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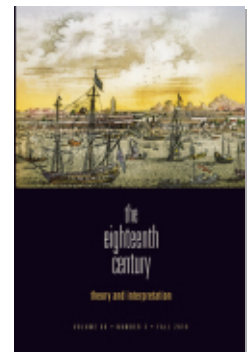
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Indulging myself in the freedom of epistolary intercourse, I beg leave to throw out my thoughts, and express my feelings, just as they arise in my mind, with very little attention to formal method.

—Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)¹

What does it mean to evoke a genre whose “freedom” eschews restraint, in a text which declaims heatedly against heterogeneity and disorder, and which equates spontaneity with chaos? What freedoms does writing need to seize in order to judge, discriminate, and declaim? What role do the laws or conventions of genre, whether overthrown or enacted, perform in such tasks, and how might genre itself be reworked in the process? This invocation in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) of the epistolary as the possibility of transcending “formal method” is perhaps the text's only consideration of its form, despite its many extraordinary stylistic and discursive maneuvers. But if, as Paul Hamilton asserts, Burke “was nothing if not a rhetorical strategist,” what strategy might lie beneath its deliberate evocation of a genre beyond generic restraint?² This paper argues that part of the rhetorical strategy of the *Reflections* was to deploy genre in order to serve the text's most occluded purpose: the mediation of what Burke saw as the truths and laws of late eighteenth-century political economy.

To insist on the importance of attending to genre in *Reflections* might appear to present an especially challenging task, for the generic references and engagements made in Burke's text are many and various. Even in its identification with the letter form, *Reflections* aligns itself with a genre already marked by variety, looseness, and openness, of which numerous subgenres (letters

public, private, familial, political, historical, and so on) circulated.³ But *Reflections* also exceeds that already open and various genre: most notably in its length, and in its lack of a signature, but also in its resistance to the dialogic exchange which is the letter's usual context: Burke's is a text which seeks to close down, not perpetuate, differences of viewpoint and voice.⁴ It has some generic affinity with the political pamphlet, but again its length exceeds that usual to this form, and its references—to theater, poetry, romance, aesthetics, history, laws and sermons; to the classics, and to theories of human nature and society—extend its concerns well beyond politics. Critics have not only attended to the text as a public political letter or a familiar one, but have also studied it in relation to theatricality, tragedy, the sentimental Gothic romance, epic, Swiftian satire, and classical rhetoric, a list which further attests to its multiple generic references.⁵ Such a list implies a formal looseness to which Burke privately admitted.⁶ Equally, while the full title of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (1790), one of the first critical engagements with Burke, suggests that she follows his use of the letter form, her text also exceeds its notional genre. Both texts are more open and heterogeneous than the essay, the modern form in which relative formlessness is recognized as a genre. Again, while both *Reflections* and the *Vindication* lack a self-conscious sense of themselves as artifacts or organic unities in a developed literary sense, both deploy a good number of literary and rhetorical devices, together with writing that ranges from historical, political, and religious concerns, to invective and reverie. Burke rewrites recent historical events as fiction or theater; Wollstonecraft exposes the contradictions of his text like an exasperated literary critic, inviting generic comparison to a commentary.⁷

Eighteenth-century genre theory offers some resources for understanding *Reflections* and the *Vindication*, in its accommodation of mixed genres, and (an instance of this), in its notion of the digressive essay.⁸ Ralph Cohen has observed that digressive forms mark "historical discontinuity," "harmony or disharmony," the "factionalism of society, and the dangers of this division," and he links mixed forms to "defences of general principles of human nature by indicating the kinds of variations within any form."⁹ This paper seeks to push further at the implications of these remarks for these two texts, to argue that, in each case, their loose, polemical form might appear to disrupt the settled generic order of eighteenth-century writing, to break new political or epistemological territory whose disciplinary shape has yet to be revealed, or which will emerge through the process of their mutual interrogation. Even if genres are frequently or always mixed, the "ensemble of formal features"—which marks out a genre as such¹⁰—appears peculiarly scrambled in both Burke and Wollstonecraft's texts, as though their writing is somehow in transition between or beyond established genres, deploying them in new ways to map out some object, of knowledge or history, whose outlines are not yet fully

realized. Their seeming genrelessness might thus be understood as characterizing the moment (or the epistemological field) immediately prior to the emergence of specialized modern disciplines at the end of the eighteenth century.

This paper argues that the new object of knowledge determining the generic fluidity of these texts is political economy; it focuses on Burke's *Reflections*, with some comparisons with Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, in order to make and explore such a claim. Burke's engagement with political economy in the *Reflections*, although veiled, has been recognized by critics, most prominently by J. G. A. Pocock; Wollstonecraft's preoccupation with commercial society is increasingly being noted.¹¹ But although Burke's text has been thoroughly investigated by modern literary and historical scholarship, the formal and generic implications of its occluded concern with political economy has received little attention.¹² Burke's broaching of economic concerns is delayed to the final stages of the text, but how might what precedes it be understood as mediating concerns which only become overt at that late stage? How might that later discussion determine, or disturb, the generic identity of the text as a whole? Such questions about the relationship of Burke's text, and its genre or genres, to the emergent discourse of late eighteenth-century political economy are more easily broached in the wake of Mary Poovey's study of the role of genre in mediating and establishing modern commercial society, *The Genres of the Credit Economy*. Following Poovey, we might ask how genre mediates Burke's discussion of political economy in a text which had as its own masked intention the shoring up of the political and economic settlements of late eighteenth-century Britain. Comparison with Wollstonecraft reveals that genre itself became a battleground on which arguments over the new political economy, and the establishment of commercial capitalism, were fought.

