learned in that one hour. First that his expressed passion for her was a complete fraud. From that point to this, you can be sure that every vow that he has made to her she has written on the rushing waves. She also learned his carnal vulnerabilities. Lazy intrigue with a sauce of naughtiness engaged safely within the walls of Lady Bumfrey's estate.

Once satiated he gravitated back to being the king's own sailor boy. By those markings our savvy little Viola will be able to steer him wherever she wants to go.

HENRY

You women are cunningly lingual foxes. You are like iced cream in the mouth.

MARY

Wary hares, rather.

HENRY

This is fun. What else do you think this stratagem of hers discovered?

MARY

I can only surmise. But because she is still with him, I believe that he passed her self-administered gag test. Consider how dangerous it would have been for her to register any amount of disgust on an unveiled face. That's a bit of honesty that she would never have recovered from. This way she could

explore every crevasse of the man without any risk.

HENRY

Other than the pox.

MARY

Do you really believe that someone as careful to costume herself down to the last brass button of Lady Bumfrey's livery and pass herself off as a virgin would be naked to that eventuality? Henry, are you really such a child?

JOSEPH

You've characterized the man entirely.

HENRY

Then she reappears as Little Bo Peep and has been royally rogering him ever since. So, Mary, this dressing like a man trick was what you tried to play with me.

MARY

Was she allowed to bring her children with her?

HENRY

Where?

MARY

To live with the Duke at Bushy House.

HENRY

Of course not. That indeed would have made it la scandale intolerable.

MARY

She and her fellow actresses may be the only free women in England. I especially marvel at how cleverly she has managed to retain this freedom while increasing her worth.

HENRY

(clearly irritated)

You have more to add?

MARY

Consider it more deeply. By maneuvering into such an inappropriate match, she has completely insulated herself from the slavery of marriage. The prince can never marry her and no man would dare become the prince's rival. When her life with the prince becomes intolerable, and it surely will, she can pack her valise and slam the door.

And by deserting the prince she will enhance both her value and perceived morality. That is the exact opposite of a wife's leave taking. Mrs. Jordan's almost thousand pounds a year from the stage already exceeded that of most landed squires. It's certainly many times superior to your own, Mein Herr Fuseli.

JOSEPH

She certainly is not safe from the savagery of the gazettes and the lancing of Gilray's cartoons.

MARY

And every time her name appears on paper hundreds more playgoers flock to her plays to bear witness to her disgrace and sneak a peek into the prince's harem.

JOSEPH

The Critical Review needs to critique more plays. Will you do that for me, Mary?

MARY

Wholeheartedly.

HENRY

Is she really paid a thousand pounds a year for wearing trousers on stage?

MARY

It isn't just about the trousers. As Viola, Hippolyta or Rosalind, her real danger to men is that she unleashes women's imaginations

JOSEPH

Come to think of it, I do believe that nearly all revolutions begin on a stage. Beaumarchais' Figaro being an excellent example. Apropos Beaumarchais I forgot to tell you, Thomas, Godwin sends his apologies for missing our meeting. He had a prior engagement escorting Mrs. Jordan's fellow actress, Mrs. Inchbald, to the theatre to solicit her monetary investment in a new production of Holcroft's translation. If they succeed, however, it will probably land the whole company in a jail cell right next to ours.

MARY

Godwin is so tedious. I'm certain she will give him the money just to stop his talking.

PAINÉ

I can add some support to your argument, Joseph. Washington had us read aloud to the troops Addison's "Cato" the evening before the attack on the Hessians at Trenton. I read Juba. It did wonders to rouse the men's spirits. I think it also helped put them to sleep.

MARY

Before we bore ourselves to sleep. Father Christmas, what did you bring us in your sack?

Johnson drags out the sack from near the fireplace.

JOSEPH

Let's see here. For Will I have freshly printed, with your new engravings, Mary's "Original Stories from Real Life for Children; with *(takes an exaggerated deep breath)* Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness." Will, when people pick this up they immediately thumb to your engravings and buy it. Inside is a token of my personal appreciation for your delightful images.

There is a 20 pound bank note in the book which Cate quickly pockets.

CATE

You are too generous. We thank you for all of your benevolences to us.

JOSEPH

Now, Mary, don't pout. For you this envelope is stuffed with pound notes. I can't keep your second edition of the Vindication on the shelves. And most curious to me is that nearly all of them are being bought by women. I never dreamed that there'd be a women's market for political philosophy.

WILL

Maybe it helped that you put Mary's name on the cover this time.

PAINE

For Mary's next book, how does a "Vindication of the Rights of **Woman** in considered refutation of Tallyrand, late Bishop of Autun, by the noted author Mary Wollstonecraft" sound as a title, Joseph?

JOSEPH

Like Inca gold.

HENRY

(a few seconds of petulant silence)

What do you have for me?

JOSEPH

Nothing can come of nothing, my ancient friend. . . But I can imagine a commission for a series of illustrations . . . How like you “Paradise Lost”?

