

## Reading with the Heart: Tracing Love and Human Rights across Ellen and William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) and Mary Louisa Gordon's *Chase of the Wild Goose* (1936)

Helene Grøn

In March 1788 and December 1848, two stories begin, as many good love stories do, with an escape out of a window, a step out of a door, by women in men's disguise for safety and sanctuary. The two couples in question are not only sixty years and a continent apart; they are also situated radically differently within their legal, political and social circumstances. What brings them together on these pages is not only the daring of their escape and their stories of love, but an exploration of how their transgressive unions united them against what sought to pull them apart. A question arises: what part does love play in obtaining the human rights and dignities the couples implicitly and explicitly asserted within and beyond the bounds of their intimacy?

In March 1788, the orphaned Sarah Ponsonby leapt out of a parlour window of her relative Sir William Fownes' house in Kilkenny, Ireland. Dressed in men's clothing, Sarah was going to meet her beloved Eleanor Butler, with whom she was escaping to Llangollen in Wales. Butler, a descendant of the Duke of Ormonde, had purchased a cottage there, wherein they planned to share a life. The couple did not make it to Wales in March, as Sarah fell ill on the way. Their relatives comforted themselves that scandal might be hushed up as there had been 'no gentlemen concerned', and that their flight was nothing more 'than a scheme of Romantic Friendship'.<sup>1</sup> In 1936, doctor, writer and social reformer Mary Louisa Gordon imagined the circumstances before their second, successful escape, fashioning fiction from the few historical sources available: the Archbishop was fetched to talk ecumenical sense to Eleanor, they were both reminded of the several eligible suitors ready to take their hands in marriage, and of the risks their escape posed to their financial security and social standing as *noblesse oblige*.<sup>2</sup> Although to most women, 'force would have been applied [...] regardless of their

<sup>1</sup> S. Tighe in Eva Mary Bell, *The Hamwood Papers of The Ladies of Llangollen and Caroline Hamilton*, ed. G. H. (John Travers) Bell (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1930), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Louisa Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*. (Bristol: Lurid Editions, 2023), 202.

legal and human rights',<sup>3</sup> these two 'fiery young hearts'<sup>4</sup> remain steadfast to one another, and they eventually settle in their domicile, Plas Newydd, never spending a day apart for the following fifty years.

In December 1848, William Craft took the hand of his wife Ellen Craft as they stood in front of their door, on the threshold between freedom and a continued life under the system of slavery. Having obtained a few days of holiday for Christmas from their owner, they had hatched an elaborate escape plan, which involved disguising Ellen, who was 'almost white'<sup>5</sup> and could pass as such, as a 'privileged southern planter',<sup>6</sup> while William, who 'possessed visibly African features',<sup>7</sup> was to travel as her slave. The disguise and plan evidently had several stages that needed careful execution to bypass the intricate legal system and dehumanising restrictions placed on those who were enslaved. As a white person could not trade with enslaved people without their master's consent, William had to obtain the articles of clothing for Ellen's disguise in different parts of town; as it was illegal to teach enslaved people how to read and write, Ellen had to travel as an invalid with an arthritic condition.<sup>8</sup> With her arm in a sling, they would circumvent the custom of writing their names in the visitor's books in the hotels, just like the poultice over her face would hide her beardlessness and the green spectacles covering her eyes would make meeting the gaze of fellow travellers bearable. Dressed like this, hand in hand, opening the latch of their door, William said to his wife: 'Come my dear. Let us make a desperate leap for liberty'.<sup>9</sup> Thus, a journey started, which brought them from Southern Georgia to the free and Northern Boston, and eventually on to England, which became the 'safest, most logical asylum for the Crafts'.<sup>10</sup>

There are evident and necessary distinctions to make between the couples, the context of their lives and the literary works produced by and about them. Most glaringly, the Crafts risked their lives in escaping from slavery, and had

<sup>3</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 110.

<sup>4</sup> Bell, *The Hamwood Papers*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*, ed. R. J. M. Blackett (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara McCaskill, 'Introduction' in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara McCaskill, 'Introduction', 19.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Ellen's disguise in relation to disability, race and gender, see Ellen Samuels "'A Complication of Complaints": Untangling Disability, Race, and Gender in William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*', *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 31:3 (2006), 15–47.

<sup>9</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 19.

