ABSTRACT

ROBINSON, LAURA MARIE. The Face of Hope: Helen Maria Williams and the Revolutionary Countenance. (Under the direction of Sharon Setzer.)

Helen Maria Williams, in Letters from France, advances her argument for the French Revolution by sketching Revolutionary ideals in the very faces of her “historical characters.” Although Williams’s Letters have gained significant critical recognition during the past fifteen years, little consideration has been paid to her depictions of these Revolutionary visages. Williams’s Revolutionary rhetoric, in conjunction with her awareness of Johann Kaspar Lavater’s theories, positions the countenance as significant in her sympathetic portrayal of the French Revolution.

In an attempt to situate Williams as a writer in sync with the aesthetic techniques of her day, “Revolutionary Physiognomy” provides a historical explanation of countenance reading. “Hope Envisaged” explores early examples of countenances that reflect Williams’s hopeful idealism for the Revolution. “Faces and Facades” examines the assumed transparency of countenances during the Terror of the Revolution, as Williams attempts to reconcile her Revolutionary ideals with bloody realities. “The Individual Vis-à-Vis Humanity” discusses Williams’s extension of physiognomy from the individual to the face of humankind as she positions her broken ideals with her unfaltering belief in humanity’s potential. Finally, the “Epilogue” attests to Williams’s continued interest in physiognomy and the relationship of her voice with emerging nineteenth-century adaptations of the trope.
The Face of Hope: Helen Maria Williams and the Revolutionary Countenance

by

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DEDICATION

In honor of Charlie,

Who believed in my future
BIOGRAPHY

Laura M. Robinson, a native of the St. Louis area, graduated from Cedarville University (Cedarville, OH) in June of 1999. Prior to pursuing a Master of Arts in English Literature at North Carolina State University, she taught junior high English in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Desiring to continue her educational journey, Laura plans to return to the classroom as both an educator and a student.
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INTRODUCTION

Revolutionary Physiognomy

Between 1790 and 1796, the English author Helen Maria Williams published eight volumes of Letters from France, giving English readers an unusually sympathetic account of the French Revolution. Williams’s first volume, published in November 1790, the same month as Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France, established her identity as a sympathetic “citizen of the world” and an enthusiastic participant in the festivities celebrating the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille (1.1.13). While Burke “stirred England’s memories of riot and regicide,” Neil Fraistat and Susan Lanser observe, “Williams rhapsodized about the Revolution’s spirit of cooperative generosity” (32). At some moments, Williams’s “rhapsodies” seem similar to Wordsworth’s well-known lines: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,/But to be young was very Heaven.”¹ Whereas Wordsworth looks back nostalgically upon the early days of the French Revolution through the lens of disillusionment, Williams captures the intensity and the immediacy of the Revolution as it unfolds around her. Unlike Wordsworth, Williams “remained immersed in history,” and her immersion ultimately forced a reconciliation of her Revolutionary hopes with the brutal realities of the Terror (Fraistat and Lanser 50).

Soon after the publication of her first volume of Letters, Williams won critical acclaim as an “amiable letter writer,”² whose works were not only “sprightly and entertaining,”³ but also endowed with an “air of sincerity.”⁴ As the Revolution became increasingly bloody, however, critical assessments of Williams’s steadfast commitment to Revolutionary ideals

¹ The Prelude, Book 11: 108-109. (1850)
³ The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure, Dec. 1790: 289.
became increasingly harsh. Still, as late as 1796, the Critical Review maintained that Williams’s Letters were “a valuable, authentic, and entertaining history of the most astonishing event of modern times.”5 Unlike Burke, who denounced the event from the outset, or Wordsworth, who lost faith in the Revolution after the oppressed “became oppressors in their turn,”6 Williams maintained an unflagging faith in the goodness of humanity, even in the midst of the Terror. Although Williams’s Letters were widely read in her own day, they fell into obscurity by the mid-nineteenth century and attracted limited interest for over a hundred years. Now, however, owing to the historical research promoted by the bicentennial of the Revolution, a new critical interest in letters and travel writing, and the ongoing efforts to recover the work of women writers, Williams is again widely recognized as one of the most influential writers of the 1790’s. Following modern editions of the Letters and a variety of critical articles, Deborah Kennedy’s book-length study, Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution (2002), took Williams from the periphery to the center of critical discourse on the French Revolution. Current scholarship frequently positions Williams’s works alongside those of Wordsworth, Burke, and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Touting the Revolutionary sensibility of Williams’s Letters, recent criticism frequently acknowledges her capacity to transcend gender barriers and limitations of the epistolary genre while she navigates the French Revolution as both an observer and a participant. Richard Sha, for example, suggests that Williams blurs gender barriers as she “insulate[s] her feminine persona from masculine politics” by exploiting the rhetoric of “the sketch and letter” (197). Certainly, the immediacy of Williams’s text, which displays a “spontaneity or the illusion

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6 The Prelude, Book 10: 791-792. (1805)
of” operates as “a vehicle for the display of sensibility” (Sha 203). Arguing that Williams’s Letters are never simply a “transparent medium,” Mary Favret suggests that “correspondence” always “promises blockage, limits and distance” as an “envelope of contingency” (Romantic Correspondence 56). For Williams, part of this “envelope of contingency” is what Chris Jones calls her “canny and sophisticated exploitation of the ambiguities of sensibility to grasp the progressive possibilities of the age” (“Travelling Hopefully” 94).

While much recent scholarship has focused on Williams’s sensibility, very little attention has been paid to the relationship between physiognomy and sensibility and the way in which it informs her representation of Revolutionary countenances. Williams’s tendency to read countenances as a measure of character is a recurring point of emphasis as she moves from studying youthful faces, which represent the hopes of a nation, to the faces of Revolutionary villains, who betray these hopes. Steven Blakemore notes that Williams’s reference to her own “quickness of perception” (1.1.195) ends up “emphasizing her sensibility” (163). According to Lavater’s principles, “quickness of perception” is a requisite skill for every physiognomist. Asserting that her own proximity to the Revolutionary scene qualifies her to “discern every look,” Williams writes,

> While you observe from a distance the great drama which is acting in France, I am a spectator of representation. - I am placed near enough the scene to discern every look and every gesture of the actors, and every passion excited in the minds of the audience. (1.3.1)

As a “spectator of representation,” Williams scrutinizes the Revolution by looking beyond the events to the “actors.” Employing the theatrical trope of the Revolution, where “both
revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries depicted the Revolution as a stupendous dramatic event played out on the world’s stage,” Williams evokes the language of the Revolutionaries who “represented themselves as actors” (Blakemore 234). Their role stands in opposition to the “counterrevolutionary betrayers” who wore “‘masks’ and ‘disguises’ which needed to be ‘ripped off’ in order to reveal their ‘insincerity’” (Blakemore 234). Through countenance reading, Williams emphasizes the genuine character of Revolutionary players while also critiquing the masks of those who opposed Revolutionary ideals.

Williams’s motivation may seem ideological, and her approach impressionistic, but her portrayals of countenances highlight the influence of the emerging “science” of physiognomy. Employing the technique of physiognomy, Williams takes part in “the physio” which was “a successful genre in the beginning of the Revolution,” used by journalists who employed “the reading of the body” as a “political weapon,” explains Antoine de Beaocioque in The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770-1800 (236). This method of sketching a countenance for the purpose of transparency demonstrates Williams’s rhetorical ability and her evolving understanding of humanity. As the Revolution turned to Terror, Williams’s Letters from France extends beyond mere tear-stained pages written by a woman struggling with broken ideals; instead, she provides faces to peer into in order to grasp the implications of a human nature that is unable to be defined by political parties or grievous personal faults. Examining the countenances of Williams’s characters reveals a portrait of the soul of humankind which maintains a capacity for goodness beyond the limitations of present evil.

Williams’s portrayal of the countenance as an index of character participates in popular scientific readings of the body which materialized as eighteenth-century ideals joined
with the emerging science of the nineteenth century. The term most often affiliated with the study of the body in connection with morality is “physiognomy,” defined as “the study of the features of the face . . . as being supposedly indicative of character” (OED). Graeme Tytler, in Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes, explains that the practice of physiognomy harkens back to Pythagoras, Hippocrates, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (36). A classic definitive work, Physiognomonica, commonly accepted as being authored by Aristotle, provides “particular types of physical appearance and the moral dispositions they signify – strength, weakness, genius, stupidity, gentleness, impetuosity . . . with particular emphasis being laid throughout on symmetry and proportion of body and features as expressions of the golden mean” (Tytler 37). In the centuries that followed Aristotle, multiple works emerged touting connections to astrological physiognomy, but in the mid-eighteenth century, Jacques Pernett published Lettres philosphiques sur les physionomies (1746) which distanced itself from astrological tendencies and returned to Aristotelian principles (Tytler 46). This writing set the stage for the emergence of Johann Caspar Lavater, a Zurich minister and philosopher, and his principles for reading the character of man through the face. Lavater set his practices apart from those of his immediate predecessors by insisting on the Aristotelian connection between the physical and the moral, by “taking physical appearance as the starting point and deducing moral character from that rather than the other way around” (Tytler 51).

Lavater’s primary work, Physiognomische Fragmente, first appearing in 1775, provided guidelines for the detailed analysis of facial features. According to this work, the high excellence and physiological unity of human nature are visible at the first glance. The head, especially the face, and the formation of the firm parts, compared to the firm parts of other animals, convince the accurate observer,
who is capable of investigating truth, of the greatness and superiority of his intellectual qualities. (24)

He continues to outline those specific facial features, which, when carefully observed, provide a means for scrutinizing a face. He writes that the eye, the look, the cheeks, the mouth, the forehead . . . are the most expressive, the most convincing picture of interior sensation, desires, passions, will, and of all those properties which so much exalt moral above animal life.

(Lavater 24)

Lavater’s attempt to isolate the face into readable segments is representative of practices which became prominent in eighteenth-century Europe. De Beaecque notes, “Lavater relies on a very precise mapping of the pattern of facial features . . . . the ‘scientific’ reproduction of human proportions finds its consecration in the mechanization of the drawing, the portrait, which appeared in France at the same time as the diffusion of Lavater’s theories” (233-4). This attempt to map facial features objectively and use these standards as guidelines for art establishes a key distinction between Williams’s sympathetic physiognomy and Lavater’s scientific physiognomy. Williams asserted faith in the face as a measure of character, but her sketches are not reductive representations of humanity: they are isolated readings of individuals, sketched with a definitive immediacy, which coincided with her own Revolutionary ideals.

