Name: Rowan Rose Boyson

e-mail: rowan.boyson@kcl.ac.uk.

Address: Department of English, King’s College London, Virginia Woolf Building, 22 Kingsway, London WC2B 6LE

Abstract: Air flows through all Mary Wollstonecraft’s writings, from her first novel Mary, through her treatises and letters, and to her last novel Maria. She was attuned to the medical importance of a change of air, but also developed a more philosophical notion of a right to air. Her attention to everyday air and smell unavoidably reaffirmed her key intellectual questions of commonality, individuality, equality and freedom. For Wollstonecraft, air was both a metaphor for freedom and also a literal condition for its development. This article situates her numerous remarks on air alongside medical sources, racialized climatological theory, slavery cases, and the pneumatic chemistry of the 1790s. Such a reading of Wollstonecraft’s aerial philosophy, and comparisons with Burke, Rousseau, Godwin and Kant, contributes to an ecological reading of her work and to a forgotten history of air rights, with relevance to current debates on air quality and inequality.

Keywords: Wollstonecraft, Air, Feminism, Slavery, Climate, Smell
Mary Wollstonecraft and the Right to Air

Wollstonecraft’s attitudes to health and medicine have received much attention over the past few decades, especially given the ‘politicized history of obstetric practices’ which frames her death at the age of thirty-eight.\(^1\) With her longstanding beliefs in rational optimism and perfectibility, she was inclined towards preventative health, and was likely to have been well versed in the flood of guides to diet and exercise by William Cullen, Thomas Garnett, William Buchan and others.\(^2\) Earlier feminist-biographical approaches such as those by Vivien Jones and John Whale considered how Wollstonecraft’s medical optimism was challenged when she was ‘confronted [. . .] by physical corruption and the death of the individual’ during her grief-struck Scandinavian trip (Jones, 203).\(^3\) Such approaches have recently been complemented with explorations of the theme of medicine in her political philosophy.\(^4\) Amy Mallory-Kani has contrasted Wollstonecraft’s and Burke’s reactivation of the Hobbesian body-politics metaphor: whilst Burke is preoccupied with the exclusion of agents of contamination, Wollstonecraft advocates the development of ‘medico-political’ immunity through individual preventative regimens.\(^5\) Mallory-Kani briefly mentions that ‘since airborne contagion was viewed as extremely difficult to regulate, attention to diet, exercise and other controllable habits could safe-guard a potentially diseased environment’ (Mallory-Kani, 26). Kimiyo Ogawa also considers the body-politic metaphor in Burke and Wollstonecraft, focusing on the importance of John Brown’s theory of health ‘management’ to Wollstonecraft, especially during her travels in Scandinavia.\(^6\) She suggests that the *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, attentive to the ‘disease’ of the pre-revolutionary French body politic and the importance of the passions for its gradual cure, represents a watershed in Wollstonecraft’s thinking about medicine and politics.
These important political-philosophical readings of Wollstonecraft’s medical interests have underestimated air’s rich implications. Air was everywhere in the neo-Hippocratic preventative medicine of the long eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{7} Even where modern commentators stripped away certain implausible aspects of Hippocrates’s theories of \textit{Airs, Waters and Places}, they almost always retained the \textit{Airs}; air was a good substance to think with, especially following the influential chemical researches of Robert Boyle. Writing in the 1730s, the physician John Arbuthnot dismissed some of the more outlandish Hippocratic notions about solstices and equinoxes, but considered air to be a proper subject for a popular treatise, since everyone needed to know how to make a good ‘Choice of Air’. His \textit{Essay concerning the effects of air on human bodies} (1733) went into three English editions plus French and Latin in the eighteenth century. An indication of its ongoing importance for Wollstonecraft’s peers is signaled by the presence of a heavily marked first edition of Arbuthnot’s text in Edmund Burke’s sale catalogue.\textsuperscript{8} We don’t know if Wollstonecraft read Arbuthnot, but as Janet Todd has written, she was ‘always fascinated by medical theories’, and, relatedly, ‘could not have avoided a work which was the talk of the town’: John Brown’s \textit{Elements of Medicine} published by Wollstonecraft’s friend Joseph Johnson in 1788.\textsuperscript{9} Brown claims that air’s ‘application to the whole surface of the body is a necessary stimulus’; he proposes that ‘too pure an air’ might be unhealthy, and prescribes fresh air for convalescence.\textsuperscript{10} Wollstonecraft’s ideas about the stimulating power of the air and the need to strengthen and harden the female body, were likely to have been influenced by Brown’s notion that individuals require a balanced regime of stimulation, whereas softness, relaxation and weakness indicate disease in the asthenic type. As we shall see, Rousseau also emphasized the need for everyone—including girls and women—to inure themselves to outdoor air and a variety of climates.