<sup>10</sup> R. J. M., Blackett, 'The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft' in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 64.

to navigate the stakes between life, death and freedom against pro-slavery policy. Compared with that alone, there was arguably less at stake for upper-class ladies, who, even so, risked social, financial and familial support, while manoeuvring the gossip and malcontent surrounding unmarried women. In making an adventurous crossing between America and England, Ireland and Wales, the couples became famous in their lifetimes, taking centre stage on some of its key political, philosophical and artistic debates. The Ladies' life of mutual devotion, seclusion and self-betterment brought an impressive roster of famous contemporaries, swept up in the spirit of Romanticism and the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to their door in awe and fascination. The Crafts' bold escape, the publishing of their memoir and their lecture tours on the moral degradation of slavery made them prime agents in the abolitionist movement across America and Britain.

This chapter reads William Craft's memoir *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, and Mary Gordon's retelling of the Ladies in *Chase of the Wild Goose* together, by taking seriously the premise that, in both stories, and for both couples, love plays a key role in challenging the paradigms and social practices that seek to limit their human rights and joint freedom. Making a proposal for reading rights and reading love together, this chapter focuses on how both works are in conversation with their genres, as well as how they spill over their edges into wider artistic and activist networks, thereby questioning how storytelling, writing and the materiality of books can enable the transformation of human rights from abstract ideals to lived reality.

## Reading love, reading rights, or, reading with the heart

It seems a tough and even unromantic argument to make that love has a role to play in political life, from the workings of the law to the abstract ideals set forth in human rights declarations. As Elizabeth Brake states in her branching philosophical and historical survey into the institutional life of love and marriage, the law is 'essentially impartial, unloving',<sup>11</sup> where love is 'unlawful, illicit, outside the law'.<sup>12</sup> Love and law's most direct overlap sits in the religious and statutory regulation of marriage. Yet even here, Brake traces how love has been a philosophically contested component in marriage, from Hegel who views marriage

---

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Brake, 'Love and the Law', in Christopher Grau, and Aaron Smuts, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Love* (2024; online edn, Oxford Academic, 6 Feb. 2017), 453–70, 453.

<sup>12</sup> Brake, 'Love and the Law', 453.

as a taming of passionate love, to Nietzsche, who conceives that love gets in the way of the legal responsibility to another undertaken in marriage.

Where Brake's study shows how legal perimeters promise something lasting in the face of the instabilities of romantic love, Simon May suggests that seeking to 'institutionalise the perilous expectation' of love via marriage might compromise the kind of freedom necessary for love to be a mutual project of self-realisation and freedom.<sup>13</sup> May locates the yoking of freedom and love in the Romantic movement, and particularly the influence of Rousseau, arguing that two fundamental expressions influence instances of love to this day. Firstly, 'the quest to become yourself in dedicating yourself to a loved one and in being loved', shows how personal agency, conversely, is contingent on (loving) another. Secondly, departing from the more incredulous approach to romantic love in Brake's overview, passion cannot only be a source of 'goodness and truth', but also provide instances wherein 'we might glimpse the sacred'.<sup>14</sup> May's argumentation extends to love gradually taking the place of religion in increasingly secular societies, not only as something to believe in, but also as a force holding people responsible and in unity with one another. Human rights historians have located the universality necessary for developing rights in a cross-religious genesis of the Golden Rule: do unto another as you would have them do unto you.<sup>15</sup> Developed and departing from a mutual theological origin of navigating the terrain of self and other, both love and human rights are then in conversation with the meaning of relationality. Although (romantic) love seeks to unite with a specific and significant other, where human suggests rather the inalienable dignity of all beings, the universality implied in both might begin to show what viewing them together can offer.

Joseph Slaughter has suggested the proliferation of the Bildungsroman in the nineteenth century was fundamental in making clear the rights and duties of a citizen,<sup>16</sup> just as Crystal Parikh explores literature's key role in formulating the meaning of rights from their abstract ideals in declarations, to the lives and

---

<sup>13</sup> Simon May, *Love: A History* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 157.

<sup>14</sup> May, *Love: A History*, 153.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Thomas Crushman, *Handbook of Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 2011); Alistair Davidson, *The Immutable Laws of Mankind: The Struggle for Universal Human Rights* (New York: Springer, 2012); Micheline R. Ishray, *The History of Human Rights* (London: University of California Press, 2008); Johannes Morsink, *Inherent Human Rights: Philosophical Roots of the Universal Declaration* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Joseph R. Slaughter, 'Becoming Plots: Human Rights, the Bildungsroman, and the Novelization of Citizenship', *Human Rights, Inc. The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York, 2007; online edn, Fordham Scholarship Online, 1 Sept. 2011), 114.