Although Williams does not directly claim her own ability to decipher a countenance, two specific references within her writing reveal a curiosity about the elementary principles of physiognomy as she references “experts” in the field. In Letters from France, Williams recognizes the skill of Madame Roland to judge character; and Williams’s subsequent work, A
Tour of Switzerland (1798), includes an account of a visit with Lavater. A visit with Lavater in his Zurich home testifies to Williams's continued interest in physiognomy following the French Revolution. Yet, Williams's own representations of countenances within Letters exhibit the complications of assuming the transparency of a face. Her interaction at the height of the Terror with Madame Roland, a well-known practitioner of character reading, may have contributed to her consciousness of the oversimplifications of character which can result from physiognomical analysis.

Madame Roland, an “intellectually inclined” Parisian, “used her home to coordinate Girondin activities” (Andress 397). Williams was close friends with Roland, “whom she probably met in Paris during her stay of December 1791 to April 1792,” and the two ladies socialized at the Jacobin Club, “the cradle and the sanctuary of French liberty” (Kennedy, HMW 85). In her Letters from France, Williams quotes Roland, “an admirable judge of character,” as she reads the countenance of Jacques-Pierre Brissot, a radical journalist and friend to the Girondins:

‘I know nothing more pleasant than the first interview of those who, though connected by correspondence, have never seen each other. We look with earnestness to see if the features of the face bear any resemblance to the physiognomy of the soul, and if the figure of the person confirms the opinion we have formed to the mind . . .’ (165)

Roland’s first tendency in judging Brissot is to look at the “features of the face” in order to see the “physiognomy of the soul.” The term “physiognomy of the soul” is an interesting adaptation of physiognomy, which is commonly associated with the outer features of an individual. The shape of the soul must have been apparent through Brissot’s writings, and it
is interesting that Roland’s analysis begins with her knowledge of Brissot’s character, before the features of his face were examined. In other words, Roland does not blindly accept the face as the primary measure of character. She interrogates the concept of the “physiognomy of the soul” aligning itself with the outward appearance of the man. Williams’s own analysis of countenances follows a similar tendency. Often, the countenance aligns itself with her expectations, but sometimes the face is met with surprise. For physiognomy to be an effective rhetorical strategy, Williams had to adapt it to fit her personal appraisal of a person, much like Roland, who carefully examined the face, but did not dismiss her prior knowledge of character.

Williams’s texts situate her interest in physiognomy among those of other eighteenth-century writers and artists; yet it is not her general use of physiognomy that most notably emerges in her Letters, but her lingering focus on the faces of the French Revolution where her expectations do not lead to the scientific conclusions of character such as Lavater would find. Incorporating sensibility into her facial assessments, Williams looks to the countenances of young people, royalty, innocent victims, and tyrants, leading her to see humankind’s potential, rather than solely judging faces of individuals based on scientific classifications of character. In order to outline the progression of Williams’s use of countenances in light of the evolving Revolution, as well as to trace the shift of her expectations for these character readings, I provide examples of physiognomic readings which are distributed throughout the pages of Letters from France. In Chapter One, “Hope Envisaged,” I examine Williams’s sketches of countenances that embody the idealistic image of Revolutionary hope and blur boundaries between binary opposites. In Chapter Two, “Faces and Facades,” I provide examples of the savage scope of the Revolution and investigate Williams’s representation of
this period of disillusionment when faces deny immediate hope, but offer transparency regarding individuals’ characters and legacies. Finally, in Chapter Three, “The Individual Vis-à-Vis Humanity,” I argue that Williams no longer looks to an individual’s face as a source of virtue or hope; rather, she looks at countenances collectively, as a representation of the inner spirit that maintains virtue even in the midst of unbridled evil.
CHAPTER ONE

Hope Envisaged

I promised to send you a description of the Federation; but it is not to be described! One must have been present, to form any judgment of a scene the sublimity of which depended much less on its external magnificence than on the effect it produced on the minds of the spectators. ‘The people, sure, the people were the sight!’ (1.1.5)

The landscape of the French Revolution affords Williams arresting scenes which she attempts to sketch in her developing travel narrative. Yet, it is the face of the Revolution that catches her eye in distinct moments. Historically, travel writers assessed the physical landscape and observed the population of the region, but for Williams, the challenge was greater. Her intent in recording the Revolution extended beyond mere travel writing and embodied her “recognition of the French Revolution as a significant historical moment and the National Assembly as an unprecedented vehicle for political change” (Kennedy, HMW 55). Kennedy continues, “the essence of her experience in France in 1790 is not one of foreignness, but one of belonging, so that her political agreement with revolutionary ideals acts as a bond between her and the people around her” (HMW 56). Within the framework of “belonging,” Williams’s experiences bring her face to face with individuals who have a story to tell. As she “defies any careful separation of interior and exterior, private and public, sentimental and political,” Williams blurs the distinctions between observer and participant, English and French, the monarchy and the people, and individuals’ faces with those of the masses while she recounts the Revolution (Favret, Romantic Correspondence 276).
Williams begins the first of her Letters from France with the unthreatening voice of a woman writing to a friend at home:

I shall send you once a week the details which I promised when we parted, though I am well aware how very imperfectly I shall be able to describe the images which press upon my mind. It is much easier to feel what is sublime than to paint it; and all I shall be able to give you will be a faint sketch, to which your imagination must add colouring and spirit. (1.1.2)

As Richard Sha observes in “Expanding the Limits of Feminine Writing: The Prose Sketches of Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) and Helen Maria Williams,” Williams uses the unassuming genre of the familiar letter and the sketch “to insulate her feminine persona from masculine politics” (197). As she identifies her writing as sketching, Williams employs a “strategy” used by other eighteenth-century women writers who “began to manipulate the boundaries between masculine and feminine” even as they “denied that their works were in competition with the more finished works of men” (Sha 194). This rhetorical strategy of “sketching” blurs Williams’s identification between her position as a woman and her position as a writer.

In depicting the countenances of her Revolutionary characters, Williams does not provide the details characteristic of physiognomic drawing prescribed by Lavater. Rather, she supplies a general outline based upon her personal perceptions and allows her reader to “add colouring and spirit.” Lavater’s scientific diagrams highlighting specific facial features caused an observer to focus on the features themselves: Williams’s sketches offer an outline of individuals, bringing their personal character to light, while not confining this character to defining features that have set expectations. Acknowledging that she is unable “to paint the
impetuous feelings” of an “exulting multitude,” Williams uses the unthreatening genre of the sketch to spread the story of the Revolution. By doing so, Sha notes, Williams not only makes “history more accountable to individual experience and emotional intensity,” but also resists “the general devaluation of feminine sensibility” as “a kind of witless emotional reaction” (194-5). Williams’s “individual experience” with the Revolution resonates in her epistolary travel narrative, and the “emotional intensity” that drives it causes Letters to appeal beyond reason to the emotions of her readers.

The early moments after the fall of the Bastille ignited hopes for freedom and a justly governed France. As Williams stepped onto the scene of Revolutionary France on July 13, 1790, she was immediately engaged in the emotions of the crowd surrounding her:

Half a million of people assembled at a spectacle, which furnished every image that can elevate the mind of man; which connected the enthusiasm of moral sentiment with the solemn pomp of religious ceremonies; which addressed itself at once to the imagination, the understanding, and the heart! (1.1.5)

Williams’s representation of the “multitude” mirrors the blurring of boundaries that the Revolution itself effected. The “enthusiasm of moral sentiment” is united with the “solemn pomp of religious ceremonies,” and the spectacle appeals simultaneously to the human faculties of imagination, rational thought, and feeling. In this passage and others, the Romantic blurring of conventional distinctions destabilizes the hierarchical framework that supported oppression.

Observing the Fête de la Fédération take place in prominent locations such as Notre Dame and the Champ de Mars leaves Williams, the British travel writer, in a position so united with humanity that she is unable to separate her own nationality or political
tendencies from the scene before her. She is not detached from the scene; she is both a sympathetic observer and an empathetic participant. Williams writes,

you will not suspect that I was an indifferent witness of such a scene. Oh no! this was not a time in which the distinctions of country were remembered. It was the triumph of human kind; it was man asserting the noblest privileges of his nature; and it required but the common feelings of humanity to become in that moment a citizen of the world. For myself, I acknowledge that my heart caught with enthusiasm the general sympathy; my eyes were filled with tears; and I shall never forget the sensations of that day, “while memory holds her seat in my bosom.”7 (1.1.13-14)

As many critics have noted, Williams’s “general sympathy,” “tears,” and “sensations” bespeak a revolutionary “sensibility” that effaces distinctions between the personal and the political. Williams’s sensibility, however, is more than an emotional demonstration of her Revolutionary sympathies; it is also a manifestation of her qualification to become a physiognomist. As Lavater explains, sensibility is not antithetical to the science of physiognomy but an absolutely crucial prerequisite:

Whoever does not dwell with fixed rapture on the aspect of benevolence in action, supposing itself unobserved; whoever remains unmoved by the voice of innocence, the guileless look of unviolated charity, the mother contemplating her beauteous fleeing infant, the warm pressure of the hand of a friend, or his eye swimming in tears; whoever can lightly tear himself from scenes like these,

7 From “To G.A.S. Esq. On Leaving Eton School” – by William Hayward Roberts, line 68 “Even in thy heart while memory holds her seat’ from Poems (1774) (Fraistat and Lanser 69).
and turn them into ridicule, might much easier commit the crime of parricide than become a physiognomist. (79-80)

Recognizing the responsive position that Williams assumes in her journalistic approach to the Revolution provides a basis for analyzing her use of the Revolutionary countenance in Letters from France.

Furthermore, Williams’s responsive approach to the Revolution represents a departure from typical British narratives of the Revolution. Alan Liu, in Wordsworth: The Sense of History, explains that English accounts of the Revolution tended to “flinch away from the revolutionary story” and focused more on the “English subject” (142). The “English subject” does not drive Williams’s Letters instead, her own position as an English woman is blurred by her emotional interaction with the French populace. As Favret observes in “Spectatrice as Spectacle: Helen Maria Williams At Home in the Revolution,” Williams allows “the dramatization of personal feelings [to] dissolve the barriers between reader, writer, and spectacle so that partisan politics are translated into universal, “human” sympathies” (280). Williams’s sensibility blurs the boundaries with sympathy, and invites her readers to join her perspective on the Revolution.