A ‘change of air’ is a key plot driver in Wollstonecraft’s first novel, \textit{Mary: A Fiction} (1788), the medical emphasis of which is apparent in its opening pages, critiquing the bodily
constitutions of the heroine’s parents. The self-perfecting Mary has such disciplined control of her appetites and regimens at the start of the novel that ‘she almost forgot she had a body’, but by the end she has had her ‘nerves’ destroyed, and her early death is predicted. Air is thematized through respiratory illness and the shared space of a sickbed, as well as healthy and unhealthy climates. Mary’s mother Eliza suffers ‘consumption, to which her constitution tended’; Mary sits through a night of her father Edward’s ‘unequal breathing’ as he dies following a riding accident; but it is Ann’s ‘hectic cough’ which dominates the plot (Ch.2, 82; Ch.7, 98; Ch.6, 97). Mary decides to take Ann to ‘a more salubrious climate’, with the added benefit that it allows her to escape her own husband Charles (Ch.7, 99). Mary writes to Charles: ‘The physicians had said change of air was necessary for her as well as her friend’; he replies that she may go: ‘as the physicians advised change of air, he had no objection’ (Ch.8, 100). In Lisbon, they meet more consumptives: ‘fashionable females’ who ‘hurrying from one party of pleasure to another, occasioned the disorder which required change of air’ (Ch.11, 106). Despite the improved climate, Ann dies suddenly, and for the first time, in grief, Mary finds she has ‘a difficulty in breathing’, relieved by tears that her suitor Henry brings on (Ch.16, 115). Henry and Mary’s courtship is couched in medical considerations: “where shall I hear of your health?” “Oh! let me hear of thine” (Ch.18, 120). Back in England, Mary spends her time helping the poor, and finds a dying mother in a toxic room: ‘regardless of the surrounding nastiness, [she] knelt down by the poor wretch, and breathed the most poisonous air; for the unfortunate creature was dying of a putrid fever, the consequence of dirt and want’ (Ch.23, 132). Mary catches, then recovers from the fever, and finally re-encounters Henry, who is unwell but hopes that his ‘native air may work wonders’ (Ch.25, 138). His ‘breath’ worsens through ‘the closeness of the air, in the metropolis’, and soon Mary is nursing him: ‘While he slept she would support his pillow, and rest her head where she could feel his breath’; ‘she heard distinctly the last sigh’ (Ch.26, 141; Ch.29, 145, 145). In this novel climate and breath
are conversational topics and ties, and Mary is affected and ultimately doomed by the airs she has shared.

Air accrues a more metaphorical—and political—meaning for Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), and decidedly so by the time of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In the *VRM*, the reflections on property and economy occasioned by Burke’s *Reflections* seem to move air from a more private, sanitary consideration to something that concerns rights and equality. She compares the need for first principles of reason (something Burke’s edifices of imagination lack) to the fact ‘that air and bread are necessary to enable the body to fulfil its vital functions’.\(^\text{12}\) Her vision for political economy involves ‘industrious peasant[s]’ setting up their own smallholdings in salutary countryside: ‘This sight I have seen; [. . .] chubby babes, who breathed a bracing air far from the diseases and vices of cities’; cities are described as ‘pestilential’ (*VRM*, 61). Burke’s thought is associated with intoxicating ‘fumes’: ‘vain of this fancied preeminence of organs, you foster every emotion till the fumes, mounting to your brain, dispel the sober suggestions of reason’ (*VRM*, 6–7). Air, by contrast, is associated with the rational, clarifying sphere of public debate: the weak foundations of his opinions will have to lean on some ‘centre of gravity [. . .] till some strong blast puffs it into the air’ (*VRM*, 8). Wollstonecraft was not the only one to figure Burke in terms of smoke and air in the winter of 1790. Gillray’s etching ‘Smelling out a Rat’ (1790), shows Burke’s long, sensitive nose picking up on dark, smoky clouds of ‘Aetheistical revolution’ in the nonconformist Richard Price’s study.\(^\text{13}\) Burke himself had given an unusual prominence to olfaction in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Unlike his philosophical contemporaries, Burke did not think that smells lacked aesthetic interest: smells, just as much as sounds and sights, could be ‘sweet’, smooth and relaxing, noting that the ‘smell of flowers disposes people to drowsiness’.\(^\text{14}\) Burke argued (whilst acknowledging that this could be perceived as ridiculous) that ‘stenches’ could
even be a source of the sublime, citing the Aeneid’s ‘opaca Mephitis’ and ‘halitus atris’ (Philosophical Enquiry, 70).\textsuperscript{15} The striking lines on ‘wild gas’ near the start of Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) were however the likely immediate inspiration for both Gillray’s and Wollstonecraft’s airy responses:

When I see the spirit of liberty in action, I see a strong principle at work; and this, for a while, is all I can possibly know of it. The wild gas, the fixed air, is plainly broke loose: but we ought to suspend our judgment until the first effervescence is a little subsided, till the liquor is cleared, and until we see something deeper than the agitation of a troubled and frothy surface.\textsuperscript{16}

As Steve Connor has pointed out, the italicized word ‘gas’ points to a recent introduction of that word, directly imported from new French chemical nomenclature, in 1788; by contrast, Burke’s alternative term ‘fixed air’ was more homely and local, referring to Joseph Black’s 1754 discovery of what we now call ‘carbon dioxide’.\textsuperscript{17} Connor reminds us that fixed air was seen as preservative rather than explosive when first discovered; hence Burke’s rhetoric begins with the wildness of revolutionary air, but rapidly reassures us of its precipitation back into solidity (Connor, 66–7).