relations of characters and, by extension, readers.<sup>17</sup> Similar claims have been made about the difficulty of understanding, let alone theorise, love, characteristic of avoiding set definitions. In *All About Love*, bell hooks contends that in the face of lacking and sustained discussion on the meaning and mooring of love, ‘we still look to books as the primary source of guidance and direction’.<sup>18</sup> A glance across this volume equally testifies to the role literary and artistic representations play in portraying love in its many dimensions, but also how such representations traverse from the realm of fiction into the lives of readers. For example, Lene Østermark-Johansen’s chapter on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* shows how love is rendered spatial and material in its readers visiting graves, carrying trinkets and living out their love-lives to the backdrop of this story. Identifying a kindred traversing between fiction and life, Melissa Adams-Campbell explores the marriage plot of nineteenth-century books as both a signifier of freedom, attesting to ‘Anglophone women’s new ability to contract affection-based marriages’ and as a means for ‘translating personal marital choice into nationalist claims for British superiority’.<sup>19</sup> The ideological life of marriage as a social and literary signifier shows ‘courtship novels as a site for questioning the supposed division between private romantic relationships and public political agency’.<sup>20</sup> Even if the merging back into the social order of such plots show stasis rather than dismantling, the books read in this chapter, and in this anthology more broadly, examine how love happens across and despite the systems and social practices that seek to regulate it, suggesting how love might operate by its own logic and law.

Lynn Hunt develops her history of human rights also from the philosophical and literary legacy of Rousseau, exemplifying how his *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761) taught its readers ‘a new psychology and in the process laid the foundation for a new social and political order’.<sup>21</sup> Appealing specifically to the emotions of the reader developed, Hunt argues, the ‘ability to understand the subjectivity of other people and to be able to imagine that their inner experiences are like one’s own’.<sup>22</sup> As Philip Stewart suggests in his introduction to the book, the

---

<sup>17</sup> Crystal Parikh, *The Cambridge Companion to Human Rights and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Melissa M. Adams-Campbell, *New World Courtships: Transatlantic Alternatives to Companionate Marriage* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Adams-Campbell, *New World Courtships*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights, A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2007), 39.

<sup>22</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 39.

key to this was reading as the writer wrote it, namely ‘with the heart’.<sup>23</sup> What unites love and rights under the umbrella of literary practice are stories as ‘vital starting points for the imagination’, as what we ‘cannot imagine cannot come into being’.<sup>24</sup> However, beyond this, literature also offers a space ‘where people meet, where they must negotiate their differences, where they may contest each other’s powers, and where, while retaining their bodily borders, they may merge’.<sup>25</sup> For example, as we shall see, abolitionist literature was argued to be politically effective exactly because it was able to appeal to the hearts of readers by humanising portrayals in a dehumanising system. United, then, in the need for formulating what might otherwise elude articulation, and appealing to the hearts of readers that are part of a society, reading with the heart, or, reading love and rights together, thereby seeks to be a prism for envisioning these convergences both on and off the page.

### ‘Boy, do you belong to that Gentleman?’: Marriage, law and the language of love and ownership

Where strong marital bonds were unusual in abolitionist writing,<sup>26</sup> the centrality of Ellen and William Craft’s marriage and their emphasis on wider understandings of relationality and dependency on socio-political networks makes *Running* ‘a realisation of relationship’.<sup>27</sup> Yet, it was the daring of their escape, ‘the stuff of which great adventure novels are made’,<sup>28</sup> and their love with its ‘unheard-of boldness and romance’,<sup>29</sup> that captured the public’s imagination, and spread their story even to ‘newspaper opposed to the abolitionist cause’.<sup>30</sup> Blurring the lines of fact, fiction and the literary retellings of both, their escape was compared ‘to Christian and Christina’s in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and their love to Héloïse and Abélard’s’.<sup>31</sup> Reflecting on this chapter’s exploration of love and storytelling as shared sites for formulating rights, the Crafts’ story was received exactly as

---

<sup>23</sup> Philip Stewart, ‘Introduction’ in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, ed. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché (Lebanon, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> hooks, *All About Love*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Holly A Laird, *Women Coauthors* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 436–38.

<sup>27</sup> Laird, *Women Coauthors*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Blackett, ‘The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft’, 74.

<sup>29</sup> Blackett, ‘The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft’, 65.

<sup>30</sup> Blackett, ‘The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft’, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Blackett, ‘The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft’, 55.



**Figure 1.1** *Photograph of William Craft in Locket.* From William and Ellen Craft's photograph album, ca. 1850s, jewellery. Craft and Crum families' collection.

such: a story of love and adventure to be shared widely in newspapers, on stages and beyond.<sup>32</sup>

Contrary to the importance of love to the reception of the story, the memoir continually shows the duress placed on all bonds of affection by the system of slavery. Enslaved people had to obtain consent from their owners to marry.<sup>33</sup> They generally discouraged unions across lines of ownership because they could not ensure 'that they would not be sold or redistributed'. Yet, as the 'the constitutional amendments to eliminate slavery moved forward', marriage was used as an assimilative tool, seeking to merge what had been pulled asunder by an institution of enslavement? into institutional frameworks of love. Conversely, as Adams-Campbell shows, as the 'many disrupted relationships and remarriages, an inevitable result of the vagaries of slavery', white slaveholders were responsible

<sup>32</sup> Marcus Charles Tribbett, 'Three Williams and a Subversive Text: Collaboration, Communal Agency, and Resistant Identities in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860)', *The Southern Quarterly*, 9 (2017).