Burke's attitude toward political economy across his political career is complex, but within the *Reflections*, it is focused by what emerges as, for Burke, the central event defining the revolution in France. As Pocock reminds us, this is not the subject of the *Reflections*' stylistic showpiece (the attack on Marie Antoinette at Versailles), but an economic event: the establishment of a newly unshackled operation of credit, through the circulation of a paper currency, the *assignats*, whose value was founded not on land, nor other present assets, but on the *future* value of church and monastic land and property seized by the French state. These aspects of a *financial* revolution in France open a fault line in Burke, who, Pocock argues, defended the commercial society established by the Whigs in the early eighteenth century, but nursed concerns regarding commerce's dependence on credit and its potentially dangerous consequences.¹³ Such a fault line produces a text able, famously, to denigrate an "age" of "sophisters, oeconomists and calculators" while elsewhere praising the "science of speculative and practical finance" as highly esteemed by "the wisest and best men."¹⁴ One of the many proliferating ironies exposed by

the French Revolution, and with which Burke grapples in this deeply conflicted text, is that a defining aspect of the modern commercial state, its dependence on credit—now foregrounded in France but also long present in Britain—is one which is both, according to David Hume and others, central to social and political cohesion but also, by the same token, carries the potential for pervasive economic, social, and political disintegration.¹⁵

Burke's commitment to commercial society is effectively disguised in *Reflections* by the prevalence of pejorative market rhetoric, used early in the text to attack both revolutionary sympathizers in Britain (the Corresponding Society, whose letters to France are like "counterfeit wares" sent to market) and the French National Assembly (who have misspent their stock); in conjunction with the invocation of the manners of the chivalric age (understood by Burke, if not by Scottish conjectural historians, to have *preceded* the age of modern commercial society) and the general Gothicism of his style, Burke's support for commercial society recedes from view.¹⁶ Following Pocock, such apparent contradictions in *Reflections* might be reconciled by sketching for Burke a precise politico-economic position: pro-commerce and accepting of credit, but only when credit has a stabilizing link to property, and to men of property as in the original Whig settlement—a link crucially undone in France. The question remains, however, of why, if this *is* Burke's position, and given that the supposedly necessary relationship between credit and land is already well established in the writings of Hume and others decades earlier, it has to be excavated with some effort from the layers of obfuscation and rhetorical "drapery" which occupies Burke's text. What does such "burial" of his economic beliefs and concerns say about Burke's relation to political economy and about the genre of his writing about it? What does it mean for political economy, and for Burke's attempts to shore up British opinion regarding its own economic settlements, that his engagement with economic issues in this text is so hedged, shrouded, and delayed? Why are Burke's negotiations of economic topics mediated by writing which is clearly extrinsic to political economy itself? And how do the genre choices he makes, the generic associations he invites and plays with, modify or stage political economy?

To answer such questions, this paper reads *Reflections*, with some reference to Wollstonecraft's response to it, to reveal how genre is involved in the struggle over political economy—its mediation and resistance; it argues that the fate of political economy in a revolutionary age would be decided in part by generic maneuvering. Burke's and Wollstonecraft's texts both pose the question of the relation of political economy to other genres and ask what genres will be used for the reception, dissemination, and narrativization of political economy; both ask how "technical" knowledge associated with political economy will be assimilated to other narratives or genres and their accounts of human experience, society, labor, and happiness. In Burke, this question of relation manifests as a problem in the formal organization of his text, where

explicit economic concerns are relegated to the end, overwriting a pejorative language of commerce dominant earlier. This split in his text arguably corresponds to the historical or interpretative question of Burke's own divided relation to commercial society. To consider the generic engagements of these texts thus reveals how, in them, the writing not just of revolution, but of political economy and its possible futures, was at stake.

CONTEXTS: GENRE, POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND VALUE

Genre theorists have long recognized the connection between literary form and political and historical change. Genres have been defined as "open systems" which "arise, change, and decline for historical reasons," emerging to fulfill a social purpose in a community, to mark out different kinds of speech from each other, and to "complement, augment [and] interrelate [with]" other genres.¹⁷ As a "social construct" which "regularizes communication, interaction, and relations," genre inflects and constructs social order and function; it also illuminates and articulates larger historical upheavals and reorganizations, including in knowledge, disciplines, labor, and writing itself.¹⁸ Genre's importance, as well as radical instability, at the time Burke and Wollstonecraft were writing, is thus clear: at a time when the gradual formation of disciplinary and therefore generic identities was beginning to shape the proliferation of all kinds of writing throughout the eighteenth century, changes in genres were profoundly linked to the reorganization of knowledge, society, and writing itself. Cohen's insight that generic identity depends not only on authorial intention, but also on how texts are read by their readers, means that genre emerges as a potential site of conflict, in which alternative readings of, for instance, revolution or commerce, might be fought out. Generic analysis, therefore, doesn't only provide us, as Clifford Siskin says, "with a way of understanding and articulating how behaving in writing connects to other sorts of social behaviors"; it also enables us to see how "behaving in writing," or even behaving in genre, might rehearse or challenge, explore or resist, larger (social, political, aesthetic, economic) beliefs, attitudes, and actions.¹⁹ From this perspective, the pressure under which genre is put in *Reflections* speaks to the difficulty of Burke's attempt to regularize social and economic relations. It also suggests that Wollstonecraft's explicit and conscious countering of those attempts in Burke will involve a necessary engagement with his genre choice.

The history of eighteenth-century political economic discourse itself illustrates how genre tracks historical, social, and disciplinary transformation. The emergence of political economy in the second half of the eighteenth century was part of an ongoing process of discursive separation which, at the century's end, resulted in the formation of discrete disciplinary identities and specialisms, including of political economy itself. The example of political economy

reveals that disciplinary cohesion is arrived at via, and brings with it, numerous generic allegiances. Stemming from philosophical writing as a branch of moral philosophy, it mixes historical with empirical, even experimental writing; deeply informed by natural philosophy, its exemplary text, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), has been described both as a "prose georgic," deeply invested in a particular narrative of labor and as a text where abstraction provides the stylistic "key."²⁰ At the same time, political economy's status as "experimental" knowledge, combining empirical data and general statements, has been shown to be shared with the quite different genres of lyric and essay.²¹ As Poovey has shown, the emergence of political economy as a distinct form of knowledge, in a particular generic form (while itself still generically mixed), entails a reorganization of the relations between itself and a range of other concerns, including the financial, the ethical, and the aesthetic; political economy incorporated, but also separated itself from, contemporary sociology, psychology, and history.²² Its emergence involved choices about form: concerning, for instance, the use of abstraction or systematization; the use of a writing persona; the location and deployment of data or evidence; and the ways arguments are constructed from and around them. Political economy thus emerged through a negotiation of its disciplinary and discursive relations to, and differences from, other practices of knowledge and form.