The cultural association between air chemistry and radicalism in the 1780s has been studied by historians of science, but less attention has been paid to the longer semantic links between political freedom and air.\textsuperscript{18} For instance, Burke’s phrase ‘spirit of liberty’ was originally a religious one, appearing in the King James Bible, in St Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians: ‘Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty’ (2 Cor. 3: 17). The book of Isaiah, which inspired the politicized Christianity known as
liberation theology, also links spirit and liberty:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. (Isa. 61: 1)

Seventeenth-century occurrences of the term ‘spirit of liberty’ are predominantly in sermons and catechisms.19 As liberty itself became a more fraught, ambivalent term, denoting licentiousness and factionalism, so the phrase became increasingly unmoored from the Bible, appearing in literary and political contexts, particularly in application to Whigs and enthusiasts.20 The phrase started to be prefaced with the indefinite article, marking its multi-applicability: ‘a’ Spirit of Liberty.21 It could now appear in Addison’s hope to see Lucan translated, for his ‘Work is filled with a Spirit of Liberty’.22 Burke used the phrase frequently in his writing career, perhaps most reflexively in his 1775 speech ‘Conciliation with the Colonies’, on admitting America’s success: ‘My rigour relents. I pardon something to the spirit of liberty’.23

Liberty has been the focus of recent philosophically-oriented work on Wollstonecraft.24 Alan Coffee has argued that Wollstonecraft’s description of women as ‘slaves’ is no mere metaphor: according to her classical republican perspective, independence means to be protected against the effects of arbitrary power, and its antonym is slavery; hence, since they are dependent on men for their basic needs, and subject to male control, women are literally ‘slaves’ in a patriarchal society.25 Near the start of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), Wollstonecraft closely weaves together slavery, liberty, women and air:
Liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women are, by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish like exotics, and be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature; let it also be remembered, that they are the only flaw (VRW, Ch.2, 107)

Women here are both ‘slaves’ and exotic houseplants; but neither slavery nor air are stable metaphors. Only by being allowed enough real air to grow strong and hardy, will women be able to develop morally and rationally into full citizens who may breathe the ‘air of freedom’.

Wollstonecraft may also be alluding to the racist climatology that was prevalent in the period. As Mike Hulme has summarized, whilst views of ideal climates and their moral-agricultural impacts had been propounded since ancient Greece, the eighteenth century saw new possibilities of accurate temperature measurement and statistical analysis. These measurements, and crucially the colonialist endeavours they accompanied, made climate comparisons more pointed and tendentiously racist, ultimately serving as a justification of slavery. What scholars have neglected to consider is the extension of this climatology into the metaphor of an ‘air of liberty’ belonging to certain nations. In the celebrated habeas corpus case of the enslaved man James Somersett in 1772, the defendants and prosecutors turned several times to the question of whether ‘this air is too pure for a slave to breathe in’. This language seems to have come from their quotation of a French case of 1738 concerning the enslaved person Jean Boucaux (or Boucaut). The case turned on the concept of the ‘precious maxim’ that on entering the Kingdom of France, one became free. Although this principle of enfranchisement is often discussed in terms of feet on soil, in this trial air seems to have been just as important a referent, French liberty being granted ‘a la seule entrée dans ce Royaume, au seul air qu’on y respire’ (‘on entry into the Kingdom, in the very air that one breathes’, my
La France se fait gloire de communiquer le beau privilege d’affranchissement a tous les esclaves, lorsqu’ils entrent dans ce climat heureux, dont le seul nom répand de toute part la bonne odeur de la liberté (France glories in granting the beautiful gift of enfranchisement to all the enslaved, when they enter this happy climate, whose name alone spreads the sweet smell of liberty). (Pitaval, 576; my translation).