<sup>33</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 16.

for the ‘supposed nonconformity with monogamous state-sanctioned marriage’.<sup>34</sup> Ellen, William writes, ‘was torn from her mother’s embrace in childhood and taken to a different part of the country’.<sup>35</sup> Having seen this happen to many others, Ellen is as tentative of marriage and motherhood as William is of broaching the subject. Their intention to marry then includes a plan to escape, not only so they may be free, but also so they may parent free children.

The memoir consistently places linguistic, metaphorical and political ambiguity around the readability of love, race and gender, thereby exploring the humanising potential of such a double-view. Even though Ellen and William are the main agents in the memoir, William continually breaks the flow of narration, overriding his own testimony with the examples of others. The reader is drawn into ‘a world of complexly mixed relations and, we might say, mixed narrations’.<sup>36</sup> Showing how different understandings of love and marriage might then be necessary when people navigated the domains of freedom and captivity, William relays the following story: waiting for a steamer at a hotel, they meet a fugitive slave. He tells them that not long after his marriage, and while still enslaved, his wife was sold. Remaining single for many years, both before and after he becomes free, he finally remarries. Then:

[A]s he was passing down the street one day, he met a woman; at the first glance they nearly recognized each other; they both turned round and stared, and unconsciously advanced, till she screamed and flew into his arms. Her first words were ‘Dear, are you married?’ On his answering in the affirmative, she shrank from his embrace, hung her head and wept.<sup>37</sup>

This story is narrated alongside Ellen and William’s difficulty in occupying a room together. Understanding Ellen as white, the butler states that there is room for her, but not for William. When she rents a room, orders dinner for two, and relays that they are married, they are asked to find other accommodation. An indirect parallel to the story of the man and his lost wife, the Crafts show the many navigations and the constant labour involved in staying together under circumstances that seek to pull them apart. Continuing the story of the man and his wife, William states how he took his old wife to see his new one, ‘who was also a fugitive slave, and as they knew the workings of the infamous system of

<sup>34</sup> All quotations in Melissa M. Adams-Campbell, *New World Courtships*, 142.

<sup>35</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> John Ernest, *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 190.

<sup>37</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 50.



Figure 1.2: J. Andrews & S. A. Schiff, *Ellen Craft, the Fugitive Slave*, 1856, illustration. New York Public Library Digital Collection.

slavery, they could (as no one else can) sympathise with each other's misfortune'.<sup>38</sup> Although the man and his former wife might be divorced in the eyes of the law, they were not divorced, as William puts it, 'morally'. As such, 'it was arranged between the three that he should live only with the lastly married wife, and allow the other one so much a week, as long as she requested his assistance'.<sup>39</sup> *Running* then shows how these mitigations of broken relationships expand an understanding of love beyond a conventional conception of marriage as a union of two, to work instead by its own moral law. Ellen and William yoke the reading of love and rights together by claiming narrative and extra-narrative relationality with unions that have been fraught, broken and challenged, but also, and

<sup>38</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 51.

<sup>39</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 51.

importantly, by formulating their marriage within the context of resistance to and navigation of those systems.

The memoir is prefaced with the frontispiece above of Ellen dressed as a planter, thereby challenging paradigms of race and gender on a visual level before the story begins. With this picture in mind, the reader is privy to a double-view extending from her disguise to the language of love. On their journey, they meet a slave dealer who wishes to purchase William, to which Ellen replies: ‘I do not wish to sell, sir; I cannot get on well without him’. He responds that in travelling North, Ellen is risking exactly this, as William might escape. ‘My master’, William narrates, as he has stated he will call his wife-in-disguise during their journey, ‘said “I think not, sir; I have great confidence in his fidelity”’.<sup>40</sup> Fidelity is commonly understood a consequential promised when entering a marriage. Repurposing it within the context of escape and enslavement encourages the reader to view William simultaneously as the slave dealer and Ellen: where one sees unreliability and property, the other sees a person whose fidelity and lifelong companionship is promised. Another such instance occurs when the couple are purchasing tickets for a steamer, and William is asked by the ticket officer: ‘Boy, do you belong to that Gentleman?’. William replies in the affirmative and adds: ‘(which was correct)’.<sup>41</sup> The bracketed addendum, once again, allows the reader to examine the radically different meanings of belonging to someone in the context of ownership and belonging to someone in a relation of love. The latter not only shows the dedication of a loving husband, but also unravels the discourses of a wife belonging to her husband. This tone of romantic defiance is employed throughout the memoir, working against the dehumanising pro-slavery rhetoric surrounding them. The rights-unfolding potential in this double-view is revealed in the reader’s task to see William and Ellen through different prisms (property, husband, master, wife), but also by inserting ambiguity into the very terms of ownership, love and fidelity.