At the same time, as a relatively new object of knowledge, the status of political economy was still being established at the time Burke and Wollstonecraft were writing: it was both cited in parliamentary debate and attacked in the radical press. The term "political economy" could be understood to name an "emerging science of 'the wealth of nations,'" or of revenue administration, or more broadly the establishment of "the moral, political, cultural, and economic conditions of life in advancing commercial societies."²³ Debates over the direction, authority, and principles of a fledgling political economy took place within and as part of the French Revolution controversy of the early 1790s—the context of both Burke's and Wollstonecraft's texts, whose debates were themselves characterized by generic diversity.²⁴ Burke's and Wollstonecraft's texts participated in this process of contesting the nature and writing of political economy: given that engagement with political economy was not (yet) regarded as the sole concern of technical specialists; given that their exchange is initiated by Burke's deep anxiety about what he presents as a revolution in political economy, an expanded system of credit; given too that happiness, an explicit object of political economy, is a concern of both. Their negotiation, it is worth repeating, takes textual and generic form, and their differences are in part over what the form, narrative, or genre of political economy is going to be, as well as its relation to history, the aesthetic, and so forth.

The emergence of political economy in the last decades of the eighteenth century coincided with a larger crisis in the concept of value. According to James Thompson, political economy's formation itself "constitutes a gradual

working through of this crisis”: its ability to “describe the movement of capital, and . . . the very process of capitalism” enables a “gradual consensus over the nature of value” to emerge.²⁵ For Thompson, the “theorisation of nominal value” and the “transition from real to nominal value in semiology and economics” constituted the “cultural work of this period.”²⁶ As Thompson’s vocabulary makes clear—“describe,” “cultural work”—this establishment of political economy’s narrative of value occurred through writing and thus genre: writing’s means of measuring, assigning, or implying value. But if the establishment of a new narrative of value would involve generic mediation, it might equally entail generic contest.

Struggles over the concept of value, which involved mobilizing notions of aesthetic or literary value against market value, continued well into the mid-nineteenth century.²⁷ According to John Guillory, this split between economic and aesthetic accounts of value was itself the consequence of eighteenth-century moral philosophy’s bifurcation into political economy and aesthetics. In Guillory’s account of this split, political economy becomes a “discourse of exchange value” because of its inability to found value on the usefulness of an object or an individual’s desire for it: instead, the nexus of consumption, desire, pleasure, and beauty (in which value is articulated via a response from, or in relation to, the individual subject) is taken up by aesthetics.²⁸ Thus, in solving the problem of value and in establishing, in exchange value, a means of determining value through the mechanisms of the market, political economy exiles or alienates questions of subjective need or desire; however, it maintains the pretense, or ideology, that subjective need and desire is precisely what it serves. In Guillory’s words, the discursive separation of political economy and aesthetics marks political economy’s inability to “solve the problem of the relation between the individual subject and market society.”²⁹ This “problem” might be formulated as, or marked by, a generic failure, a failure to find a form capable of successfully expressing that relation: from this perspective, political economy looks less like georgic, for instance, the genre which celebrates the individual’s relation to society through labor, and more like tragedy: the genre of the malfunctioning of the same relationship.³⁰ Indeed, one of Smith’s own accounts of the life of an individual in market society reads precisely as a tragedy of delusion.³¹

In 1790, Burke and Wollstonecraft are writing prior to the mobilization of aesthetic value against market or exchange value described in these accounts: rather, their texts coincide with the complex decoupling of political economy and aesthetics, and the generic hybridity and unfixity of their writing makes sense in such a context. The generic looseness of both texts can thus be read both as a sign of the reorganization of knowledge consequent on the rise of political economy and as the means by which that reorganization (whether as testing or contesting, as securing or challenging) took place. Value’s relationship to genre means that the “crisis” or “struggle” over value at this time was

also a struggle over and within genre: a struggle over the kinds of genres whose accounts of value were admissible, over the relations of genres with each other, over their mutual areas of expertise and hierarchical relations. Given that generic affiliations are not passive, but active choices made by writers, Burke's *Reflections* and Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* can be read as actively engaged in mediating or contesting emergent political economy precisely through their genre choices. Each text speaks to this situation in differing ways. The generic mix of Burke's *Reflections* suggests a desire—shared with political economy itself, as part of its inheritance from moral philosophy—to maintain a fiction of the beauty of the social order through a sensationalist and aesthetic terminology and style which is at odds with the turn to political economy in its final stages. Its desire to secure an account of the individual's relation to society is evident too in elaborate images founded on, variously, the family ("the little platoon"), the body ("relation in blood"), and property or law (the "mortmain").³² As we shall see, the precariousness of such fictions is hinted in a rare moment when the drapery of *Reflections* is lifted to reveal the misery of labor: the "violence of production" whose "conflict" is otherwise "relegated from civil society."³³ The generic strategy of Wollstonecraft's text, meanwhile, involves an attack on the gentlemanly persona which sustains Burke's, a critique of political economy via an exposure of its failed utilitarian ideology and a turn to the pastoral not as empty utopianism but as an evocation of a generic alternative to the tragedy of political economy.