As the English lawyers in the Somersett case glossed this, to ‘inspire the air of France, was to be free’ (Cobbett, 12). Somersett’s lawyer Davy cited a 1569 case in which an enslaved person from Russia was not permitted to be scourged, for, it was said, ‘England was too pure an air for a slave to breathe in’ (Cobbett, 51). Dunning, the lawyer for the enslaver, rejoindered ‘Let me take notice: neither the air of England is too pure for a slave to breathe in, nor have the laws of England rejected servitude’ (Cobbett, 74). Dunning’s sarcasm is magnificently excoriated by Davy:

For the air of England; I think, however, it has been gradually purifying ever since the reign of Elizabeth. Mr Dunning seems to have discovered so much, as he finds it changes a slave into a servant; though unhappily he does not think it of efficacy enough to prevent that pestilent disease reviving, the instant the poor man is obliged to quit (voluntarily quits, and legally it seems we ought to say,) this happy country. However, it has been asserted, and is now repeated by me, this air is too pure for a slave to breathe in: I trust, I shall not quit this court without certain conviction of the truth of that assertion. (Cobbett, 79)
Punning on air pollution, air health, and the pestilence of slavery, this passage shows the significance of the discourse of air inequality. It also shows the ambiguity of the discourse of air quality: earlier eighteenth-century scientists and physicians, with their preference for moderation and ‘mixture’, worried that pure air might be harmful.\textsuperscript{31} Paradoxically, the same idea of a constitutional fit with a certain kind of air was used to justify the suitability of enslaved people for slavery, though this time with the poles reversed: the coarse could not withstand the pure.\textsuperscript{32}

By the time Wollstonecraft wrote the \textit{Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, pure air had been positively revalued by Joseph Priestley’s discovery of oxygen, and Rousseau’s anti-city prescriptions had helped sweep away some of the lasting Hippocratic worries about dangerous breezes. Rousseau advocates a hardening and strengthening air-regime:

\begin{quote}
Fresh air affects children’s constitutions, particularly in early years. It enters every pore of a soft and tender skin, it has a powerful effect on their young bodies. Its effects can never be destroyed. So I should not agree with those who take a country woman from her village and shut her up in one room in a town and her nursling with her. I would rather send him to breathe the fresh air of the country than the foul air of the town.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

Babies must wear loose clothing, not swaddles, in order that they ‘[feel] the air’ (\textit{Emile}, Bk I, 27). Rousseau contradicts commonplace fears of air-temperature changes, instead advising getting ‘used to the changes in the air and to every degree of temperature’; hence Emile will be ‘lightly clad’ in all seasons (‘Sir Isaac Newton did this, and he lived to be eighty’, \textit{Emile}, Bk II, 92). ‘The skin protects the rest of the body, so it is very important to harden it to the effects
of the air that it may be able to bear its changes’ (*Emile*, Bk II, 103). Unlike other aspects of education which were modified for the ultra-feminine Sophie, Rousseau thought women must have an equal air habit, if only to enable them to bear strong sons. Girls should attend ‘[c]onvents and boarding-schools’ which gave opportunity for exercise ‘in the open air and in the garden’, compared to homes, ‘where she is kept sitting in a stuffy room, always under her mother’s eye, afraid to stand or walk or speak or breathe’: such a lack of air ‘destroy[s]’ ‘heart and body’ (*Emile*, Bk V, 329). Wollstonecraft echoes Rousseau’s notions closely, suggesting that any subject lessons ‘should never encroach on gymnastic plays in the open air’ (*VRW*, Ch. 12, 263–4). Modern, indolent women stay behind ‘well-closed windows which do not admit a breath of air’ (*VRW*, Ch. 12, 269). A literal lack of air stunts the physical, and moral, development of girls and women:

To preserve personal beauty, woman’s glory! the limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves. (*VRW*, Ch. 13, 113)

Stepping out into the ‘sharp invigorating air of freedom’ will offer women political transformation (*VRW*, Ch.2, 107).34

Wollstonecraft explored the climate of political transformation in *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794), where she suggests that the mood of the people is air-borne. The ‘climate of France’ is so ‘genial’ that even the ‘oppressed common people’ may live ‘for the day’: ‘diffusing fragrance’, the ‘genial atmosphere seems instantaneously to inspire the animal spirits’.35 In its preliminary draft, known as *Letters on the Character of the
French Nation (Paris, February 15, 1793) Wollstonecraft links fragrance (‘volatile sweets’) with French joie de vivre itself: ‘They [people walking on the Boulevards] play before me like motes in a sunbeam, enjoying the passing ray; whilst an English head, searching for more solid happiness, loses, in the analysis of pleasure, the volatile sweets of the moment.’ In the Historical and Moral View, such a joyful French climate is contrasted to the corrupt pre-revolutionary air: the ‘voluptuous atmosphere’ of Versailles and the ‘rank atmosphere’ of Paris, both noxious and contagious (HMV, 33, 261–2). Despite these semi-metaphors, she concludes that ‘liberty cannot be considered as belonging exclusively to any particular climate [. . .] as a physical effect’ (HMV, 302). This argument against climatological theory had been made explicitly the previous year by William Godwin in the Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793). Godwin ventriloquized and contested the climatological arguments of Montesquieu in The Spirit of the Laws (English 1750, French 1748). In his chapter ‘Of the Importance of Climate’, Godwin cites the argument that climate limited the possibilities of freedom: “It is impossible,” say some, “to establish a system of political liberty in certain warm and effeminate climates.” In the following chapter ‘On the Objection to these Principles from the Influence of Climate’, he semi-comically cites an argument about the effect of physical causes on our moral character: “The hero of to-day,” we are told, “shall by an indigestion or a rainy atmosphere be converted into a coward to-morrow” (PJ, 39). What is particularly interesting is that Godwin connects new ideas about ‘atmosphere’ with the decades-older notions of climate, which previously referred chiefly to temperature.