### ‘Novelising the Narrative’: Genre, collaboration and co-writing for abolition

In 1850 in America, the Fugitive Slave Law was passed, which permitted the recapturing and returning of fugitive slaves to their former owners, even if they resided in free states. Paradoxically, what worked in the Crafts’ favour for spreading their abolitionist message, the adventure of their escape, the romance

<sup>40</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 28.



GROSVENOR HOTEL, PALL-MALL.

That the Duke of Cambridge—the "hero" or the "lancer" of Calcutta, as the name may be—passed many years of his life...

All the relations of his life, including the liberality of the benevolent...



VIEW OF GROSVENOR HOTEL.

There is no doubt that the Duke of Cambridge was a man of high...



REAR-VIEW OF GROSVENOR HOTEL.

parted some of his most conspicuous works. He erected, on the upper story...

FAIRING WEEK.

Among the London Entertainments, that of the Royal Ball, at the George Theatre...



MR. CHAFF, A FAVORITE DANCER—AND VERY GOOD.

The printing of the Duke of Devonshire's new edition... is indicated by...



HERE STAND MR. BERRY BISHOP'S NEW SHOW-BOARDS, AT THE GREAT BAZAAR—THE GREAT BAZAAR.

Figure 1.3: Newspaper article on Ellen Craft from The Illustrated London News, 1851, image. Craft and Crum families' Collection, open domain.

of their union and their narrative which read ‘novelized’,<sup>42</sup> made them vulnerable to recapture and re-enslavement. They continued their journey to the ‘free air of good old England’,<sup>43</sup> where both their escape from slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law had been widely reported. To make the most of their renown, first William, and later Ellen, who needed to recover from illness linked to the strain and stress of securing their freedom, joined William Wells Brown on a lecturing tour across England and Scotland.<sup>44</sup> The collaboration between the Crafts and Brown, who was already a celebrated writer, abolitionist and orator, became one of the most ‘influential abolitionist combinations in both America and Britain’.<sup>45</sup>

In the memoir, William reflects how it is against the law to teach those enslaved how to read and write.<sup>46</sup> Writing and reading are thereby undertaken against the threat of fines and imprisonment, ‘vigorously enforced on anyone who is humane enough to violate the so-called law’.<sup>47</sup> And yet, it is exactly through reading and writing that the so-called law might be challenged. As the Boston *Chronotype* reflected in 1849:

[F]ugitive slave literature is destined to be a powerful lever. We have the most profound conviction of its potency. We see in it the easy and infallible means of abolitionizing the free States. Argument provokes argument, reason is met by sophistry. But narratives of slaves go right to the hearts of men.<sup>48</sup>

Reflecting on reading with one’s heart, the *Chronotype*’s remark shows how storytelling, particularly first-hand accounts, played a key part in abolitionist resistance by appealing to the solidarity of its readers. Nonetheless, as Geoffrey Sanborn is not alone to argue, abolitionist literature is ‘usually characterized, for good reason, as a means of limiting agency of ex-slave narrators’.<sup>49</sup> Because of the ‘low status of slave testimony in [and beyond] legal cases, where for a long time the word of a slave meant nothing when pitted against that of a white

---

<sup>42</sup> Geoffrey Sanborn, ‘The Plagiarist’s Craft: Fugitivity and Theatricality in Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom’, *PMLA* 128:4 (2013), 917.

<sup>43</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Blackett, ‘The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft’, 65.

<sup>45</sup> Blackett, ‘The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft’, 58.

<sup>46</sup> Barbara McCaskill and Steve Hahn have noted how the illiteracy of enslaved people may have been overestimated in the antebellum years, estimating that up to ten per cent had some degree of literacy. See *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 26.

<sup>47</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> In Blackett, ‘The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft’, 75.