As one prepared to sketch the French Revolution in order to grant the British public a picture of the events unfolding across the English Channel, Williams first outlines the faces of her subjects as unthreatening and full of innocent hopefulness. Youthful countenances embody the positive qualities of freedom and revolution and speak of the promise of days to come instead of the painful memories of being ruled by a monarchy that did not hear the cries of the nation. In her rhetorical strategy of blurring boundaries between binary
opposites, Williams juxtaposes optimistic expectations and faces framed by past contradictions.

In her first Letter, Williams displays the countenance of a young English beauty as the primary exhibit of Revolutionary optimism. As Williams explains, the nameless English beauty is a companion of the French princess, consigned to the care of Madame Brulart, a patriotic citizen, “who wears at her breast a medallion made of a stone of the Bastille” (1.1.38). Although Williams notes in passing that the Princess “has a countenance of the sweetest expression” (1.1.34), the countenance of her English companion offers a clearer index of Williams’s Revolutionary ideals:

We found at St. Leu a young English lady . . . whose appearance is calculated to give the most favourable idea of English beauty. I never saw more regular features, or an expression of countenance more lovely: Madame Brulart, by whom she has been educated, assured me that ‘the mind keeps the promise we had from the face.’ This young lady talked of her own country with a glow of satisfaction very grateful to my feelings. She seems to, ‘Cast a look where England’s glories shine, and bids her bosom sympathise with mine.’ 8 (1.1.41)

While Williams’s description initially appears to confirm English prejudice, the presence of this “English beauty” actually functions as an argument for the French Revolution. In fact, here Williams is employing “beauty as an auxiliary,” much like the organizers of Revolutionary celebrations did, since “no argument would be found more efficacious than that of a pretty face” (1.1.62-63). This beauty stands in stark contrast to Burke’s claims that the French Revolution would develop monstrosity and deformity. Instead, the beauty of the

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8 From Oliver Goldsmith’s “15 The Traveller, or A Prospect of Society,” Lines 421-422.
“English companion” conforms to his own standards within his text On the Sublime and the Beautiful. Burke asserts,

The physiognomy has a considerable share in beauty, especially in that of our own species. The manners give a certain determination to the countenance; which, being observed to correspond pretty regularly with them, is capable of joining the effect of certain agreeable qualities of the mind to those of the body. So that to form a finished human beauty, and to give it its full influence, the face must be expressive of such gentle and amiable qualities as correspond with the softness, smoothness, and delicacy of the outward form. (III.19)

Furthermore, by acknowledging the young beauty’s “regular features,” Williams again highlights the normalcy of the princess’s body, which, positioned pleasantly alongside the French, asserts that English supporters of the Revolution are not peculiar individuals, as Burke projected. In fact, Williams’s depiction coincides with Lavater’s assertion on “National Physiognomy,”9 which portrays English women as “soft and distant from all that is harsh” (87). It is interesting that this young lady is not an English woman with decidedly exotic features, but rather is one whose beauty is firmly rooted in expectation. Both Williams and Lavater seem comfortable with an English ideal, and the young lady of Williams’s narrative is aligned with Williams’s ideal, contrasting with Burke’s expectation for monstrosity in an English sympathizer.

9 “All English women whom I have known personally or by portrait, appear to be composed of marrow and nerve. They are inclined to be tall, slender, soft, and as distant from all that is harsh, rigorous, or stubborn, as heaven is from earth” (Lavater 87).
Edmond Burke’s distrust of the Revolution and veneration for the historical rule of a country could be refuted based on the hopeful face of this intelligent young English woman who is learning alongside the Princess in France. As Williams describes the fall of the Bastille and the extravagant celebrations that followed, the leadership of clear thinking individuals appears in the development and adoption of The Declaration of the Rights of Man in August of 1789. Certainly, education and reasoned thoughts were fostered in France as well as on the English mainland, and Williams transcends the boundaries between the Revolutionaries’ use of beauty and Burke’s expectations for beauty when she unites the two with “agreeable qualities of the mind” in her description of the young English woman.

Furthermore, the friendship between the French Princess and the young English beauty suggests a paradigm for a relationship between their two countries based on shared ideals. Williams desires a propitious liberty to appear in England, much like the hopeful beauty of the young English woman in France. Williams exclaims that liberty “appears in France adorned with the freshness of youth, and is loved with the ardour of passion. In England she is seen in her matron state, and like other ladies at that period, is beheld with sober veneration” (1.1.71). Through the countenance of the young English beauty, Williams highlights the “freshness” which permeates the French Revolution, and implicitly contrasts this hopefulness which stands in opposition to the steadfast English society defended by Burke. Certainly, Williams is grateful for a moment to sketch the pure countenance of one who had a “glow of satisfaction” as she spoke of England, as Williams relates to her homeland and impresses her readers with the presence of youthful hope which extended beyond national borders.
As her first volume of *Letters* continues, Williams presents additional embodiments of France’s hopes for the future as she depicts the two children of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. The young princess, Williams notes, “is a beautiful girl” while “the Dauphin . . . is the idol of the people” (1.1.86). Central to this representation are the changes in the way that the French populace viewed the family. One year after the fall of the Bastille, Williams explains that the King is “extremely popular,” and the people expect that the Dauphin “will be educated in the principles of the new constitution, and will be taught to consider himself less a king than a citizen” (1.1.86-87). Hope guides France’s view of the family as well as Williams’s representation.

When she later describes the portraits of the children, “two pictures in tawdry gilt frames,” however, Williams suggests that they are not entirely free from the trappings of the monarchy. Her suggestion that the pictures “slandered the sweet countenances” of the children recalls the pornographic campaign to discredit their mother. Williams, nevertheless, perceives goodness in the young children who are destined to lead the country in the days ahead. Her concern for the “tawdry gilt frames” ruining the children’s image implies that the position of the monarchy should not be the only lens through which to view these children. The children’s faces are oppressed by the frame that holds their image still. Williams’s language suggests the living nature of the frame that actively “slandered” the children’s appearance, while their “sweet countenances” were defenseless to the violence of the frame. This framing disturbs Williams, as the depiction of youthful promise is restricted by the surrounding royal border. Her criticism of the frames implies her desire to cast away all

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10 Lynn Hunt’s article, “The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution,” provides a thorough examination of depictions of sexual depictions of Marie Antoinette that were popular during the French Revolution.
ancient frameworks that distort countenances and impose artificial distinctions between royalty and the general populace.

Williams's investment in the Revolutionary ideal of equality becomes even more explicit in her retelling of the Du-Fossé story. This story of heartache results from Baron Du-Fossé resisting his son's marriage to a commoner. Through the course of events, the young couple is separated by the father's obsessive opposition to the marriage, and they suffer repeated heartache before being reunited, after the death of the tyrannical Baron, and fittingly, after the fall of the Bastille. Williams tells the emotional story, representing the lives of many who fell prey to the tyrannical rule of the ancien régime, but also to show the hope represented in the destruction of this establishment.

For these reasons, perhaps, Williams does not sketch the individual countenances of the tyrannical father or the young lovers. Instead, she examines the countenances of the celebratory crowd which gathers to commemorate the end of oppression. It is the collective countenance that now catches Williams's eye as she joins in celebrating the freedom of those now released from the grip of tyranny by playing the role of "Liberty." Recounting her role in the celebration, Williams writes,

> the scarf was thrown over my shoulder, and the piece concluded with Le Carillon national: after a grand chorus of ça ira, the performers arranged themselves in order, and ça ira was danced. Ça ira hung on every lip, ça ira glowed on every countenance! (1.1.205)

"Ça ira," meaning "it will be fine" or "there is hope," not only resonates in the voices of the people but also lights up the facial features with hope. As the dance continues
Williams reflects,

the gentlemen danced with the peasant girls, and the ladies with the peasants. A more joyous scene, or a set of happier countenances, my eyes never beheld. When I recollected the former situation, of my friends, the spectacle before me seemed an enchanting vision: I could not forbear, the whole evening, comparing the past with the present, and while I meant to be exceedingly merry, I felt that tears, which would not be suppressed, were gushing from my eyes - but they were tears of luxury. (1.1.206)

The dance combined with joyful countenances brings personal emotion onto the page of Williams's writing, and Williams's own countenance is altered by tears as she responds to the faces and stories of those surrounding her. Fruchtmann suggests that she offers a clear example of "refined sensibility" as "a constant presence in her own chronicle. Williams not only recorded the history of these years, but also revealed her own reactions and feelings, sensations and thoughts to the events unfolding around her" ("Politics of Sensibility" 188-189). As she reacts with overwhelming joy to the glow of the countenances around her, her identification leads her from being a journalistic bystander to a participant in the celebration of humanity and hope.

Scholars are quick to acknowledge the impact of Williams's use of romantic, emotional language on her audience. For example, Kennedy writes that Williams's emotional response is "meant to influence her readers, to have a power over them as her emotions have overpowered her body, so that heart and mind and body together reveal her approval of the Revolution that has produced such family happiness" (HMW 71). Yet, critical attention highlights Williams's emotional response and ignores the countenances of the individuals
with whom she relates. In order to gain an understanding of Williams’s response to the scene, an acknowledgment of the surrounding faces is essential. Countenances offer a glimpse beyond the actual celebration taking place: they make the celebration personal. Williams is not weeping merely to “influence her readers”; rather, she is weeping because the pains and joys of humanity encircle her, and she finds herself identifying with the Revolutionary ideals that are highlighted on the faces of her friends and acquaintances. The preceding sorrow of the Du-Fossé family blurs into a collective hope for the nation, and the countenances of the crowd speak for many broken lives that find hope in new-found liberty.