BURKE AND THE CRISIS IN VALUE

Burke's *Reflections*, which attempts to remedy what it understands as a revolution in value—where "splendour" has been given to "obscurity, and distinction to undiscerned merit"; where there is a "strange chaos of levity and ferocity"³⁴—readily lends itself to being read via the crisis in the concept of value described by Thompson. As we shall see, it attempts to address that crisis in part by asserting the authority of Burke's authorial persona, and thus wielding a formal tool against a "chaos" which extends to form itself. However, the text's attempts to intervene in the crisis of value is rendered all the more complex by the contamination of its formal means with the very anxieties about value which it hopes to resolve. As suggested above, the particular crisis in value which *Reflections* addresses pertains to credit: the establishment of the political economy of France on a credit system whose paper currency, the *assignats*, depends on property assets yet to be realized. Yet the crisis which Burke's text inhabits, articulates, and recirculates seems far larger than this particular political economic fact. Burke's fears over the unleashing of credit, insofar as they are articulated, intersect with another set of anxieties, not about economic value, but literary or representational value: about how writing and

communication alters or misrepresents value, and therefore about the circulation of opinion in all forms of paper, writing, and communication. These two sets of anxieties are interlinked further by a shared vocabulary: for Burke, “security” is founded both on economic assets and in opinion; “credit” circulates in an economic system, but is also given to persons, beliefs, paper, and writing; and “interest” performs the same interdiscursive crossing.³⁵ Given the seemingly unavoidable promiscuity of the words which are Burke’s own tokens of value, it becomes possible to read *Reflections* so that the anxieties which he wants to address in relation to value, paper, credit, and security in the economic sphere speak too to the operation of value in the sphere of public opinion, with his own “letter” as the paradigmatic instance of it. Thus, a repeated horror of a “boundless paper circulation” which remains unfounded in any final ground of value speaks too of Burke’s anxieties about print culture, pamphlets, and public opinion—a culture within which political economy must establish and secure itself, not least through works such as his own.³⁶

The essential contradiction running through Burke’s text is thus his desire to use writing to secure value (of both kinds: security of a credit economy through the “security” of opinion) when writing is a medium, not an endpoint: it is a mode of circulation by which value is established, rather than a means of fixing it. Whereas property, in Burke’s view, offers a concrete form to counter the potential fluidity of credit and value, value in writing (especially, perhaps, in a form such as that ostensibly used by Burke, the occasional letter) is potentially transient, subjective, and contestable. Burke’s forceful expression of his character in writing may be read as an attempt to solve this problem by securing for his opinion-in-writing a more permanent form, but in doing so, the form in which that character is embodied and with which it is identified—the letter—becomes emptied of significant generic function or meaning. The putative private letter morphs into an instrument to manipulate public opinion, and rhetorical, textual, even generic trickery emerge as Burke’s response to value-crisis. Even a brief list of the narrative manipulations present in *Reflections* would note, for instance, how an account of the origins of the French paper currency is withheld until long after a sense of its horrors are established; how its presentation as a senseless idol is divorced from any account of its economic function; how scant attention is paid to the fiscal crisis which preceded and precipitated the Revolution; and how engagement with the economic detail of the National Assembly’s actions is delayed to the very end of the text, when the emotional tone of alarm and horror is already dominant. But to make such a list is to assume that Burke is writing (logically structured, rationally ordered) economic commentary or analysis, but that is far from what his text attempts. Rather, Burke’s notional letter assumes a very different generic form, as a Gothic narrative with repeated evasions, obfuscations, draperies, mystifications, and sudden revelations of horrors; which plays strongly, even self-consciously on feeling, sensation, and affect; and where a repeatedly

invoked figure of disembodiment (“mind,” “spirit”) is in constant search for an adequate form.

Burke’s rhetoricism, his play on the personal and affective, and his elevation of the authority of the expressive individual have been read as part of what makes his text paradigmatically Romantic.³⁷ But these textual maneuvers might also be understood as, *pace* Hamilton, “rhetorical strategies” that intervene in value-crisis and whose effect is in part the reorganization of genres into new relations and hierarchies. The foregrounding of formal features associated with rhetoric and the literary (personification, abstraction, reification, a subjective speaking voice) elevates the figural in general within the generic mixture of Burke’s text, propelling them into a prominence for his reader and pushing at the limits of the letter form. But such (literary) devices have no value in themselves in *Reflections*—rather, their value is determined by their functional role in relation to Burke’s defense of political economy. To read his text for its literary art would be entirely to miss his point. By deploying literary devices in a narrative whose larger aim is to secure British political economy, Burke foregrounds one set of genres to serve another, which is rather more occluded; he seeks to solve a crisis in value by establishing a deliberate hierarchy between one set of values (literary, aesthetic, imaginative, affectual) which serve another (economic), even though, like all relations in Burke’s text, such hierarchized relations are mystified and obscure. Burke’s desire to ensure the “beauty” of the social and economic order—his deployment of aesthetic genres to gloss and drape his political economic purpose—echoes Guillory’s account of the deployment by political economy of a utilitarian ideology through which the operation of the market can be understood as an account of the “beautiful” operation of society. As we shall see, Burke’s concessions to a seemingly necessary utility later in the text jeopardize the ideological possibility of beauty and happiness in the revelation of a starkly unadorned account of political economic realities.

Viewed as a piece of writing which seeks to intervene in, and fix, the security of opinion and value, the remarkable hybridity and generic looseness of Burke’s text reveals its purpose: *Reflections* replicates, while seeking to resolve, the generic chaos which it sees in culture and politics at large. It shares the heterogeneity of the cultural hybrids, such as “political theologians” or “miscellaneous sermons,” which it deprecates; yet it is able, within a couple of pages of attacking Richard Price’s “porridge” of mixed opinions and thoughts, to excuse its own lack of form.³⁸ Such contradictions are controlled and contained by Burke’s authorial persona: whereas, beyond him, everything “seems out of nature,” in a “strange chaos” where others “quit their proper character” to meddle in world affairs, the “lack of formal method” in his own writing is justifiable as an expression of the organic functioning of the human mind.³⁹ Burke’s persona is the one constant presence in an otherwise generically and thematically confused text, and it is the point from which emanates the

sequence of abstractions—“nature,” the “human,” the “universe”—deployed in the text’s attempt to uphold order. Their inaccessibility is mediated by Burke, as the figure who evokes and articulates them. Yet the limited powers of such abstractions, and of Burke himself, as the embodiment of the power of human order, is revealed when, depicting the Corresponding Society’s communication with France as taking suspect goods to market, the market (which circulates difference indiscriminately, regardless of any value other than what it can itself find) is revealed as the supreme instance of the uncontrollable mixing, combination, and disturbing of order which Burke’s text attempts to counter. Given Burke’s position as a defender of the British market economy and of liberal trade, his position emerges as complex, even contradictory. A text which battles hybridity, mixture, and generic chaos by instituting order through the notion of the human—both particularized in Burke as the text’s speaking subject and more universally or abstractly evoked, as a mode of unified but natural variety—comes up against the market as a mechanism through which human activity comes to threaten the human itself. The irony is that Burke seeks to defend the human from a market mechanism whose indiscriminate circulation is the apotheosis of human activity itself.