<sup>49</sup> Geoffrey Sanborn, ‘The Plagiarist’s Craft: Fugitivity and Theatricality in Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom’, 910.

person',<sup>50</sup> slave narratives were typically enveloped in authenticating documents, which were 'implicitly addressed to an incredulous white readership'.<sup>51</sup> Such testimonies offer rich space exactly for examining collaboration and co-writing, but also for questioning 'the complexity of authorship'.<sup>52</sup> For example, in reading Mary Prince's 1831 memoir, 'related by herself',<sup>53</sup> Jessica Allen argues that between Susanna Strickland's transcription of Prince's testimony and Thomas Pringle's edits, Prince's story undergoes such a significant amount of 'pruning' that the very possibility of authenticity and voice are contested.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, in many cases, by slowing down the reader 'towards retroactively explanatory end points [slave narratives] prompt us to read for something other than truth or moral clarity'.<sup>55</sup>

Examining the complexities of authorship and collaboration should be kept in view for *Running* also. While the memoir has 'marital cooperation' at its heart,<sup>56</sup> Barbara McCaskill notes several places where William silences Ellen's voice and highlights her fragility and femininity, emphasising how 'black abolitionists wrote formerly enslaved Africans into conventional gender roles'.<sup>57</sup> Conversely, Daneen Wardrop has suggested that Ellen is responsible for the parts of the story that deal with women's rights,<sup>58</sup> and Adams-Campbell explores the ways in which nineteenth-century African American women not only used the marriage plot to achieve respectability and social status within and outside stories, but equally shaped its trajectories.<sup>59</sup> Marcus Tribbet argues that the collaborative efforts of

---

<sup>50</sup> Sara Salih, 'Introduction', in *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (London: Penguin, 2004), xiv.

<sup>51</sup> Sanborn, 'The Plagiarist's Craft', 910.

<sup>52</sup> Jessica L. Allen, 'Pringle's Pruning of Prince: The History of Mary Prince and the Question of Repetition', *Callaloo* 35/2 (2012), 509.

<sup>53</sup> Prince, Mary, *The History of Mary Prince*, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Allen, 'Pringle's Pruning of Prince'

<sup>55</sup> Sanborn, 'The Plagiarist's Craft', 910.

<sup>56</sup> Daneen Wardrop, 'Collaboration in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*: William's Key and Ellen's Renaming', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 61:3 (2005), 57.

<sup>57</sup> Barbara McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory*, 25.

<sup>58</sup> Wardrop, 'Collaboration in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*.'

<sup>59</sup> Adams-Campbell, *New World Courtships*, 7. See also, for example, Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole* (1984), wherein her marriage and subsequent widowhood allow her to move through the world more freely as a medical practitioner, and, as Samantha Pinto suggests, explore the possibilities of citizenship (2020). Similarly, Prince's memoir underscores the degradation of slavery when she must choose between being free in England or being with her husband in Antigua, 37.

*Running* become clear by reading three William-narrators into the text: William Craft, William Wells Brown, and “William Johnson”, Ellen’s adopted persona when she is dressed as a planter.<sup>60</sup> In *Biography of an American Bondsman* (1856), published by Josephine Brown, William Wells Brown’s daughter, Sanborn identifies a passage likely written by William Brown, wherein a married fugitive couple, Ellen and William Craft, escape by her masking as his master. In this passage, Ellen plays a much more prominent role in both conception and execution of their escape.<sup>61</sup>

These readings suggest an approach to the text where, keeping its collaborative nature in view, unearths not only instances of Ellen’s agency against the perception of a single-author male protagonist, but equally destabilises categorisations of race and gender by showing their performability. I am not the first to remark on the Shakespearean elements of Ellen’s disguise and the story of the Crafts’ escape.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, Ellen may be placed within a lineage of literary heroines, kindred with Rosalind, Viola or Portia, who disguise themselves to operate safely and authoritatively in a world suited to men. Extending from a planter’s disguise into a ‘lifelong performance’,<sup>63</sup> the Crafts and Brown partake in the 1851 Great Exhibition, where Ellen is on display as ‘a specimen of Victorian femininity’<sup>64</sup> and an ‘authentic ‘white’ lady’.<sup>65</sup> This highlights the slippery textual and visual terms of Ellen’s performability within and beyond text, but also highlights the complexities of Ellen’s ‘readability’ as white in furthering abolitionist aims.

Reading love and rights brings these performative and collaborative elements into a novel view. Firstly, the memoir comes into being, as the cover states, ‘only twelve years beyond illiteracy’.<sup>66</sup> Secondly, writing alongside other literary and legal texts places William not only in a position of an experienced authority, this ‘[c]itational aesthetics’<sup>67</sup> also disrupts ‘the establishment of the narrative’s

---

<sup>60</sup> Tribbett, ‘Three Williams and a Subversive Text’ *The Southern Quarterly* 55:1, (2017).

<sup>61</sup> Sanborn, ‘The Plagiarist’s Craft’, 907.

<sup>62</sup> See Sanborn 2013 or Tribbet 2017, 25.