As Thomas Ford has recently delineated, the seventeenth-century word ‘atmosphere’ expanded in frequency and complexity towards the end of the eighteenth century, with its literal and metaphorical applications appearing around 1800. Godwin frequently uses ‘atmosphere’ metaphorically: an ‘atmosphere of prejudice’ (PJ, 66). At the same time, Godwin wishes to argue against the widespread idea that literal atmospheres seriously affect morals: atmosphere
as an ‘external circumstance’ cannot really impact upon people, otherwise ‘their characters and actions would be much alike’, and a ‘fog’ on the battleground would diminish both armies (PJ, 39). Godwin, writing in a more globally interconnected era, sees atmosphere as fundamentally more shared—and moving or moveable—than the more locally-determined notion of climate. Atmosphere may affect only a minority of impressionable persons:

In reality the atmosphere, instead of considerably affecting the mass of mankind, affects in an eminent degree only a small part of that mass. The majority are either above or below it; are either too gross to feel strongly these minute variations, or too busy to be at leisure to attend to them. It is only a few, whose treatment has been tender enough to imbue them with extreme delicacy, and whose faculties are not roused by strong and unintermitted incitements, who can be thus blindly directed. (PJ, 39)

Whilst national climates were not to be considered as conditioning people’s propensity for freedom, one of the main arguments of Political Justice was that systems of government and particular institutions—namely tyranny and incarceration—did in fact exert a kind of ‘atmospheric’ influence: ‘Will his heart become much softened or expanded, who breathes the atmosphere of a dungeon?’; still, we can ‘rise above the atmosphere of prejudice’ (PJ, 66, 397). The very word ‘Influence’, a key part of Political Justice’s full title, carried a sense of fluidity (watery, astral or ethereal) until the end of the seventeenth century, and that older meaning seems to seep into Godwin’s comments on air and climate: ‘Will the influence of climate prevent them from embracing the obvious means of their happiness?’: No; once ‘the magic of opinion is dissolved’, ‘[t]hey quietly leave the mansion where they were hitherto immured, and partake of the blessings of light and air like other men’ (PJ, 44). Freedom will one day be
recognized as common and necessary as air: ‘Men may one day feel that they are partakers of a common nature, and that true freedom and perfect equity, like food and air, are pregnant with benefit to every constitution’ (PJ, 16).

Whilst, as we have seen, this notion of air-as-equality appeared in Wollstonecraft’s VRW, she shows ongoing commitment to the idea of different, national climates in her travel letters of the mid-1790s. Her letters to Imlay offer plenty of the medical ‘change of air’ discourse that we saw in Mary: ‘I will now sally forth (you will go with me in my heart) and try whether this fine bracing air will not give the vigour to the poor babe’; ‘I wish indeed to be out in the air as much as I can’; ‘I have a degree of vivacity, even in my grief [...] this change is more owing to [...] the purity of this air, and the being continually out in it’; ‘I was therefore, in defiance of cold and dirt, out in the air the greater part of yesterday’; ‘AIR, exercise, and bathing, have restored me to health’.39 Perhaps, in the simplest sense, travelling generated for her a renewed sense of air’s specificity, given that new environments offer new smells. It is certainly notable how much Wollstonecraft begins to refer to odours in the Scandinavian letters. Scholars have noted a certain hygienic anxiety, even repulsion, in Wollstonecraft’s encounters with some of the Swedish and Norwegian people: ‘In the article of cleanliness, the women of all descriptions seem very deficient’.40 She criticizes the closed damp cottages of the poor Swedish families she encounters, surmising that infant ill-health mortality might be due to such lack of ‘air and exercise’, ‘whilst every pore is absorbing unwholesome moisture’; likewise the hot stuffy stove-heated inns are ‘not admitting any air to renew its elasticity’ (LSND, 22, 26).

As Emily Friedman has commented, Wollstonecraft was particularly ‘repulsed’ by the tobacco smoke which she associated with ‘chaos’, quarrels, ‘noise, riot, and confusion’ and a ‘rude tumult of the senses’ (LSND, 92). Friedman is a little judgmental of Wollstonecraft’s judgmentalism, commenting that she ‘snarls’ about the tobacco.41 Placed in the context of Wollstonecraft’s broader interest in the link between freedom and fresh air, however, one might
say that her claim that she felt ‘almost stifled by these smokers’ is not so far-fetched; it does, after all, even further exclude her from male power: ‘I found it very difficult to obtain from them any information respecting their own country, when the fumes of tobacco did not keep me at a distance’ (*LSND*, 53). Lecturing in the 1790s, Immanuel Kant also argued that smell was undemocratic: ‘Smell is taste at a distance, so to speak, and others are forced to share the pleasure of it, whether they want to or not. And thus smell is contrary to freedom and less sociable than taste’.\(^{42}\) Wollstonecraft often contrasts air with ‘oppression’: ‘I felt my breath oppressed, though nothing could be clearer than the atmosphere’ (*LSND*, 69). Air is the cure for psychological and physical entrapment: ‘I walked out, for the open air is always my remedy when an aching head proceeds from an oppressed heart’; ‘Not being able to walk, I requested a boat as the only means of enjoying free air’ (*LSND*, 82, 71).