As both an observer and a participant, Williams blurs her role in the Revolution as she sketches hopeful countenances that destabilize expectations or limiting categorizations. Whether observing the face of a beautiful young woman, lamenting the framing of the royal children, or looking to the masses to celebrate the joys of a family, Williams persistently sees beyond the surface of the countenance. Her sketches provide an outline of hope, and she expects her readers to fill in the details which will bring that hope to life. Yet, of great significance is the neglected representation of early opposition or despair on the countenances surrounding the Revolutionary story. A journalist who sketches the countenances of hope seemingly should sketch the countenances of those who resist or question the path that the Revolution is heading towards. Certainly, the absence of this representation leads to complications as the Revolution diversifies in focus, and the countenances of Williams’s characters cannot simply embody hope: they must also represent the painful realities of the ongoing struggle for freedom.
CHAPTER TWO

Faces and Facades

What has become of the transport which beat high in every bosom, when the assembled million of the human race vowed on the altar of their country, in the name of the represented nation, inviolable fraternity and union - - an eternal federation! This was indeed the golden age of revolution. - - But it is past! - - the enchanting spell is broken, and the fair scenes of beauty and of order, through which imagination wandered, are transformed into the desolation of the wilderness, and clouded by the darkness of the tempest. If the genius of Liberty - - profaned Liberty! Does not arise in his might, and crush those violators of freedom, whose crimes have almost broken the heart of humanity, the inhabitants of Paris may indeed 'wish for the wings of the dove, that they may fly away and be at rest - - for there is violence and strife in the city.' (1.3.6-7)

Revolutionary France's countenance of joy, the "enchanting vision" of the first Letters, steadily transformed into a reality of pain and fears (1.1.206). The very bonds which were cast off in the early days of the Revolution were reinstituted by tyrants, fixed on destruction of the monarchy and the rise of a new system. The guillotine, the infamous instrument of death associated with the French Revolution, was first used on April 25, 1792. From this point on, death became intimately tied to the Revolution, and conflicting factions of the Revolution clashed repeatedly as tensions mounted. In August of 1792, the Tuileries Palace was stormed and the Royal family was detained. While the Revolutionaries broadened their control of Paris, the September Massacres evidenced their fear of revolt and their dramatic display of power as they killed more than one thousand prisoners based on fears of treachery. The King himself was tried on December 10, 1792, sentenced to death on January 14, 1793, and publicly executed on January 21, 1793. Within this chaos, Williams found herself caught between ideals of freedom and the reality of chaotic instability.
Williams faces an arduous challenge of representation as the scene of the Revolution changes and death reigns over hopes of liberty. Gary Kelly explains,

Revolutionary death is a major theme in these Letters, leveling Revolutionary leaders Williams knew, monarchs, and a host of ordinary individuals and families, ironically uniting the nation under Jacobin Terror. Death even mediates contrasting figures of Revolution – on one hand ‘ferocious crimes’ and on the other ‘the sublime enthusiasm of the virtuous affections’ that bid ‘us cease to despair of humanity, that convert ‘the throb of indignant horror into the glow of sympathetic admiration,’ and that bid us ‘turn from the tribunal of blood,’ from Robespierre and ‘his jury of assassins’ to parents and children dying with or for their loved ones . . . . (62)

Weaving her Revolutionary ideals throughout her narrative, Williams navigates her own emotional response to the chaos and death as she retells history and describes the countenances of those caught in the Terror. Avoiding mere historical accounts of the scenes, she peers into the faces of individuals and assumes their transparency, looking for inner qualities that will sustain their reputations. Williams’s depiction of countenances now involves the faces of those whose rule either destroys lives and shatters hopes for liberty, or those individuals who, having lost all, turn their faces towards the final stage of hope, that which lies on the other side of the guillotine.

Maximilien Robespierre’s face provides the most striking representation of evil that infiltrated the Revolution and robbed the French of their dreams for liberty.
Williams remarks,

at the head of this band of conspirators is Robespierre – gloomy and saturnine in his disposition, with a countenance of such dark aspect as seems the index of no ordinary guilt – fanatical and exaggerated in his avowed principles of liberty, possessing that species of eloquence which gives him power over the passions, and that cool determined temper that regulates the most ferocious designs with the most calm and temperate prudence. His crimes do not appear to be the result of passion, but of some deep and extraordinary malignity, and he seems formed to subvert and to destroy. (1.3.7)

Williams finds Robespierre's countenance an accurate “index” of his dark and guilty nature. According to her description, the man’s face is closely related to his heart, and to his actions, which come from “some deep and extraordinary malignity.” In a later letter, when describing “the period . . . when the visible signs of patriotism were dirty linen, pantaloons, uncombed hair, red caps, or black wigs” (2.1.193-194), Williams depicts Robespierre's countenance in a similar manner:

It is remarkable enough, that at this period Robespierre always appeared not only dressed with neatness, but with some degree of elegance, and while he called himself leader of the sans-cullotes, never adopted the costume of his band. His hideous countenance, far from being involved in a black wig, was decorated with hair carefully arranged, and nicely powdered; while he endeavored to hide those emotions of his inhuman soul which his eyes might sometimes have betrayed, beneath a large pair of spectacles, though he had no defect in his sight. (2.1.194-195)
Williams's descriptions of Robespierre are complementary to other contemporary accounts. John Moore, a British correspondent, for example, details Robespierre's "disagreeable countenance, which announces more fire than understanding; in his calmest moments, he conceals with difficulty the hatred and malignity which is said to exist in his heart, and which his features are admirably formed to express" (206). Both Williams and Moore reference Robespierre's attempt to "hide" or "conceal" his true feelings, but his countenance itself speaks louder than his ability to conceal. Particularly telling in William's depiction of Robespierre are the "spectacles," which he vainly wears in an attempt to alter his malevolent countenance. According to both narratives, Robespierre himself is conscious that his countenance may betray his true character, and the fear of being discovered encourages the concealment of his eyes. Williams unmasks Robespierre's countenance by acknowledging the false spectacles, and penetrates their concealment to look into his eyes. As Antoine de Baecque observes in "The Great Spectacle of Transparency,"

laying bare is one of the weapons of revolutionary writing: it transforms a 'scientific' method by offering it a political subject, its communications giving birth to a flourishing network of images, to an imagination. The figures of this imagination of reading the body are all grouped around the theme of unmasking. First, the instruments of clear sight: spectacles, lorgnettes, lanterns, rays of light, all symbolic of the scrutinizing eye, all derived, often thanks to laughter, from the great jumble of scientific experiments of the time.

(237)

The duplicity of Robespierre's glasses provides an opportunity for Williams to invert the trope of transparency. With his spectacles, Robespierre poses as the embodiment of corrected
vision, but he is actually the agent of a repressive, tyrannical surveillance operation. The very
glasses which appear to help him “scrutinize” the people of the Revolution are the same
glasses that attempt to mask his own character. Working as a masking tool, which ironically
exposes his character, the spectacles draw attention to Robespierre’s eyes.

Williams’s deliberate consideration of Robespierre’s eyes, which act as a window to his
soul, is consistent with Lavater’s emphasis on the eyes since

the images of our secret agitations are particularly painted in the eyes. The eye
appertains more to the soul than any other organ; seems affected by, and to
participate in, all its motions; expresses sensations the most lively, passions the
most tumultuous, feelings the most delightful, and sentiments, the most
delicate. It explains them in all their force, in all their purity, as they take
birth; and transmits them by traits so rapid, as to infuse into other minds the
fire, the activity, the very image with which themselves are inspired. The eye at
once receives and reflects the intelligence of thought, and the warmth of
sensibility. It is the sense of the mind, the tongue of the understanding. (51-52)

Williams’s assessment of Robespierre acknowledges that his “secret agitations” are not easily
hidden, even when he makes the effort to conceal. Robespierre’s spectacles may have worked
as a barrier that deflects, which stands in contrast to the eye that “receives and reflects . . . the
warmth of sensibility.” Yet, transparency is inevitable because the eye is more closely related
to the soul “than any other organ,” and Williams sees Robespierre’s “inhuman soul” when she
looks into his eyes (2.1.94). Williams, exhibiting her own perceptive sensibility, both “receives
and reflects” as she focuses on Robespierre’s eyes.
Beyond Robespierre’s eyes, the “disagreeable countenance” that portrays the “hatred and malignity” in his heart is similar to the “dark aspect” accounted for by Williams. Another contemporary of Williams, J.G. Millingen, an Englishman, writes,

“There was something singularly strange and fantastic in this extraordinary man, at least, so it appeared to me. He smiled with an affected look of kindness; but there was something sardonic and demoniac in his countenance, and deep marks of the small-pox added to the repulsive character of his physiognomy. He appeared to me like a bird of prey – a vulture; his forehead and temples were low and flattened; his eyes were of a fawn colour, and most disagreeable to look at; his dress was careful, and I recollect that he wore a frill and ruffles . . . . (255)

Even when a temporary change, such as a smile, affected Robespierre’s countenance, his underlying character still reflected “something sardonic and demoniac.” His face and his soul appeared so intimately linked that no masking, either naturally occurring or crafted by science, could hide the true nature of this man. Collectively, these descriptions of Robespierre reveal that the apparent evil which pervaded his inner character was authenticated on his countenance.

Edmund Burke’s analysis of “ugliness” corresponds with the depictions of Robespierre provided by Williams, Moore, and Millingen. Burke states, “Ugliness I imagine likewise to be consistent enough with an idea of the sublime. But I would by no means insinuate that ugliness itself is a sublime idea, unless united with such qualities as excite a strong terror” (On the Sublime and the Beautiful, III.21). Robespierre’s countenance clearly falls into the distinctions outlined in Burke’s text since the terror incited by his face, corresponds with the
Terror he encouraged and inflicted throughout the Revolution, and leaves no question as to his inner character. Whether Robespierre is wearing “spectacles” or smiling “with an affected look of kindness,” the inner man breaks past the barriers and reveals his heart. The face that he attempts to display can not counter the truth of the character lying beneath his features. This individual, whose presence elicited fear in the hearts of the Parisians, had a transparent countenance that shattered hopes for the future.

With Robespierre’s easily deciphered countenance determining his position in the Revolution, Williams proceeds to highlight the central characters of her Revolutionary sketch, the victims of the guillotine. In the moments before the blade would slice the heads of the victims, Williams sketches final images of the countenance and provides a moment for the countenance to illuminate the inner goodness which may supersede any accusations held against them. Herein, she reveals the power of sublime moments to reinforce the beauty of an individual’s soul. The distinctions between Girondist and Jacobin, and royalty and commoner, tend to dissolve under her pen’s record of their moments of crisis.

The death of Louis XVI offered Williams an opportunity to represent royalty by way of the countenance. Yet, Williams’s depiction of his countenance at the actual point of death is much less descriptive than the historical details she affords prior to his death. Williams records,

The French king received the intelligence of his approaching fate without dismay. He displayed far more firmness upon the scaffold than he had done upon the throne, and atoned for the weakness and inconsistency of his conduct in life, by the calmness and fortitude of his behavior in death. (1.4.32)
Williams’s narrative initially evokes pity for the King, even as she takes into account the former “weakness” of his life. Yet, she straightforwardly describes Louis XVI at the guillotine and the “despair [which] seized upon the mind of the unfortunate monarch– his countenance assumed a look of horror– twice with agony he repeated, “Je suis perdu! Je suis perdu!” [“I am undone! I am undone!”] (1.4.38). With the absence of her typical romantic imaging, Williams’s initial pity for the king shades off into indifference, possibly suggesting that Louis XVI was nothing more than a misunderstood figurehead. Her lack of attention to the King’s face may have stemmed from the numerous accounts of his death, to which she did not feel a desire to add her own explication. Writing for the English people, Williams may also have felt hesitation to dramatize an event that was certain to arouse hostility towards the French Revolution. In addition, her personal letter to Hester Thrale Piozzi, dated December 12, 1792, precedes the King’s death by over a year and reveals how her emotions likely wavered as the scenes of 1793 unfolded:

I never took so little interest in politics as I have done lately – I have been too sick and too sorrowful to have the power of considering whether monarchies or republics are best – and at present all my feelings are on the side of Lewis the sixteenth – whom whether he be guilty or innocent we know to be unfortunate which gives him a sufficient claim to pity – indeed even the mob of Paris seemed to feel this sentiment yesterday – for they observed the most profound silence as he passed along to the national convention – how imagination is struck by such a fall from greatness.
The ultimate death of the king provides another incident of Williams's own "imagination" being "struck by such a fall from greatness." Certainly, Williams was left with confusion while observing the evolving political situation.