<sup>63</sup> Gay Gibson Cima, *From Anti-Slavery Celebrity to Cosmopolitan Self-Possession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 180

<sup>64</sup> Barbara McCaskill, ‘Yours Very Truly’: Ellen Craft – the Fugitive as Text and Artifact’, *African American Review* 28:4, (1994), 520.

<sup>65</sup> Lisa Merrill, ‘Exhibiting Race “under the World’s Huge Glass Case”’: William and Ellen Craft and William Wells Brown at the Great Exhibition in Crystal Palace, London, 1851’, *Slavery and Abolition* 33:2 (2012), 32.

<sup>66</sup> After the tour with Brown, the Crafts were sponsored by John Estlin, Lady Byron and Harriet Martineau (see Blackett 1999, 70) to spend three years at the Ockham school, where William learnt to read and write and began the work on *Running*.

<sup>67</sup> Sanborn, ‘The Plagiarist’s Craft’, 908.

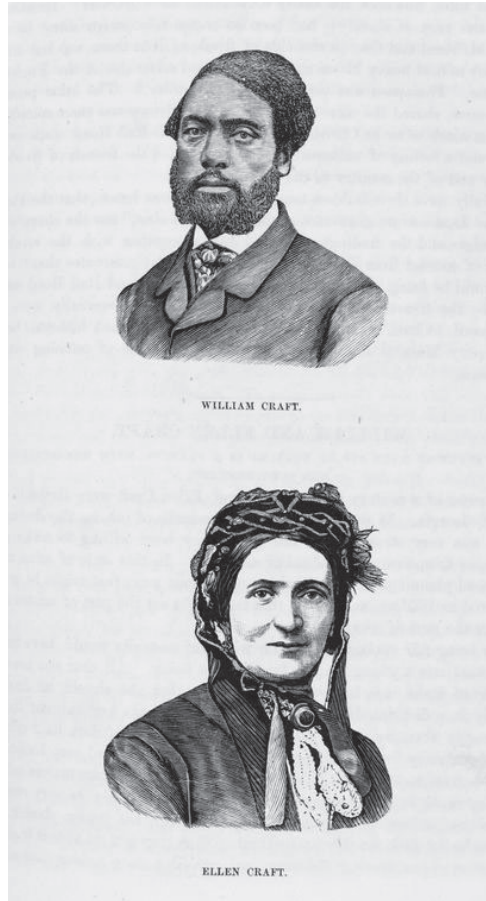


Figure 1.4: *William and Ellen Craft*, 1872, The New York Public Library Digital Collection.

relation to the genre as a whole'.<sup>68</sup> William begins the memoir emphasising its rights-obtaining designs against the backdrop of the American Declaration of Independence:

Having heard while in Slavery that [...] 'all men are created free and equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'; we could not understand by what right we were held as 'chattels'. Therefore, we felt perfectly justified in undertaking the dangerous and exciting task of 'running a thousand miles' in order to obtain those rights which are so vividly set forth in the Declaration.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Sanborn, 'The Plagiarist's Craft', 913.

<sup>69</sup> Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 1.

As with the language of love and ownership, prefacing the story with contrasting what is legal and what is lived, the law and system of slavery is consistently scrutinised under the lens of rights and dignity.<sup>70</sup> Destabilising the meaning of rights, they are interrogated both as the term against which they are held as well as the reason for undertaking their flight.

Henry Louis Gates draws these connections further by titling his foreword to Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl 'In Her Own Write'*.<sup>71</sup> Tracing the Afro-American literary canon to the 1773 poetry of Phyllis Wheatley, Gates states that in a 'strictly literary sense [...] all subsequent black writers have evolved in a matrilinear line'.<sup>72</sup> Playing on the terms of rights and writing, Gates suggests a conflation of the author and the rights-bearing individual. Wheatley might then be a progenitor of a literary canon, but also of that literary canon's tensions and expressions of writing for rights. The frontispiece of *Ellen* in planter's disguise alongside William's preface mentioning the American Declaration of Independence might be viewed as a similar tactic. By introducing taxonomic and experiential ambiguities into how things seem to be, how they are formulated by the law to be, and how they are lived, navigated and circumvented by those caught in its system, the reader is asked to hold writing and rights in continual vision and question throughout the memoir.