It is intriguing to note that the olfactory sensitivity that Wollstonecraft portrays in the *Scandinavian Letters* aligns her more closely than one might expect with Rousseau’s hyper-feminine Sophie. Sophie is so sensitive to smell that even the sight of manure offends her nostrils. This sight-smell synaesthesia—and offense—is echoed directly in the *Letters* when Wollstonecraft observes

> the loveliest banks of wild flowers [. . . which] promised to exhal eodours to add to the sweetness of the air, the purity of which you could almost see, alas! not smell, for the putrifying herrings, which they use as manure, after the oil has been extracted, spread over the patches of earth, claimed by cultivation, destroyed every other. (*LSND*, 27)

Sophie would certainly meet Wollstonecraft’s enhanced personal hygiene standards:

> In her rooms there was never anything but simple water. She knows no perfume other
than that of flowers; and her husband will never smell anything sweeter than her breath.

[...] Sophie is much more than clean. She is pure.43

Whilst one can read this as another time-worn misogynistic attitude, there is more to say about Rousseau’s account of olfaction and gender. We have already seen the importance of fresh air in *Emile*, but smell played a particular role in a treatise which, following Locke, emphasizes the senses as the first materials of a child’s knowledge. Indeed, whilst Rousseau (like almost all Enlightenment writers) suggested that olfaction was relatively unimportant, imprecise, and a minor, late-developing sense in children, he carefully revised sentences on smell between the manuscript and published versions of the text.44 He described smell as ‘the sense of the imagination’, being emotional and discriminatory, and related to anticipation and expectation—of food, sex, and so on—rather than fulfilment (Bk II, 300). Hence it is culturally diverse rather than universal, and it is linked to feelings of waiting, wanting, lacking and indulging: ‘Keying up the nerves, it must agitate the brain a good deal. This is why it revives the temperament for a moment and exhausts it in the long run’ (Bk II, 300). Women exemplify this kind of secondary, problematic, anticipatory selfhood, and hence, beyond their delicacy, they may have a special relationship to olfaction.

Wollstonecraft valorizes (good) scents highly in her later works and fully celebrates the imaginative charge they provide. Arguably, the link to wishing and dreaming—which for Rousseau marks it down as non-fulfilling, quasi-masturbatory—might make it for Wollstonecraft one of the most free forms of desire and sensuality.45 Wollstonecraft portrays herself as seeking good air and sweet scents everywhere in Scandinavia, and her descriptions of these contribute to the *Letters’* vaunted Romantic aesthetic. ‘You will ask, perhaps, why I wished to go farther northward. Why? not only because the country, from all I can gather, is
most romantic, abounding in forests and lakes, and the air pure’ (LDNS, 85). Waking early on her first day in Sweden she ‘scented the sweet morning air’, and appreciates Gothenburg as a ‘clean airy town’ (LDNS, 11, 13). There is a specificity in her appreciation of scent that is not apparent in any of the earlier works: ‘And if a light shower has chanced to fall with the sun, the juniper, the underwood of the forest, exhales a wild perfume, mixed with a thousand nameless sweets that, soothing the heart, leave images in the memory which the imagination will ever hold dear’ (LDNS, 39). She notes the ‘refreshing odour of the pine woods’ on approaching Norway; and speculated on the importance of air to those particular trees: ‘Nothing proves to me so clearly that it is the air which principally nourishes trees and plants as the flourishing appearance of these pines’ (LDNS, 34, 79). And awakening on her first morning there, she experiences a deeply pleasurable sense of selfhood—generated by air:

The very air was balmy as it freshened into morn, producing the most voluptuous sensations. A vague pleasurable sentiment absorbed me, as I opened my bosom to the embraces of nature; and my soul rose to its Author, with the chirping of the solitary birds, which began to feel, rather than see, advancing day. (LDNS, 34)

This ecstatic air-dissolution recurs later in the Letters: ‘my very soul diffused itself in the scene; and, seeming to become all senses, glided in the scarcely-agitated waves, melted in the freshening breeze, or, taking its flight with fairy wing, to the misty mountain which bounded the prospect’ (LDNS, 50). Whilst, like Godwin in Political Justice, Wollstonecraft wishes to downplay climatological theory, suggesting that ‘government and religion’ are the key contributors to national characters, she seems unwilling to dispense fully with it, musing that at least ‘vivacity, or thoughtfulness, pleasures or pain, [are] inspired by the climate’ (LDNS,
33). Hence, perhaps, her claim that ‘the purest air’ ‘animates’ her as she contemplates ‘the romantic views’ (LDNS, 61). Fragrant air is a vehicle for personal transformation: ‘every sensation [. . .] that stealing with balmy sweetness into my soul, led me to scent from afar the fragrance of reviving nature’ (LDNS, 143).

_Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman_, the novella on which Wollstonecraft was working on at the time of her death in 1797, focuses on imprisonment and arbitrary power, as it affects both its middle-class heroine Maria, and her working-class friend Jemima. It is also a novel in which the ability to breathe freely, and enjoy sweet air, is regularly opposed to the images of imprisonment with which it opens. Entrapped and depressed, Maria’s internal monologue moves quickly from the ‘vapours of a dungeon’ to the famous dark question: ‘Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?’ (Ch. I, 167). Wollstonecraft visited insane asylums while preparing the novel, and mad-doctors often recommended dry, clean and sweet air.46 Heather Meek has analysed the interchanges of male doctors and women hysterical patients in the later eighteenth century, and noted that women such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Elizabeth Carter ‘wholeheartedly embraced’ air and exercise cures for depression, both because they were less violently punitive than other medical treatments and because they ‘actually expanded the conventionally limited female sphere’.47 A change of air was for some women a change of existence.

Maria is sensitive to scent, and associates it with freedom and fulfilment, for instance, reading _La Nouvelle Héloïse_ in her cell, when she turns to the window:

_The air swept across her face with a voluptuous freshness that thrilled to her heart, awakening indefinable emotions [. . .] Maria was happy, till an autumnal scent, wafted by the breeze of morn, from the fallen leaves of the adjacent wood, made her recollect that the season had changed since her confinement._ (Ch. II, 177)
Maria’s own Rousseauvian account of her sensual childhood education in England emphasizes the ‘healthy breezes’ which ‘volatilized the humours that improper food might have generated’ (Ch. VII, 212). The smells of her home village bring Maria to life: ‘The first scent of wild flowers from the heath, thrilled through my veins, awakening every sense to pleasure’ (Ch. X, 239). Happiness and even love are equated with scent: unlike ‘some exquisite perfumes, the fine spirit of which is continually mingling with the air’, her husband’s love has left no sillage; Maria’s happiness with her new lover Darnford at the end of the (unfinished) novel is described as like ‘the pleasure experienced in roving through nature at large, inhaling the sweet gale natural to the clime’, contrasting with the false, feverish enjoyment of artificial ‘gardens full of aromatic shrubs’ (Ch. X, 241; Ch. XVI, 278). Air and liberty are constantly entwined: ‘to enjoy open air and freedom, was paradise’ (Ch. VII, 212). After her famous claim that ‘marriage had bastilled me for life’ (Ch. X, 243), Maria repeats closely the language of the Scandinavian letters when she envisages selfhood ecstatically dissolved on the breeze:

How I had panted for liberty—liberty, that I would have purchased at any price, but that of my own esteem! I rose, and shook myself; opened the window, and methought the air never smelled so sweet […] I was all soul, and (wild as it may appear) felt as if I could have dissolved in the soft balmy gale that kissed my cheek. (Ch. XI, 252)

This ‘wild’ thought of dissolving in the gale is a key motif of Wollstonecraft’s later work, in which becoming ‘soul’ is also becoming disembodied and free of the shackles of gender and male control. There is a minor literary tradition of female narrators becoming light as air. Ros Ballaster has analyzed the transformation of ‘the enforced invisibility of women in the world of politics’ into the ‘supernatural gift’ of Astrea’s invisibility in Delarivier Manley’s The New
Building on this idea, Matthew J. Rigilano has charted the development of the ‘embodied invisible character’ in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prose fiction by women: Cavendish, Manley and Haywood. Whilst Rigilano is not concerned with air per se, it is certainly a recurrent reference in the description of these subtle characters: Cavendish references motes or atoms caught in the light and describes a vehicle made of ‘the purest and finest sort of air’ and a ‘garment of the ambient air’; Haywood deploys very similar language with her invisibility scarf made of the ‘thinnest, purest Air’; her Invisible Spy sometimes goes out into the fields simply to have ‘liberty’ and to ‘enjoy the benefit of the fresh air’. Whilst Rigilano argues that the invisible character historically begins to ‘fade away just as Jane Austen’s transparent narrators become increasingly visible’, one might suggest that there is a residue of this ideal of an unseen, free female experience, which inverts or reclaims women’s lack of social weight, power and visibility, in Wollstonecraft’s ecstasy of evaporation.