Marie Antoinette provides the second example of royalty facing the guillotine. Her countenance on the morning of her execution, October 16, 1793, grants Williams with another opportunity for a rhetorical expression of internal conflict:

On her way to execution, where she was taken after the accustomed manner in a cart, with her hands tied behind her, she paid little attention to the priest who attended her, and still less to the surrounding multitude. Her eyes, though bent on vacancy, did not conceal the emotion that was labouring at her heart - her cheeks were sometimes in a singular manner streaked with red, and sometimes overspread with deadly paleness; but her general look was that of indignant sorrow. She reached the place of execution about noon; and when she turned her eyes toward the gardens and the palace, she became visibly agitated. She ascended the scaffold with precipitation, and her head was in a moment held up to the people by the executioner. (2.1.155-156)

Characteristically avoiding interaction with the French populace, Marie Antoinette appears self-absorbed and aloof in her final moments. Again, the eyes act as a fair measure of the soul, and the queen's eyes were not able to "conceal" the true emotions that she felt. Her face exhibits vacillating emotions between personal contemplation and disengagement, which is best seen in her cheeks as they fluctuate between red and "deadly paleness." Referencing the color on Marie Antoinette's cheeks, Williams employs elements of pathognomy as a
compliment to physiognomy. Lavater explains the distinction between the two sciences as:

Physiognomy is the science or knowledge of the correspondence between the external and the internal man, the visible supersicies, and the invisible contents. Physiognomy, opposed to pathognomy, is the knowledge of the signs of the power and inclinations of men – Pathognomy is the knowledge of the signs of the passions. Physiognomy therefore teaches the knowledge of character at rest, and pathognomy of character in motion. . . . Physiognomy may be compared to the sum-total of the mind; pathognomy, to the interest which is the product of this sum-total. The former shows what a man is in general, the latter what he becomes at particular moments; or, the one what he might be, the other what he is. (24-25)

The flash of red on Marie Antoinette’s face which vanishes as white reappears, represents a pathognomic reading as Williams pays attention to “what he [or she] becomes at particular moments.” In her final moments, Marie Antoinette’s countenance proclaims her erratic passions instead of measured strength or beauty.

Williams’s account of Marie Antoinette’s death outlines a less heroic portrait than accounts voiced by Mary Robinson, the actor and writer, and other eyewitnesses. Robinson records Marie Antoinette’s final moments from a distinctly feminist approach, meant to present her readers with an example of feminine strength. As a result, Robinson’s account, as part of A Letter to the Women of England, promotes solidarity among women, trumping her possible Revolutionary sympathies. Robinson asserts,

if there are political skeptics, who affect to place the genuine strength of soul to a bold but desperate temerity, rather than to a sublime effort of heroism, let
them contemplate the last moments of Marie Antoinette; this extraordinary woman, whose days had passed in luxurious splendor, whose will had been little less than law! Behold her hurled from the most towering altitude of power and vanity; insulted, mocked, derided, stigmatized, yet unappalled even at the instant when she was compelled to endure an ignominious death! Let the strength of her mind, the intrepidity of her soul, put to the shame the vaunted superiority of man; and at the same time place the character in a point of view, at once favourable to nature, and worthy of example. (52-53)

Robinson’s attitude towards Marie Antoinette focuses on her feminine strength which puts men to shame, especially in light of her “ignominious death.” In contrast, Williams’s Revolutionary sympathies constrain her from making equivalent heroic claims for Marie Antoinette’s character, and she leaves unsaid that which Robinson makes explicit.

Williams sketches the Queen’s final portrait by focusing on her extreme emotions and frustration with her impending execution, rather than highlighting her composure or courage. Although Williams employs an understanding tone for “the emotion that was labouring at her heart,” she qualifies that representation by emphasizing that Marie Antoinette’s countenance exhibits “indignant sorrow.” Using the rhetorical strategy of the speaking countenance, specifically from a pathognomonic standpoint, Williams allows the face to speak for the inconsistencies that she observes in the queen by underscoring her disparate emotions.

The depiction of Marie Antoinette resonates with a sense of detachment in terms of her own disengagement from the surrounding crowd and Williams’s emotional remoteness from the event, rather than invoking characteristic sympathy. Williams’s relatively restrained perspective, however, may have been calculated, as she represented Marie Antoinette’s death
objectively for the British who valued the monarchy, while implicitly recognizing the failure of the French throne. Ultimately, Williams’s faith in human nature is what spares the king and queen from harsh portrayals. Williams’s private admission that the king’s fate gives “sufficient claim to pity,” and her depiction of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, coincide with her measured sympathetic response to these figureheads caught in the torrent of the Revolution.

Williams’s depictions of royal countenances highlight the complications of understanding the monarchy, but other victims of the Terror receive generous portrayals of their characters manifested in moments of crisis. Offering a thorough analysis of Williams’s representations of scenes at the guillotine, Deborah Kennedy’s article, “Spectacle of the Guillotine: Helen Maria Williams and the Reign of Terror,” details the means by which Williams valorizes courageous women at their moments of death. Given that Williams did not attend the actual executions, she relied on narratives conveyed to her, choosing to retell the anecdotes in her own Revolutionary history (Kennedy, “Spectacle” 104). Kennedy explains that Williams focused

on images of victims before the execution, in postures that may be called, ‘virtue in distress.’ She refused to emphasize macabre images of baskets full of bleeding heads. For one thing, it would be unseemly for a woman to linger on the goriness of execution, and for another, her rhetorical strategy was to emphasize the innocence of the victims, in order to show them as martyrs to the cause of liberty. (“Spectacle” 104)

Evading the “bleeding heads,” Williams often looks to countenances in the moments before the blade dropped. Burke, in contrast, “emphasized the blood and gore in order to make the
French out to be animals and demons, and therefore to discredit the entire Revolution” (Kennedy, “Spectacle” 104). Williams’s representations of the countenances found at the guillotine are often colored with her desire to focus on the individual characteristics and inner essence of victims, rather than offering objective historical accounts.

The technique of “virtue in distress” becomes quickly apparent in the retelling of Charlotte Corday and Madame Roland’s deaths. Williams sees beyond political ideals to human ideals, outlining displays of purity and strength possessed by women steadfastly facing the guillotine. Embodying Williams’s image of “blooming beauties . . . [who] submitted to the stroke of the executioner with placid smiles on their countenances,” Corday and Roland’s beauty of character transformed their horrific deaths into heroic tales as they “looked like angels in their flight to heaven” (2.1.213).

Williams’s vivid account of Corday’s countenance during her trial for the murder of Jean-Paul Marat and subsequent approach to the guillotine speaks of her confidence and purity. Corday, convinced of her need to “destroy the evil that she was certain had befouled the Revolution,” was led to “enter the public realm with the firm self-assurance that she possessed a world-historical mission,” explains Fruchtman in “The Politics of Sensibility: Helen Maria Williams’s Julia and the Terror in France” (188). She fulfilled her perceived task by assassinating Marat, “the earliest and harshest spokesman for revolutionary Terror through his journal L’Ami du peuple” in his bathtub on July 13, 1793. Four days later, on July 17, 1793, Corday died at the guillotine. Williams introduces this resolute young woman by looking to her countenance as a measure of her inner character, rather than reducing her
character to her violent actions. Partially quoting Louvet,\textsuperscript{11} Williams explains Corday's countenance at her trial:

There was so engaging a softness in her countenance, that it was difficult to conceive how she could have armed herself with sufficient intrepidity to execute the deed. Her answers to the interrogatories of the court were full of point and energy . . . . Her face sometimes beamed with sublimity, and was sometimes covered with smiles . . . . She retired while the jury deliberated on their verdict; and when she again entered the tribunal there was a majestic solemnity in her demeanour which perfectly became her situation. (2.1.132)

Williams assigns Corday a clear presence of mind, notably void of indecision, just as there was no indecision in her assassination of Marat. In “The New Cordays: Helen Craik and British Representations of Charlotte Corday, 1793-1800,” Adriana Craciun notes that, “for Williams, Corday’s sublimity is always connected to her beauty, so that her face is shown to shift from beaming to smiling, and Williams’s meditation on her ‘softness’ follows the matter-of-fact description of her stabbing of Marat” (208). The shifting of emotion on Corday’s face is loaded with positive implications, whereas the similar shifting of Marie Antoinette’s face bears negative implications of selfishness. In Corday’s case, this variation was between the sublime and the beautiful, but Williams’s representation of Marie Antoinette displays judgment of her character.

The Revolutionary ideals of Williams are impossible to ignore, as she grants Corday’s countenance “softness,” “sublimity,” and “majestic solemnity.” “Corday embodies both sublimity and beauty, softness and firmness,” posits Craciun, “much as the Revolution itself

\textsuperscript{11} Louvet was a journalist, member of the National Convention, and supporter of the Girondists.
did in Williams’s eyes” (208). For Williams, Corday epitomizes the ideal woman of conviction: sensible, yet fierce – soft, yet solemn. Fruchtman states, “Williams described her demeanor during her trial, focusing on ‘a softness of countenance’ in order to depict a woman whose love of family...bespeaks a woman of great devotion and ‘serenity’” (“Politics of Sensibility” 188). Approaching her violent death, Corday’s serenity continues to be represented in Williams’s sketch.