CREDIT IN WRITING: PERSONA AND STYLE

Burke’s defense of political economy thus comes up against the problem of the market’s distance, as a generalized system of circulating whatever it can find value for, from human determination. Just as property should secure any system of public credit (a link fatally undone in France), the market, including expositions or defenses of its operation, for Burke equally needs to be subject to human authority. In *Reflections*, that human authority is embodied in the authorial persona of the gentleman, a synecdoche for the human, whose character and discrimination will intervene to secure value in writing against the chaotic circulation of opinion; Burke’s authorial persona is thus offered to the credit of his readers as a guarantee of order and value. As we have seen, the order (and disorder) of *Reflections* is identified as that of the author himself: *Reflections*’s gentlemanly confrontation with perceived chaos is thus carried out in a text where acknowledged formlessness is an excusable human process. Although Burke concedes that a “different plan . . . might be more favourable to a commodious division and distribution of his matter,” ultimately *Reflections*, and its generic mix, is tolerable because it reflects the occasional disorder of the human mind, a disorder which can thus become an organizing principle.⁴⁰ As we shall see, however, and despite its elevation of the human as a principle of its own (dis)arrangement, *Reflections* eventually reveals the sacrifice of human lives which underpins market society. A text in which gentlemanly character is synonymous with virtue thus also accepts the “dooming” of “so many wretches” to “innumerable servile, degrading, unseemly,

unmanly . . . occupations" in order not to disturb "the natural course of things."⁴¹ Even while, on the one hand, the human in the form of authorial character is mobilized to hold off revolutionary chaos, on the other, the human is explicitly dehumanized in the form of labor, in a sacrifice deemed necessary to maintain the "great wheel of circulation." Rather than transcending generic difference to unite and harmonize, the human will be revealed to be subject to class and genre, as that on which difference writes itself.

Burke's persistent foregrounding of the authorial persona is a significant difference with political economic texts as written by Smith and others, which seek to efface a sense of authorial persona by presenting putative facts, observations, and analyses which purport to be convincing in themselves. Where political economic writing eschews the authority of the person in favor of impersonal evidence and analysis, *Reflections* seeks to extend to Burke's account of political economy the credit which his own foregrounded persona elicits from the reader. The text's origin as a letter reinforces the importance and authority of its speaking voice, but that status is complicated by the fact that, as Burke himself admits, the text's length means that he has "far exceeded the measure of a letter."⁴² Indeed, the invocation, and then suspension, of the letter form in *Reflections* arguably works to complicate the identity and modify the authority of Burke's persona, who both is and isn't engaging in private correspondence. Critics have noted that the foregrounding of a prominent speaking subject, through whom the reader's textual consumption is mediated, is a device widely used in fiction, and the ostensible persistence of the text's form as that of a letter, even when that initial genre choice has been exceeded, involves author and reader in a kind of fiction, in which the text both is and isn't what it purports to be.⁴³ In this arrangement, the reader extends credit to Burke's persona for the sake of what he has to say, in the same way that fictional texts demand a suspension of disbelief and an extension of credit. For a critical reader like Wollstonecraft, however, this unspoken arrangement between text and reader is just the first of a series of uninterrogated historical settlements between authorities and subjects presented in Burke's text.

Wollstonecraft's sustained character attacks on Burke in her *Vindication* manifest an overt response to his authorial persona, and indeed his very person. Yet comparison of the prefatory "Advertisement" to her text with Burke's note prefacing his reveals too how differently each conceives the very act, or work, of writing itself. Strikingly, "leisure" is highlighted for both as a crucial condition for the act of writing, yet while Burke's full response to the events in France had to wait until he had "leisure to bestow" on it, Wollstonecraft's text is partially determined by her decided lack of "leisure."⁴⁴ Burke's writing is thus presented as an act of disinterested gentlemanly leisure extrinsic to the world of work; Wollstonecraft's by contrast makes the reality of the work entailed by and implicit in writing evident. One definition of professionals as

converting “knowledge of the deep self into prescriptive expertise,” as owning “the right to define and exercise their expertise,” and as regulating others in the profession even makes it possible to read Wollstonecraft’s critiques of Burke not as crude *ad hominem* attacks but as assertions of writerly professionalism.⁴⁵ Her attack on the gentlemanly behavior which was idealized as the essence of professionalism “for most of the eighteenth century” thus challenges the very culture from which Burke’s writing emanates by mobilizing an alternative conception of writing, as work, and an alternative account of the identity of the writing subject.⁴⁶ Tussles over the nature of writing, and writer, were thus part of the ground on which a larger struggle over the writing of political economy played out. As will be seen, the differing labors of the gentleman and the professional writer produced generically divergent accounts of the discipline which pertains to work itself: political economy.

If Wollstonecraft’s authorial persona illuminates writing-as-work, Burke’s authorial persona defends and mediates British political economy against the example of the French through mystification and obscurity, which even extends to style. In her study of the role of writing in mediating the credit economy, Poovey suggests that “writing that embodied, interpreted, or made . . . value comprehensible helped individuals accept deferral, slippage, substitution and obscurity . . . and abstraction.”⁴⁷ This description of the role of writing in familiarizing readers with obscure, deferred, and mysterious operations of value is suggestive for considering style in *Reflections*. Burke’s narrative about value is a Gothic tale of arcane lines of inheritance; of values (political, economic, even human) which are never fully realized or comprehended; it locates human experience within an obscure geography of the ultimately inefable. If obscurity, abstraction, and deferral of understanding, combined with extension of credit, are at the operational heart of commercial society, Burke’s rhetoric is arguably a definitive writing style of the credit economy, in its enactment of precisely such modes and in its weaving of a compelling tale through the combination of specific fact, mystification, and deferral. Here, Burke’s defense of commercial society operates even in his form, in his forging of an aesthetic and a writing style which plays with mystified value—a value which exceeds the comprehension of a single person, although it engages feelings and sentiments in obscure ways. Burke’s figures, his narrative excesses and lacunae, the swelling and bursting of his rhetorical bubbles, his playing on readerly credit: all this shows Burke deploying a writing style which echoes the operation of value in market society, producing a readerly experience which entertains the reader, but also obfuscates and mystifies her.