In a wonderful recent reading of Wollstonecraft alongside Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of planetarity, Enit Karafili Steiner has described the ‘constant pull in A Short Residence toward all—animate or inanimate—that the earth discloses to the senses’. She focuses on the auditory—‘the cow’s bell, the murmuring waters’—and sets Wollstonecraft’s treatment alongside Jean-Luc Nancy’s ‘ethique d’écoute’, Heidegger’s Stimmung, and Derrida’s khora, a ‘call to come’ (Steiner, 43–4). But it seems to me that Wollstonecraft’s sensuous appreciation of air change in the Letters is equally relevant to the ‘ecosophy of mindfulness’ and ‘embeddedness of self in otherness’ that Steiner traces (Steiner, 45). Travel memoir is a key form for a cosmopolitan philosophy:

Here place, as the very condition of embodiment, bears a host of connections that the narrator tackles by considering the effects of location, urban or un-urbanized, on mind and body. We see, thus, the mind/body divide dissolve and be transformed by the
provisionality, mutations, and metamorphosis of thoughts and feelings. (Steiner, 40)

As I have argued, Wollstonecraft’s account of changing airs exemplifies these ongoing, provisional, and mood-shifting ‘connections’ that underlie an ecosophical, cosmopolitan planetarity. This might furnish one explanation for why she retains more commitment than Godwin to the idea that climate—atmosphere—affects feeling and vivacity. At the same time, in taking this philosophical perspective we must not neglect the active political arguments around air in the period. The climatological theories of the mid-eighteenth century and the pneumatic chemistry of the 1790s had their own political impulses. Wollstonecraft’s engagement with these nascent sciences brought her to a notion of air rights that was both universal and feminist. Aware of contemporary claims that the enslaved were suited and unsuited to various national airs, and all the barely concealed paradoxes of those arguments, Wollstonecraft saw a key aspect of women’s unfreedom as lying in the literal deprivation of air and exercise, as well as their exclusion from male discursive atmospheres. ‘Paradise’ would be to ‘enjoy open air and freedom’ (Maria, Ch. VII, 212); Wollstonecraft’s writing helps us begin to apprehend such a change of air.

NOTES

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3 John Whale, ‘Death in the Face of Nature: Self, Society and Body in Wollstonecraft’s


Burke’s Philosophical Enquiry, ed. Koen Vermeir and Michael Funk Deckard (Dordrecht, 2012), 69–90, 84.


10 John Brown, Elements of Medicine (2 vols, London, 1795), i. 132.

11 Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary, A Fiction, and The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria, ed. Michelle Faubert (Peterborough, Ontario, 2012), Ch.4, 92; Ch.31, 148.


15 Dryden’s translations: ‘steaming sulphur, that infects the skies’ (Aeneid, VI, 245);
‘exhaling through / vast, gloomful woods its pestilential air’ (Aeneid, VII, 85–6).


19 “Spirit of liberty” search in Early English Books Online – Text Creation Partnership (Ann


26 Mike Hulme, Weathered: Cultures of Climate (London, 2017), 20.


28 ‘The case of James Somersett, a Negro, on a Habeas Corpus, King’s-Bench: 12 George III


33 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile, or Education. Translated by Barbara Foxley, M.A. (London and Toronto, 1921), i. 26.

34 A key right to air that emerged in the period was of course the right to travel in it. See Clare Brant, Balloon Madness: Flights of Imagination in Britain 1783–86 (Woodbridge, 2017), and Siobhan Carroll, in An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750–1850 (Philadelphia, 2015), on satires of the geopolitical implications of airspace.

35 Mary Wollstonecraft, An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution; and the effect it has produced in Europe (London, 1794), 248, 475.


Emily Friedman, *Reading Smell in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Lewisburg, PA, 2016), 33.

Scholars have long been troubled by Wollstonecraft’s purported ‘disgust’ at the body and/or sexuality; part of my argument here is that her comments on smell and air are not merely a psychological fastidiousness but part of her political worldview.


Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or on Education* [1762], trans. and ed. Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom (Hanover, 2010), v. 359.

Compare the paragraphs on smell beginning ‘Men who walk too much’ in the Favre manuscript with the published version: *Emile* (2010), 86, 300.


Rigilano, 91. There are connections here with Jayne Lewis’s reading of *The Female*
Quixote alongside Catherine Gallagher’s account of female authority and the novel, in Air’s Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in British Fiction 1660–1794 (Chicago, 2012). She argues that Arabella has an always-cold ghostliness with a ‘power to create ambience’ (173), an aria of air and spirit. Her argument is centrally concerned with ‘the ways in which the supposed second-order medium of writing is implicated in the supposed primary medium of air’ (206): ‘The forms of freedom that [Radcliffe] discovers are ones that Priestley had figured in his pneumatic lexicon of “common” yet endlessly differentiating airs. In this manner, Radcliffe’s travel writing literalized, without however naturalizing, the political and historical processes through which female names are lost. The literary aesthetic that arises from this mode of analysis is very naturally conducted in and through the grammar of air’ (224).