Williams’s account of Corday’s trial and execution displays respect for the conviction that moved Corday from an observer to an active participant in the Revolution. This resilient respect for a woman which whom Williams does not agree politically does not discredit her analysis of Corday;12 rather, it emphasizes her ability to see past political distinctions between individuals and to look to the underlying character that drives their personal actions. Williams explains,

It is difficult to conceive the kind of heroism which she displayed on the way to execution. The women who were called furies of the guillotine, and who had assembled to insult her on leaving the prison, were awed into silence by her demeanour, while some of the spectators uncovered their heads before her, and others gave loud tokens of applause. There was such an air of chastened exultation thrown over her countenance, that she inspired sentiments of love rather than sensations of pity. (2.1.133-34)

It is important to note that Corday’s countenance “inspired sentiments of love rather than sensations of pity.” Her countenance brings the spectators to feel connected with her on an emotional level, not just identifying her as a criminal facing punishment. Chris Jones, in

12 Corday was a Royalist.
“Helen Maria Williams and Radical Sensibility,” explains that Corday fits the ideal model of women dying for principles as they “are not the heroines of sentimental novels, languishing in imagined terrors or prey to mental distraction, but strong women facing the guillotine with the heroic firmness of those dying in a great cause” (12). Williams's final description of Corday's countenance exhibits that she is not a victim: her face commands respect. Williams records,

She ascended the scaffold with undaunted firmness, and knowing that she had only to die, was resolved to die with dignity...When he took off her handkerchief, the moment before she bent under the fatal stroke, she blushed deeply; and her head, which was held up to the multitude the moment after, exhibited this last impression of offended modesty. (2.1.135)

Most telling in Williams's idyllic description of Corday is the focus on her blush, which carries with it implications of the eighteenth-century understanding of countenances. In her article on cosmetics and the eighteenth century, Tassie Gwilliam explains that a blush was a “prized sign of female sensibility and modesty” (148). Gwilliam continues by citing Roy Porter's assertion that “the test of the modest woman lay in her capacity to blush. She who couldn’t blush was a woman without shame” (148). Unlike the queen, whose face flashed between red and pale white, this young woman blushes. Thus, Williams exhibits that even in death, Corday's face represents her modesty and female sensibility, much like that of Madame Roland.

Madame Roland, a close friend of Williams as a result of their Girondin ties, embodies a sense of femininity and firmness even more pronounced than that in Williams's representation of Corday. Facing charges of being a Girondist sympathizer, and undergoing
interrogation to reveal the names of her friends who were also sympathizers, Roland proceeds with an air of dignity. Williams notes,

She was tall and well shaped, her air was dignified, and although more than thirty-five years of age, she was still handsome. Her countenance had an expression of uncommon sweetness, and her full dark eyes beamed with the brightest rays of intelligence. I visited her in the prison of St. Pelagie, where her soul, superior to circumstances, retained its accustomed serenity, and she conversed with the same animated cheerfulness in her little cell as she used to do in the hotel of the minister. . . . She told me she expected to die; and the look of placid resignation with which she spoke of it, convinced me that she was prepared to meet death with a firmness worthy of her exalted character.

(2.1.196)

Williams acknowledges “an expression of uncommon sweetness” on Roland’s countenance, as well as returning to “eyes [that] beamed with the brightest rays of intelligence.” The juxtaposition of “sweetness” and “intelligence” suggests a union between a kind spirit and a strong mind. Burke’s boundaries between the sublime and the beautiful are broken in the duality of her “sweetness” and “firmness.” In addition, Williams’s analysis of Roland corresponds with Lavater’s observation that dark eyes typically reflect more “strength” and “thought” than blue eyes, which are “generally more significant of weakness, effeminacy, and yielding” (48-49). As Williams celebrates both the beauty and the mind of Madame Roland, Roland’s strength emerges.

During Madame Roland’s trial, the unjust accusations and questioning lead Williams to record, “When brought before the revolutionary tribunal she preserved the most heroical
firmness, though she was treated with such barbarity, and insulted by questions so injurious to her honour, that sometimes the tears of indignation started from her eyes” (2.1.197). The final charges brought against Madame Roland, according to Gita May in Madame Roland and the Age of Revolution, were that “she was a schemer who had presided over many gatherings of the Girondist faction and who, even while in prison, had secretly corresponded with the proscribed men” (284). Through the “tears of indignation,” Williams continues to highlight Roland’s resilience, even when placed under great pressure. The softness of Roland’s character can be seen in the “tears,” but the strength of her character is seen in the “indignation.”

Finally, Roland’s approach to the guillotine on November 8, 1793 gives a last glimpse of this brave woman. Madame Sophie Grandchamp, a friend of Roland, provides an eyewitness account of the actual journey to the guillotine stating, “she was fresh, calm, and smiling . . . I read in her eyes the pleasure she felt at seeing me at this ultimate rendezvous” (May 286). In Williams’s account, Madame Roland’s countenance is not represented, but the impression of her white clothing tells a story that strongly agrees with the early record of her soul:

On the day of her trial she dressed herself in white: her long dark hair flowed loosely to her waist, and her figure would have softened any hearts less ferocious than those of her judges. On her way to the scaffold she was not only composed, but sometimes assumed an air of gaiety, in order to encourage a person who was condemned to die at the same time, but who was not armed with the same fortitude. (2.1.199-200)

Roland’s execution grants an illustration of the Terror of the Revolution, as Williams loses her close friend and elevates Roland into an image of virtuous stature. The absence of the
description of Roland’s countenance suggests that Williams could not bear the implications of intimately examining the face of her friend so near to the point of execution. Yet, Williams’s depictions of Roland’s countenance during her imprisonment echo in the observation that Roland’s “figure would have softened any hearts.”

The Terror of the Revolution appears on the faces of tyrants, such as Robespierre, the Royal family, including Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, and women of courage, like Corday and Madame Roland. Williams’s portrayal of each of their countenances is directly related to her expectations for the face. In the case of Robespierre, evil cannot be concealed, because his eyes penetrate the mask he attempts to hide behind. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette’s countenances speak of Williams’s discomfort with the Crown, as Williams provides an emotionally guarded response to their plights. Corday and Madame Roland, though women of differing political beliefs, are celebrated for their firmness in the face of adversity. They each represent the strength of beauty and firmness united in a woman committed to her convictions. Certainly, the transparency of countenances during the Terror of the Revolution invokes mixed readings: to some individuals Williams seems gracious, but to others, she appears impassive. In subsequent Letters, countenances continue to speak of character; yet Williams modifies their descriptions as she reconciles expectations with grim realities. As Terror is dethroned, Williams assays the transparency of a countenance and looks deeper into humanity, lifting her eyes from individual stories, turning instead to the greater face of the French populace.
CHAPTER THREE

The Individual Vis-à-Vis Humanity

My pen, wearied of tracing successive pictures of human crimes and human calamity, pursues its task with reluctance; while my heart springs forward to that fairer epocha which now beams upon the friends of liberty - that epocha when the French republic has cast aside her dismal shroud, stained with the blood of the patriot, and bathed with the tears of the mourner; and presents the blessed images of justice and humanity healing the deep wounds of her afflicted bosom...the generous affections, the tender sympathies so long repressed by the congealing stupefaction of terror, burst forth with uncontrollable energy; and the enthusiasm of humanity has taken [the] place of the gloomy terror of despair... (2.3.1-2)

Caught between recognizing the price of shattered dreams of liberty and acknowledging the progress available through even the most horrendous nightmares that prey on humanity, Williams faced a challenge of representation as she looked on the faces of the Revolutionary oppressors. Robespierre’s tyrannical rule escalated after the Festival of the Supreme Being that precipitated the Great Terror, which “[was] not another grim episode of la volante punative that animates the masses: it [was] the official policy of government” (Jordan 203). From June 10 to July 27, 1794, the Great Terror, “cold-blooded, legalized, ritualized, bureaucratic, [and] administered with gruesome efficiency,” functioned and claimed 1,376 victims (204). Yet, the build-up of this tyrannical rule also lead to a weakening of Robespierre’s own ability to maintain this functioning temporary form of government (206-7). Robespierre ultimately fell on 9 Thermidor, leaving behind a legacy of violent rule.

In her final volumes of Letters from France, composed after the fall of Robespierre, Williams retrospectively reflects on the demise of violent men who face their own eradication.

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13 Williams’s second series of Letters from France “recounted the chief events of the Reign of Terror and its immediate aftermath.” In 1795, three volumes were released, and the fourth and final volume was released in 1796 (Kennedy, HMW 107).
Playing the role of both journalist and human sympathizer, Williams carefully crafts her Letters as the Terror ends and an uncertain future lies ahead. Former Girondin sympathizers, such as William Wordsworth, turned from the Revolution and removed themselves from the scene which caused such disillusionment, but Williams steadfastly stood beside the Revolutionary ideals, and was forced to extend her vision beyond the immediate desolation of misguided enthusiasm. Kennedy suggests that the loss of her Girondin friends during the Reign of Terror leads Williams to “avenge” their deaths (HMW 109), but Williams’s later representations of countenances interrogate this assumption. The woman who in 1790 enthusiastically penned the events of the victorious celebration is the same woman who, sobered by reality, in 1794 looks deeper into the core of humanity for an explanation; and the countenance affords Williams a means for doing so.

After being surrounded by Terror and death, Williams demonstrates the capacity for countenances to speak beyond the grave. The Revolution demanded sources for lead, and as coffins were opened, Williams looked into the faces of the deceased, finding resiliency in their countenances:

One of the pretenses for this violation of the dead . . . was the want of the coffins that enclosed them to make bullets for the use of the army. The cemeteries were therefore called the revolutionary lead mines. If the ramblings of imagination might be indulged amidst the horror which this sort of plunder inspired, we might pursue these revolutionary instruments of death to their destination, and see many an emigrant laid prostrate with the former covering of his parents’ dust. On many a countenance doomed to long night, the sun once again shone, and many met its beams whose features preserved all
their original force and character. Among others, Madame Sévigné was found entire with the unfading bloom of healthy and virtuous old age: but as the edict against aristocracy and privileges comprehended talents as well as birth, the wise as well as the mighty suffered in the general proscription against lead coffins. (2.2.191-192)

The identification of Madame Sévigné14 (1626-1696), a French epistolary writer, permits Williams to pay respect to a woman whose style allowed for an expansion of the genre. Furthermore, the manner in which Madame Sévigné’s face continues to communicate mirrors the power of Williams’s epistolary Letters, as her “sketches” preserved the character of Madame Roland and Corday. Williams maintains that the countenance is a source for understanding the inner spirit of an individual, living or dead, because the character itself remains intact.