Reflections, then, does not simply mediate political economy in order to manage its representation and generic identity. In the operation of his style as a form of credit, through which value is both determined and deferred, the textual economy of *Reflections* replicates that of the credit economy itself. The stylistic efforts of his work, as in any rhetorical performance, are a means to

get credit from his readers, but they also interpellate his readers as subject to the kinds of narratives he outlines. While his style can be linked to the persona of the speaking subject, as a mark of his authority, education, learning—his “credit-worthiness”—the work it does extends far beyond the figure of Burke himself as the controlling persona of his writing, to be continued by his readers. Following Poovey’s suggestion that “an imaginative writer’s style was . . . the provocation of endless interpretations,”⁴⁸ we can see that Burke’s style, like credit itself, doesn’t end a determination of what value is but perpetuates it, so that his reader is caught in a chain of evaluations, conjectures, and possibilities, though crucially in ways which are suggested and defined by the terms of his text—whose length, digressiveness, breadth of subject, and sheer intellectual scale, meanwhile, threaten to baffle any attempts to master it. In this sense, Burke’s readers are caught in a textual economy their relations to which are hazy and half-realized, even while the text constitutes the arena within which readerly action must take place. Their relations to *Reflections* are like those of subjects in Burkean history—or indeed of subjects in political economy, as described in one of the rare moments in Burke’s text where the drapes of mystification are dropped and the outlines of a starker reality are glimpsed. Speaking of the relation between “acquisition,” order, and government, Burke discusses “the power of acquisition on the part of the subject” as a delimited form of liberty given to the subject as part of the maintenance of the order of the larger political whole. “The body of the people,” Burke says, “must labour to obtain what by labour can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportioned to the endeavour, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice.”⁴⁹ The striving of labor for acquisition, the inevitable and constitutive disproportions between labor and success, the holding out of consolation in the vaguely invoked, but ominous sounding, “final proportions of eternal justice”: the experience of the subject in political economy parallels that of Burke’s laboring reader, similarly caught in exhaustive efforts towards unattainable goals, who is consoled by occasional glimpses of the sketched shapes of final settlements, dimly comprehended but never fully disclosed. At a further level of “mediating” political economy then, Burke’s text, in the relations it offers between reader and meaning, reproduces the relationship of laboring subjects in political economy. Meanwhile, the work of readers as “laborers” on the text reveals that the notion of Burke’s authorial persona as his writing’s controlling point of origin or value is a fantasy. That fantasy of control is displaced by the success of his writing in prompting an “endless” chain of readings and interpretations from its reading subjects, which, like the circulation of capital in political economy, moves around and beyond him. The style of deferral is the generic equivalent of what we shall see is the tragedy of labor in political economy: to labor in pursuit of that which never arrives.

TRAGEDY AND THE MEDIATION OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

Political economy, the obscure object of the *Reflections*, comes center stage in the closing passages of the text, where Burke asserts that “the science of speculative and practical finance . . . stands high in the estimation not only of the ordinary sort, but of the wisest and best of men.”⁵⁰ Experienced elsewhere in the text as threatening and dangerous, the “science of finance” is here subsumed under the judgement of the gentleman, subject to his “estimation.” But the gentleman might not only contain the potential threat of a “science of finance”; he might also, of course, mediate it, possibly even under the cover of defending against it. Burke’s own language of surface and base, his defense of the drapery of “illusions,” of “superadded ideas” from the “wardrobe of a moral imagination,” authorizes a reading of his text on the same depth-surface model: indeed, it suggests the lurking existence of a necessary “base” beneath the flourishes of its own rhetorical surface.⁵¹ The revelation of the determining “wheel of circulation” in the passage below fulfills this requirement for substance beneath the aestheticized flourishes of Burke’s text. Yet while we might read Burke’s capitulation to the “wheel of circulation” as a moment of the slipping of his drapes of gentlemanly rhetoric, it is equally possible to see that this slippage, deliberate or not, is itself what mediates political economy, especially as it is revealed in generically familiar terms.

The revelatory moment occurs in a crucial passage in *Reflections* which addresses the economic implications of the French appropriation of monastic property. The purported idleness of monastic life provides occasion for defending the idleness of a landed capitalist which, Burke says, “is itself the spring of labour; this repose the spur to industry” so long as profits are properly reinvested.⁵² In such terms, the idleness of the monks is fully justified; indeed, they are “as usefully employed” as the “many wretches” who are “inevitably doomed” to work

from dawn to dark in the innumerable servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly, and often most unwholesome and pestiferous occupations, to which by the social œconomy so many wretches are inevitably doomed. If it were not generally pernicious to disturb the natural course of things, and to impede, in any degree, the great wheel of circulation which is turned by the strangely directed labour of these unhappy people, I should be infinitely more inclined forcibly to rescue them from their miserable industry, than violently to disturb the tranquil repose of monastic quietude. . . . No consideration, except the necessity of submitting to the yoke of luxury, and the despotism of fancy, who in their own imperious way will distribute the surplus product of the soil, can justify the toleration of such trades and employments in a well-regulated state.⁵³

Burke’s defense of monastic property (or landed property in general) concedes, or reveals, much about the economic system (the “course of things”)

which operates here as the ground of nature and justice. Specifically, by making an argument which above all else is about utility (the phrase “usefully employed” is repeated three times immediately prior to the quoted passage), he betrays the extent to which political economy is not about the provision of happiness; indeed, as the experience of “miserable industry” shows, happiness is explicitly sacrificed to utility, as human lives are to capital. In this moment of ideological slippage, happiness emerges as a differential, a calculation, which is in fact unaffordable: what might be phrased as lamentable, or a tragedy, is instead weighed here as a political sum. However clearly Burke perceives, in the starkest of terms, the failed happiness of political economy’s laborers (“these unhappy people”), he nevertheless colludes in the mediation of political economy because of larger fears about disturbing or impeding its workings in what must remain a “well-regulated state.” In fact, it is Burke’s very acknowledgement of the miseries of labor, weighed against its contribution to maintaining the “great wheel of circulation,” which gives this passage its sense of political arithmetic. Thus *Reflections* capitulates to the logic of political economic calculation, mediating political economy in its starkest terms even at the very moment when its greatest criticism has just been stated, when the drapery is cast off and the full misery of labor revealed.