HENRY

I could be intrigued by such a proposition.

MARY

I rather doubt he will produce an Eve to my liking.

JOSEPH

And finally. Mr. Paine, I have been carrying all evening a bank cheque in the amount of one thousand guineas.

PAINE

What's this for?

JOSEPH

It is a benefactor's advance to encourage you to write the second volume of your Rights of Man.

A gun butt pounds on the door.

SPY

Open up in the name of the Crown.

MARY

I'll get it.

The Spy carrying a pistol and shackles enters pushing past Mary.

SPY

Out of my way, boy. I have a warrant here for the arrest of one Tom Paine.

JOSEPH

(stepping forward.)

. . . I stand by the name Thomas Paine.

SPY

You do, do ya? I didn't know you was so old a man. I arrest you, Thomas Paine, in the name of the crown on the charge of saying “sellicious” comments about the king. I meant “seditious tarnishments” upon the king's crown. Put these shackles on yourself.

HENRY

No need for that. He'll go peaceably.

SPY

And who, Lord Pantalones, do you be?

HENRY

A close friend.

SPY

A fellow conspiratant you mean. We got room in the cell for the both of you.

HENRY

Come along now, Mr. Paine, all shall be well. I will go with thee.

JOSEPH

(in a stage whisper)

Just love me, Fuseli.

HENRY

And with a kiss we marchon together.

Henry openly kisses Joseph on the mouth.

SPY

So Paine's a poofter too.

The three men exit through the front door.

PAINÉ

That is my cue to exit stage left. Will and Cate, thank you for the kind-ness and to my most loyal subject, Fanny, I dub thee Citizen Flute, a peer of the realm.

FANNY

You swept me over the moon, me lord.

PAINÉ

Will, here's the cheque that Father Christmas gave me so that you can bail him out of jail. Mary, follow me to Paris as soon as you can. It's out the window and over the garden wall for me.

Paine exits through the window.

MARY

Will, I don't know what I should do?

WILL

Mary, you've always known what you need to know.

MARY

I want . . . I want. It really is that simple. I just want to be able to want. And that's more likely to happen in France or Canada, or Australia even, than England in my lifetime.

Blake gets up off his chair and stops her. Puts his red wool French revolution cap on her head and kisses her on both cheeks in the French manner.

So it's out the window I go, too.

Mary heads toward the window hesitates for a few seconds and then jumps out.

BLACKOUT

Annie Lennox's and Aretha Franklin's "Sisters are Doin it for Themselves" should play through the curtain calls. [NOTE: Would need to obtain proper permission.]

<https://vimeo.com/user8588759/review/166990555/c643723de4> .

END of PLAY



Sketches of Thomas Paine, Blake's self- portrait and possibly a profile of Fuseli and figure study of Wollstonecraft from William Blake's actual 1790's Notebook:

The Question Answered
 What is it men ^{or} women do require
 The breame^{nt} of qualified desire
 What is it women do ^{or} men require
 The lament of qualified desire

Because I was happy upon the heath
 And smelt among the swaley ~~and~~ ^{and} snow
 They clothed me in the clothes of death
 And taught me to sing the notes of woe
 And because I am happy & dance a song
 They think they have done me no injury
 And are gone to praise god & his saint
 And ~~are~~ ^{are} gone to praise god & his saint
 Who make up a heaven of our misery
 Come hither my boy tell me what thou hast seen
 A fool laughs in a religious snare

The ~~con~~ ^{king} council of gods of a merry heart
 The rubies & pearls of a loving eye
 The idle ~~indulgent~~ ^{indulgent} ~~eyes~~ ^{eyes} can long to the maist
 Nor the ~~secret~~ ^{secret} board up in his treasury

An answer to the parron
 Why of the sheep do you not learn peace
 Because I don't want you to hear my fleece
 These are beauties sweeter than sheep

Holy Thursday
 So thin a holy thorn to see
 In a rich & fruitful land
 Babes ridid to misery
 Fed with cold & usurous hand
 Is that trembling cry, a song
 Can it be a day of joy
 And so quat a number poor
 In a land of plenty

I dreamt a dream that can it mean
 And that I was a mouldy green
 Guarded by one myl med
 Whilts we was near beyond
 And I wight both night & day
 And he wipid my tears away
 And I wight both day & night
 And hid from him my deerside light
 So he took his wings & fled
 Then the moon bloud rosey red
 I dried my tears & smit my fears
 With ten thousand smiles & spears
 Soon my angel came again
 And I was armed he came in rain
 And the time of youth was fled
 And grey hairs were on my head

The look of love alarmy
 Because tis filld with fear
 But the look of soft deceit
 Shall win the women here
 Soft deceit is idleness
 These are beauties sweeter than sheep

and their sun has never shone
 And their feet are black & bare
 And their ways are filld with thorns
 For eternal wonder there
 That whenever the sun does shone
 And whenever the rain does fall
 Light can never hunger there
 Nor poverty the men appall

Draft of The Chimney Sweeper from Blake's 1790's Notebook