Even a notorious criminal, such as Danton, gains the eye of Williams in her retrospective account of the final days of Terror. “Don’t forget to show my head to the people,” ironically stated Georges-Jacques Danton, a former ally of Robespierre and member of the Committee on Public Safety, on April 25, 1794 as he approached the guillotine; “it’s worth seeing” (Andress 276). Several of Williams’s contemporaries described Danton’s forcible countenance. J.G. Millingen records that

the only member of the Government I saw, whose brutality revolted me, was Danton. There was something inexpressibly savage and ferocious in his looks, and in his stentorian voice. His coarse, shaggy hair gave him the appearance of a wild beast. To add to the fierceness of his repulsive countenance, he was

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14 Marie de Rabutin-Chantal Sévigné wrote more than 1,700 personal letters to her daughter. These letters were not initially composed for publication, but her accounts of history combined with her “highly conversational tone,” provided epistolary writing an opportunity to expand beyond set rules of “composition” and “tone” (Encyclopedia Britannica).
deeply marked with the small pox, and his eyes were unusually small and
sparkling in surrounding darkness, like the famous carbuncle. David, who
looked upon him as a demi-God, attempted several times to delineate this
horrid countenance, but in vain; exclaiming, 'Il serait plus facile de peindre
l’éruption d’un volcan, que les traits de ce grand homme.' 15 (256)

Providing another account of Danton’s countenance, Madame Roland, Williams’s Girondin
friend, records that during April and May of 1793, “scarcely a day passed on which Danton
did not come to see me.” During those visits, Roland
looked into this cruel and ugly face; and though I kept reminding myself that
one should not judge without investigating, that I could not be certain of
anything against him, and that even the most honest of men may, at a time of
such political turmoil, have conflicting reputations, and, finally, that one must
not trust appearances, I still could not imagine an upright man with a face like
his. (qtd. in Kirchberger 91)

Although Danton’s “repulsive countenance” makes it difficult to “imagine an upright man
with a face like his,” Roland’s caution “that one must not trust appearances” mirrors
Williams’s depictions of Danton. Under Williams’s pen, Danton’s features bind him to
humanity instead of binding him to the limitations and harsh actions of his past.

While an early proponent of the Terror, Danton eventually questioned the
implications of the widespread violence and proposed a less brutal form of rule. Danton, in
the process of questioning elements of Robespierre’s “Republic,” set himself at odds with
Robespierre. Brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal, he was accused of “extremely

15 ‘It would be easier to paint the eruption of a volcano, than the features of this great man.’
general” charges, including “that he had not been implacably opposed to all the other factions and later ‘proven’ counter-revolutionaries” (Andress 272). During his trial, Danton spoke in his own defence, and even the scanty and scattered recollections that survive reveal a performance of epic proportions, ranging from self-justification to caustic irony, but also veering into desperation . . . . His performance dominated the whole day . . . . The crowds were with him, and the looming disaster of an acquittal seemed very real. (274)

Even with the support of the crowds, Danton was convicted by the Tribunal on April 5, 1794 and executed on the same day. Williams chronicles that as “a proof of the horrible oppression under which we groaned,” she, as well as the crowds, “lamented the fate of Danton- - of Danton, the minister of justice on the 2nd of September, and one of the murderers of liberty on the 31st of May!” (2.2.31). Attempting to explain this sympathetic reaction, she sketches Danton as more than an evil figurehead:

Yet with all these crimes upon his head, Danton still possessed some human affections; his mind was still awake to some of the sensibilities of our nature; his temper was frank and social, and humanity in despair leant upon him as a sort of refuge from its worst oppressor. (2.2.31)

With Danton’s capability to be “awake to some of the sensibilities of our nature,” Williams and “humanity in despair” found themselves identifying with his humanity in contrast to Robespierre’s tyrannical persona.

Williams’s portrayal of Danton’s countenance at the guillotine provides a glimpse of the redemptive tendency which she finds herself extending to enemies of freedom.
According to Williams, as Danton approached the scaffold his head was bare, and many persons were struck with its resemblance to the medals of Socrates. He behaved with remarkable firmness, conversing with those who were placed in the same cart, and sometimes answering the cries of the populace by looks of strong indignation. When he was tied to the plank he cast his eyes upwards to the fatal knife, and his countenance and figure assumed an expression of magnanimity with which the spectators were deeply penetrated. (2.2.30)

As a spectator herself, Williams's primarily focuses on the crowd's reaction to Danton, recognizing the “looks of strong indignation” which he cast to the crowd, while observing his face and posture which “deeply penetrated” the crowd. Identification with the French populace removes the emphasis from Danton’s past brutality. Williams does not excuse his crimes, but rather incorporates the image of this man into the collective portrait of the crowd, allowing the crimes of the individual to fade as the larger portrait of humanity comes to focus.

A final glance into the Parisian populace provides a picture of the hope Williams chose to infuse in her closing Letters, instead of the despair she encountered as the Terror unfolded. Ultimately returning to the faces on the streets of a city that enraptured her in July of 1790, Williams writes,

Paris once more reassumes a gay aspect, the poor again have bread, and the rich again display the appendages of wealth. The processions of death which once darkened the streets, are now succeed by carriages elegant in simplicity, though not decorated with the blazonry of arms, or the lace of liveries. (2.3.6)
The pressures of the Revolution are fading, yet France has to address many of the socio-political pressures, such as the disparity between the Estates, which sparked the Revolution. Williams acknowledges the continued existence of the “poor” and the “rich,” suggesting that the Revolution itself is limited in its scope, though the human spirit is unbreakable. Evidencing the buoyancy of the human spirit, joy returns and bloody streets are being replaced with a new sight — a definitive Parisian air represented on the faces of its citizens:

The cheerfulness habitual to Parisian physiognomy, again lights up its reviving look; and the quick step, the joyous smile, the smart repartee, the airy gesture, have succeeded the dismal reserve, and the trembling circumspection which so ill suited the national character. With the careless simplicity of children who after the rigours of school hasten to their sports, the Parisians, shaking off the hideous remembrance of the past, fly to the scenes of pleasure. (2.3.6-7)

The mindset of the French populace manifests itself as pleasure on their faces, and this image stands in contrast to the austere disposition typically associated with the English. Williams, highlighting the “careless simplicity of children” of the Parisians, implies an English bias which still has a proclivity to categorize the French. It also suggests that the hope of liberty is what drew Williams to the French, not only the plight of the French people. Thus, even in her awareness of the atrocities suffered by the French, this travel writer views them as a collective whole, representing humanity’s potential to escape oppression.

The most powerful account of countenances in Letters from France transpires during the trial of the Revolutionary Tribunal in March of 1795. This event brought “A thousand tender and cruel remembrances” to Williams, as she “looked eagerly towards the benches where my friends had been placed, and saw those very seats now occupied by their murderers”
In this telling account of the Revolutionary Tribunal, Williams speaks of the faces of the “assassins” in an unforeseen manner:

I gazed with a gloomy kind of curiosity upon the countenances of those assassins, which I expected to find impressed with the savage character of their souls: but in this I was deceived; I saw faces that indicated no marks of villany, and some that bore the traces of better feelings of our nature, and bespoke minds that only extraordinary circumstances and temptation had rendered wicked. (2.4.44-45)

Rather than discrediting Williams’s use of countenances as representation of Revolutionary ideals, this passage further confirms the power she invests in countenances to express history accurately. Here, as the Revolution has come full circle, and the “oppressed have become the oppressors,” she remains faithful to her belief in human-nature, emphasizing that when looking for “savage character” to appear on the countenances, she instead sees men maintaining “the better feelings of our nature.” The use of the word “our” suggests identification with even the villains of the Revolution. Williams steadfastly adheres to her belief in the innate goodness of humankind.

Williams’s depiction of the Revolutionary conspirators coincides with Lavater’s assertions on the ability for the vilest men to manifest “perfectability.” He states,

I have seen the worst of men, in their worst of moments, yet could not all their vice, blasphemy, and oppression of guilt, extinguish the light of good that shone in their countenances, the spirit of humanity, the ineffaceable traits of internal, external perfectability. The sinner we would exterminate, the man we must embrace. (Lavater 44)
Although Williams avoids using the term "sinner," or any language of religious judgment, she emulates Lavater by emphasizing the potential inner goodness of human beings. Williams's look into the faces of the evil men, yields the same outcome as Lavater's gaze on "the worst of men:" ultimately, the "light of good" illuminates their faces, and provides an opportunity to view them through the "spirit of humanity" instead of merely as a "sinner." Both Williams and Lavater acknowledge the same principle: an individual cannot ultimately be judged by his or her outward actions. Williams provides one dramatic exception to this principle: Fouquier-Tainville, the public accuser, who did not exhibit remorse during the trial (2.4.45). His attitude was that of indifference and frustration; and at the point of his death, Williams employs Burkean terms and refers to Fouquier-Tainville as a "monster" (2.4.50). Yet, as a whole, Williams allows those conspirators who expressed remorse or identification with the French populace to be represented humanly. As Williams corrects her expectations for these countenances, it emphasizes their validity throughout Letters as an accurate reading of her characters, whether for their beauty and veneration, or for a reading on the condition of the souls of evil individuals.

The principal character unable to attain redemption in Williams's Letters is Robespierre. Recognizing his downfall and endeavoring to avoid being seized, Robespierre attempted suicide but survived and faced the guillotine hours later on July 28, 1794. "Robespierre was strapped to the plank, only semiconscious, the bandage holding his jaw together was torn off," Jordan records; "He died screaming in pain" (220). Williams does not even examine the countenance of the oppressor in his final moments and offers no possibility
for his redemption. On August 10th, 1794, in a personal letter to Hester Thrale Piozzi, Williams explains,

You have perhaps heard that I arrived in Switzerland a few weeks ago – tidings which I am sure would give you great pleasure – you will I know be glad to hear that I left my mother in tolerable good health, and my sister Cecelia, happily married– they are also I trust in consequence of events which have taken place since my departure in perfect safety – for Robespierre, the most detestable of tyrants, whose crimes have almost broken the heart of humanity, exists no longer – Ah, my dear Madam, how long a period of time has elapsed since I have enjoyed the soothing consolation of my intercourse with my friends in England – we have indeed suffered much, but God tempers the wind as Maria says, to the shorn lamb –

In this personal correspondence, Williams expresses her unrelenting abhorrence for Robespierre, who remains “the most detestable of tyrants.” The distinction between Robespierre and the other violent leaders of the Revolution may have been that Robespierre’s crimes affected “the heart,” not just the physical body. This variety of crime is inexcusable and unforgivable, because breaking the “heart of humanity” has implications beyond the French Revolution; it extends to a betrayal of hope for humanity’s future as well.