Wollstonecraft, who commented that, if Burke’s “system” is true, the “gods, as Shakespeare makes a frantic wretch exclaim, seem to kill us for their sport, as men do flies,” was only the first to recognize that tragedy is what is offered, or mediated, in *Reflections*.⁵⁴ However, few have attended to the specific way in which tragedy mediates the “system” of political economy here.⁵⁵ If political economy is unable “to solve the problem of the relation between the individual subject and market society,” tragedy appears the generic expression of that problem.⁵⁶ For Ronald Paulson, the image of the wheel of fortune strongly associated with it since medieval and Renaissance times suggests that “the basic mythos of tragedy” has always been used “to keep mutability under control.”⁵⁷ In the passage above, mutability is controlled not through the wheel of fortune but the wheel of circulation, whose necessary turning, far from bringing change, in fact operates to resist and exclude its very possibility, even at the explicit price of human lives. In the process, both tragedy’s relation to time and the nature of tragedy itself are rewritten, underneath the more overt political arithmetic. If the wheel of fortune suggests the tragedy of inevitable change, the wheel of circulation announces instead the tragedy of a specific instantiation of political economy which passes itself off (under the guise of the tragic) as fate or nature. Meanwhile tragedy is itself transformed in this act of generic mediation. Classical decorum restricted tragedy to characters of high social rank, but here political economy enables tragedy to extend a more inclusive embrace.⁵⁸ Equally, if tragedy, as a means to understand change, was previously oriented to history or the past, here it is redeployed to colonize the

future with “the necessity of submitting to the yoke of luxury, and the despotism of fancy.”⁵⁹

Tragedy’s familiar form thus enables Burke to mediate political economy, in the process inaugurating generic change on both fronts. Indeed, tragedy mediates political economy even at the level of language in this passage. Phrases which encapsulate the tragic predicament of labor—the “wheel of circulation” and the “natural course of things”—are derived from political economic discourse. The phrase “natural course of things” is used at least eight times in *Wealth of Nations*, and also appears in the prized 1755 manuscript in which Smith founded his non-interventionist economic system precisely as the “natural course of things.” “Wheel of circulation” also appears in *Wealth of Nations*, where it describes the circulation of money, a process carefully distinguished from the circulation of goods to which Burke’s use of the phrase points.⁶⁰ In Burke, the phrase becomes more abstract and figural, a metaphor for the “system” of political economy itself. Elevated to become less descriptive and more imperative than in Smith, it writes political economy as a tragedy in presenting the unstoppable production of goods as a wheel on which human lives are visibly broken.

The overt presence of political economic language here prompts the question raised earlier in this paper: why Burke’s political economic beliefs, stated so starkly here, are obscured elsewhere in *Reflections*. The answer is surely because it is apparent now that Burke is not simply defending the credit economy, secured on property, established by early eighteenth-century Whigs, but a labor economy in thrall to the circulation of goods. Between these two alternatives, a revolution has taken place in the nature of property, which no longer simply secures credit, but now stimulates circulation and itself circulates. If property previously anchored and secured political economy, as the material form of the human, now, the production of property-as-goods, at the expense of human lives, dominates. Value has been unbound from the gentlemanly, to become a function of the “wheel of circulation” served by human labor, and apparent fixity has given way to circulation, in a tragedy which serves utility, not happiness. The threat this poses to “gentlemanliness” surely requires its being obscured as much as possible. For the revelation of the generic identity of political economy as tragedy—the genre of human inadequacy in the face of larger determining historical forces—destabilizes the power of the gentleman, as the embodiment of the human, as an organizing point to hold off the chaos which *Reflections* confronts. Rather than a synecdoche for human-in-general, the gentleman is now revealed as a class-specific identity, able to view with resignation the sacrifice of other human lives; the human itself is revealed not as a unifying point of transcendence but as something subject to class and generic difference.

The fate of the gentleman reveals the extent to which Burke’s text itself undergoes the kind of generic change which it elsewhere laments. A text

which has been marked by the restless circulation of disembodied abstractions becomes a stark account of the determining conditions of history, an irrefutable narration of the material experience of labor. Tragedy is revealed to be not the fall of a queen, but the experience of humanity in general under irresistible economic conditions. Indeed, one possible reading of Burke's famous outpouring over Marie Antoinette might be to understand it as displacement, a transference of the affective response which is notably lacking from his impartial tones here at the text's end. Lack of feeling was one accusation levelled at Burke by Wollstonecraft, who claimed that for misery "to reach your heart" it must "have its cap and bells; your tears are reserved . . . for the declamation of the theatre, or the downfall of queens."⁶¹ She accuses Burke of reserving feeling, the mark of the human, for the formal realm of the aesthetic, enacting a boundary between that and real life. Wollstonecraft resists Burke's separation of the aesthetic and affective from the realms of political and economic life and reasserts the possibility that feeling and happiness might be reconciled with the material conditions of life. Her suggestion that "large estates be divided into small farms" counters the tragedy of the Burkean vision with a turn to the pastoral, to cast the economic in a different genre, where feeling and happiness might be better accommodated.⁶² If *Reflections* eventually capitulates to the emergence of political economy as a science to be mediated by the aesthetic, Wollstonecraft's turn to the pastoral asserts the possibility of resistance to that separation.

NOTES

1. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790], ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (London, 1986), 92.

2. Paul Hamilton, *Metaromanticism* (Chicago, 2003), 157.

3. For an extensive survey of the letter form and its subgenres, see Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke, 2006).

4. On signature and other generic markers of the letter form, see Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton, 2014), 37–38.

5. See Frans de Bruyn, *The Literary Genres of Edmund Burke* (Oxford, 1996); David Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* (Oxford, 2009); Angela Keane, "Reflections and Correspondences: The Unfamiliarity of Burke's Familiar Letter," in *Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. John Whale (Manchester, 2000), 193–218; Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* (Basingstoke, 1992); F. P. Lock, "Rhetoric and Representation in Burke's *Reflections*," in *New Interdisciplinary Essays*, 18–39; and Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution, 1789–1820* (New Haven, 1983).

6. See Burke's letter to Philip Francis of February 20, 1790: "The composition you say is loose; and I am quite sure it is. I never intended it should be otherwise" (in *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Thomas W. Copeland, 10 vols. [Cambridge, 1958–78], vol. 6, ed. Alfred Cobban and Robert A. Smith [Cambridge, 1967], 89).

7. On commentary, see Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700–1830* (Baltimore, 1999), 118.

8. For the period's understanding of digression as a "legitimate expository mode,"

see Claudia Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender and Sentimentality in the 1790s* (Chicago, 1995), 26. On *copia* or elaboration in classical rhetoric, see Mary Poovey, *The Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 2008), 98. On resistance to genre mixing, see Duff.

9. Ralph Cohen, "On the Interrelations of Eighteenth-Century Literary Forms," in *New Approaches to Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. Phillip Harth (New York, 1974), 69–71, 73.

10. Poovey, 421. On genres as mixed, see also Siskin, 139.

11. See J. G. A. Pocock, "The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution," in *Virtue, Commerce, History* (Cambridge, 1985), 193–212. Also on Burke's economic thinking, see C. B. MacPherson, *Burke* (Oxford, 1980), 51–70; and Salim Rashid, "Economists and the Age of Chivalry: Notes on a Passage in Burke's *Reflections*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 20, no. 1 (1986): 56–61. On Wollstonecraft and political economy, see Carol Kay, "Canon, Ideology and Gender: Mary Wollstonecraft's Critique of Adam Smith," *New Political Science* 7, no. 1 (1986): 63–76; Catherine Packham, "Domesticity, Objects and Idleness: Mary Wollstonecraft and Political Economy," *Women's Writing* 19, no. 4 (2012): 544–62, and "'The common grievance of the revolution': Bread, the Grain Trade, and Political Economy in Mary Wollstonecraft's *View of the French Revolution*," *European Romantic Review* 25, no. 1 (2014): 705–22; and Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge, 2003), 168–73.

12. On Burke's rhetoric see, *inter alia*, Keane, De Bruyn, Lock, and Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology* (Cambridge, 1993). Duff fails to attend to political economy in his account of Burke's mixed generic modes.

13. See Pocock, 193–212.

14. Burke, 170, 352.

15. See Pocock, 196; and Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, 2007).

16. Burke, 110.

17. Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre," *New Literary History* 17, no. 2 (1986): 203–18, 210, 204, 206, 207.

18. Charles Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (Madison, 1988), quoted in Siskin, 17, whose discussion of genre's relationship to reorganizations of knowledge and writing I follow here.

19. Siskin, 18.

20. See Miranda Burgess, *British Fiction and the Production of Social Order 1740–1830* (Cambridge, 2005); Siskin, 19, 124; and Poovey, 144.

21. Siskin, 137–40.

22. Poovey, 127, 138–44.

23. Pocock, 194.

24. See Emma Rothschild, "Adam Smith and Conservative Economics," *The Economic History Review* 45, no. 1 (1992): 74–96, 74–79; and Duff, 70–71.

25. James Thompson, *Models of Value: Eighteenth-Century Political Economy and the Novel* (Durham, 1996), 17–18.

26. Thompson, 21.

27. See Poovey, 216–17.

28. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago, 1993), 301.

29. Guillory, 302.

30. On political economy as georgic, see Siskin, 124.

31. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759], ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), 181.

32. Burke, 135, 120.

33. Howard Caygill, *The Art of Judgement* (Oxford, 1989), 101, quoted in Guillory, 312.

34. Burke, 87, 92–93. Corey Robin’s “Edmund Burke and the Problem of Value” (*Raritan* 36, no. 1 [Summer 2016]: 82–106) also addresses Burke in the context of the “crucible of value, heated to the highest degrees by the French Revolution” (84), but has little discussion of the *Reflections*.

35. For opinion as security, see Burke, 97.

36. Burke, 142.

37. Kelly notes that Burke’s rhetorism coincides with an ongoing Romantic valuing of subjectivity and sensibility (86). On the Romantic expressive individual, see Siskin, “The Problem of Periodization: Enlightenment, Romanticism and the Fate of System,” in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, ed. James Chandler (Cambridge 2008), 101–26, 120.

38. Burke, 93, 95, 92.

39. Burke, 92, 94.

40. Burke, 84.

41. Burke, 271.

42. Burke, 84.

43. On the foregrounded speaking subject in fiction, see Poovey, 110.

44. Burke, 84; Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* [1790], in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 8 vols. (London, 1989), 5:177, 5.

45. Siskin, *Work*, 106, 113, 107–8.

46. Siskin, *Work*, 108.

47. Poovey, 90.

48. Poovey, 306.

49. Burke, 372.

50. Burke, 352.

51. Burke, 171.

52. Burke, 270.

53. Burke, 271.

54. Wollstonecraft, 60. Compare to De Bruyn’s statement that tragedy is Burke’s “fundamental literary form” (192).

55. Wollstonecraft’s highlighting of a “system” here, and Burke’s obscuring of one, is worth noting, given recent work on systems, political economic and otherwise, in this era, including Siskin, *System: The Shaping of Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016); and Robert Mitchell, *Sympathy and the State in the Romantic Era: Systems, State Finance, and the Shadows of Futurity* (New York, 2007).

56. Guillory, 302.

57. Paulson, 48.

58. On rank in tragedy, see Lock, 31.

59. Burke, 271.

60. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations* [1776], 2 vols., ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford, 1976), 1:289, 291.

61. Wollstonecraft, 15.

62. Wollstonecraft, 57.