The end of the Terror brings Williams to voice a newfound faith, one which extends beyond the borders of France: it is a faith in the collective nature of humanity to rise above oppression or tragedy. No nation or individual can singularly survive a broken spirit, but as a unit, mankind can find goodness to preserve the future. Even death cannot disguise “a countenance doomed to long night” which is found with “features [that] preserved all their
original force and character.” Williams is led back to the collective face of the nation, where “the cheerfulness habitual to Parisian physiognomy, again lights up its reviving look.” Those tried before the Revolutionary Tribunal have faces that do not reveal the “savage nature of their souls,” but rather faces of men “that only extraordinary circumstances and temptation had rendered wicked.” Danton is seen as “still possess[ing] some human affections,” and at his death, “his countenance and figure assumed an expression of magnanimity with which the spectators were deeply penetrated.” Ultimately, the countenance that is missing from Williams’s final portrayal of the Revolutionary Terror is Robespierre, “the most detestable of tyrants,” but he slips between the pages of her Letters as one who is not granted a chance for redemption, possibly because his “crimes have almost broken the heart of humanity.” Humanity is where Williams returns when the safety of early dreams is shattered. Humanity offers faces that feel unredeemable, redemption; a crowd of onlookers the power to see underlying goodness in a fellowman; and a collective hope whether in death, as true character never fades, or in life, as hope is reborn in a nation.
EPILOGUE

Looking beyond the gory events of the Revolution to the heart of humanity, Williams distinguishes herself through her emotive writing today, much as she did in the eighteenth century. In January 1796, The Critical Review offered this assessment of her Letters:

If [her Letters] want the profound investigation of the statesman or the legislator; - - if they are destitute of those political discussions, in which historians of the higher order are fond of indulging, - - they will be found to contain what is more valuable, - - a picture of the times. What they lose in stateliness, they gain in interest; if they plunge not deeply into the intrigues of cabinets or the views of politicians, they delineate correctly the fluctuations of popular sentiment; and if they enter but little on the disgusting and generally tiresome details of senatorial debates or military exploits, they paint the manners, and, by a variety of engaging anecdotes, expose the human heart.\(^\text{16}\)

Herein lies the beauty of Williams’s crafting of the countenance through individual portraits: it is a means for representing “a picture of the times,” all the while “expos[ing] the human heart.” The immediacy of Williams’s verbal sketches which provide “a picture of the times” ironically coincides with Lavater’s assertion about visual art, which he believes cannot be replaced by words alone:

Drawing is the first, most natural, and unequivocal language of physiognomy; the best aid of the imagination, the only means of preserving and communicating numberless peculiarities, shades, and expressions, which are not by words, or any other mode, to be described. The physiognomist, who

\(^{16}\) Critical Review, NS 16 (Jan. 1796), 1.
cannot draw hastily, accurately, and characteristically, will be unable to make, much less to retain, or communicate, innumerable observations. (81-82)

Yet, the primary distinction between Williams’s “sketches” and Lavater’s “drawings” lies in their application of the science: Lavater purports that drawing helps to isolate the representative features of an individual, whereas Williams endeavors to extend the features of the individual to universal characteristics of humankind through her representative sketches.

Williams’s ongoing interest in physiognomy is apparent in her subsequent work, A Tour of Switzerland (1798), which includes her account of an actual meeting with Lavater. In this account, Williams attempts to distance herself from the critics of physiognomy, while implicitly critiquing the reductive tendency of physiognomic readings. Representing herself as a judicious adopter of physiognomy, Williams explains,

We stayed long enough at Zurich to visit its first literary ornament Lavater. It being known that he is willing to receive strangers, no traveler of any lettered curiosity passes through the town, without paying him the homage of a visit. He received us in his library, which was hung thick with portraits and engravings, of which he has a considerable collection, forming a complete study of the ever varying expression of the human face divine. Some very wise men, who admit of no scope to that faculty of the mind called imagination, and are for ever bringing every theory to the square, and the compass; consider his system of physiognomy as the fantastic vision of an heated brain; but though it may be difficult, it is surely ingenious and interesting to attempt reducing to rules a science, which seems to be founded in nature. It is surely curious to analyze what is so easy to feel, the charm of that expression, which is the
emanation of moral qualities; that undefinable grace which is not beauty, but something more, without which its enchantments lose their power of fascination, and which can shed an animated glow, a spark of divinity over the features of deformity. (emphasis mine) (66-67)

Williams is attracted to Lavater’s findings, but his “science” is secondary to Williams’s feeling as she contemplates the natural tendency to analyze a face. Borrowing from the eighteenth-century fascination with physiognomy, Williams utilizes physiognomic language in her texts, but it is always defined by a feeling, not a categorical rule. Of specific interest is her recognition of “that undefinable grace” which adds “a spark of divinity over the features of deformity.” The inner character casts “divinity” even over “deformity”: this familiar theme appears throughout Williams’s Letters from France where facial imperfections are overlooked if the inner character breaks physical expectations. Williams sees Lavater isolating that “undefinable grace” to scientific terms, yet her hesitation to rely on science echoes in the word “undefinable.” For Williams, a countenance has an affective nature, not only a scientific nature.

Proceeding with a personal observation of Lavater’s face, Williams reinforces her interest in the techniques of physiognomy by practicing the technique. Williams remarks,

Lavater is a venerable looking old man, with a sharp long face, high features, and a wrinkled brow: he is tall, thin, and interesting in his figure; when serious he has a look of melancholy, almost of inquietude; but when he smiles, his countenance becomes lighted up with an expression of sweetness and intelligence. (67-68)
Lavater’s countenance provides Williams with an opportunity to probe beyond her first impression of this venerable man by looking to his face for clarification. She acknowledges his facial structure, though she does not explicate her findings. Lavater’s own writings explain that

The form, height, arching, proportion, obliquity, and position of the skull, or bone of the forehead, show the propensity, degree of power, thought and sensibility of man. The covering or skin of the forehead, its position, colour, wrinkles, and tension, denote the passions and present state of the mind. The bones give the internal quantity, and their covering the application of power.

(44)

Williams’s study of Lavater has an objective tone, but rather than making concrete character assertions about Lavater, she acts on instinct and acknowledges that his countenance is affected by his changes in mood: “when serious he has a look of melancholy . . . when he smiles . . . an expression of sweetness and intelligence.” The tone of this passage shows her desire to see the best in this gentleman. Although her first impression of Lavater’s countenance is not entirely positive, Williams gazes long enough in order to watch his expression change, which also modifies her first impressions of the man. A similar tendency exists in her final Letters, as initial impressions might immediately condemn the inner nature of an individual, but Williams’s gaze lingers long enough to move beyond surface impressions; she continues to peer until humanity’s goodness reappears.

In assuming the ability to read a face, Lavater and Williams operate on the premise that they, as observers, are adequate judges of human nature. Their ability, however, to ascertain character within a countenance is grounded in a perceived value system that grants
them a moral ability to judge. Thus, their reading of any individual reflects their own values, not necessarily the true character or merit of the one they seek to decipher. In this attempt to view the outer shell of a person as a manifestation of the inner self, they construct a self-reflexive identity: they see that which they themselves value. If the countenances within Williams’s Letters speak of what she esteems, it is understandable how her expectations and representations of faces adjust as the Revolution changes. Certainly Williams was forced to reconcile her idealistic images of liberty with the pain she experienced, and in doing so, the countenance provided a means by which she could dissolve barriers between absolute categorizations of individuals.

Incorporating Lavaterian language, Williams’s use of countenances suggests an intriguing duality between the masculine and feminine nature of her writing. Although he emphasizes emotion, Lavater’s means of representing physiognomy by way of anatomical diagrams portrays a masculine bias to his science. In issue 16 of Révolutions de France et de Brabant, Lavater’s reading of a key Revolutionary player, M. Necker, exhibits the exacting approach of his science. Lavater’s focus centered on the individual parts of Necker’s face as he was “admiring the complexion of a pale yellow the beautiful ideal of a statesman, and tracing with a sure hand the character of the hero according to the analysis of his nose and his chin” (qtd. in de Baecque 236). Lavater’s primary focus on the individual components of a face stands in contrast to Williams’s depictions of a more composite figure. Rather than reducing the face into separate, readable parts, Williams incorporates both sensibility and reason, which allow her to extend her readings beyond the individual figure to universal significance. The “rules” that Williams employs when reading a countenance are those which are instinctive, and by eighteenth-century standards, distinctly female. Williams’s Letters
repeatedly display analysis and emotion intertwining as she depicts individual faces and the collective face of the nation, and this unification between the body and the heart of humanity allows Williams to incorporate masculine and feminine rhetorical strategies.

Williams's writing anticipates the emergence of nineteenth-century novelists, such as Charlotte Brontë, who utilized physiognomic language, but remained, in the words of Graham Tytler,

unaffected by the Lavaterian notion of beauty as a sign of virtue; on the contrary, they tend to give their heroes and heroines unprepossessing appearances: one only has to think of Maggie Tulliver in the Mill on the Floss, Dobbin in Vanity Fair, Mary Thorne in Doctor Thorne, and the heroine of Jane Eyre, all of whom have commendable or, at least, interesting qualities of character. (Tytler 177)

For example, the heroine in Brontë’s Villette, Lucy Snow, follows Williams’s tendency to gaze beyond surface impressions, because Lucy “believes it is more important to look for the hidden merits of a commonplace appearance than to put people in dubious categories of beauty and ugliness” (Tytler 177). Lucy carefully focuses on an individual’s features as she ascertains character, representing an adaptation of physiognomy, yet she allows ambiguity in her readings to show the inability of science to fully classify human nature. Privileging

17 An example of Lucy’s adaptation of physiognomy is found in her reading of Madame Beck: “I know not what of harmony pervaded her whole person; and yet her face offered contrast, too: its features were by no means such as are usually seen in conjunction with a complexion of such blended freshness and repose: their outline was stern; her forehead was high but narrow; it expressed capacity and some benevolence, but no expanse; nor did her peaceful yet watchful eye ever know the fire which is kindled in the heart or the softness which flows thence. Her mouth was hard: it could be a little grim; her lips were thin. For sensibility and genius, with all their tenderness and temerity, I felt somehow that madame would be the right sort of Minos in petticoats.” (Villette 79)
feminine instinct and emotions, Williams's Letters join with the emerging literature of the nineteenth century and illustrate the power of reading beyond facades. Breaking the boundaries of the travel letter by infusing it with Revolutionary ideals, Williams's writing requires the same careful study as her representative countenances: a cursory reading affords a glimpse of Williams's rhetorical ability and Revolutionary fervor, but a judicious consideration reveals that assuming transparency in any text can lead to misinterpretations.
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