### **'Sketched by many hands': Celebrated virgins, celibacy and a romantic friendship**

In 1847, John Hickling gathers and publishes a volume of writing about the Ladies, comprising an impressive range from the practical to the poetic. It includes an auction note of their house ('Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Ponsonby's little paradise at Llangollen'<sup>73</sup>) by the seller, a Mr George Robins, who feels the need to apologise for the 'imperfect recital', of the 'beauties and particularities' of their 'far-famed Domicile'.<sup>74</sup> Robins records the rooms of the house, the surrounding

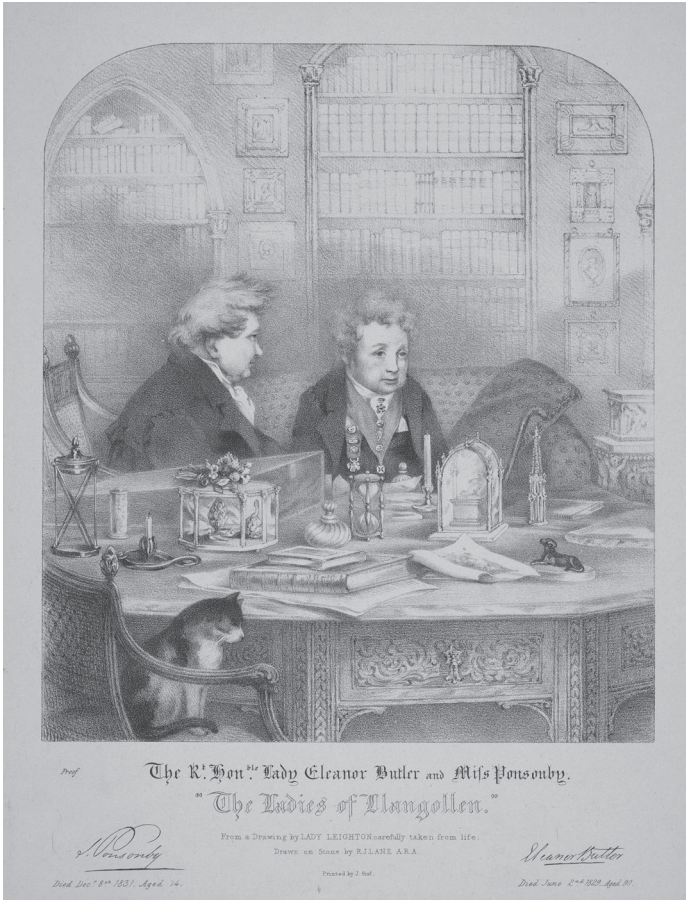
<sup>70</sup> Writing and acting alongside declarations of rights occurs also in other writing, for example, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* was a backdrop for Toussaint L'Ouverture's revolutionary undertakings and the 'establishment of Haiti as a Black-majority republic' (see Moore, Brooks, and Wigginton 2012, 332).

<sup>71</sup> Henry Louis Jr Gates, 'Foreword: In Her Own Write', in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), vii.

<sup>72</sup> Gates, 'Foreword: In Her Own Write', x.

<sup>73</sup> John Hickling, *The 'Ladies of Llangollen' as Sketched by Many Hands; with Notices of Other Objects of Interests in 'That Sweetest of Vales'* (Dublin: Thomas Catherall Edition, 1847), 8.

<sup>74</sup> Hickling, *The 'Ladies of Llangollen'*, 9



**Figure 1.5.** Richard James Lane, *The Rt Honble Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Ponsonby 'The Ladies of Llangollen'*, 1840, illustration. The British Library.

garden and the inventory, comprising of everything from furniture to trinkets, like 'a lock of "Mary Queen of Scots" hair'.<sup>75</sup> The volume also includes writing about the Ladies by the many people who undertook literary pilgrimages to the secluded Plass Newydd. Famously, Prince Hermann Pückler-Muskau of Prussia recorded his impression of the Ladies upon visiting the vale in 1832: they 'took it in their heads to hate men, to love only each other',<sup>76</sup> making them, as he

<sup>75</sup> Hickling, *The 'Ladies of Llangollen'*, 13

<sup>76</sup> Hickling, *The 'Ladies of Llangollen'*, 22



**Figure 1.6:** Cambrian Pottery and the Glamorgan Pottery, *Plate. Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby out riding*, ca. 1813–1839. Earthenware, glass, 16 cm. Amgueddfa Cymru National Museum Wales.

continued, ‘the most celebrated virgins in Europe’.<sup>77</sup> Hickling further writes guidebook-like advice for the ‘adventurous tourist’ who, after climbing ‘the lofty hill’, might wish to ‘look around for a comfortable resting place and good refreshment’ like Llangollen Ale, for which a ballad is also recorded.<sup>78</sup> Given Eleanor’s alleged aversion to being portrayed, the first and last sketch of her and Sarah being drawn from the shadow of a curtain in their library during the year of Eleanor’s serious illness,<sup>79</sup> Hickling’s ‘sketching’ speaks to their inadvertent fame and the public’s desire for depiction.

In 1930, Eva Mary Bell, a distant relative of the Ladies’ only heir, Caroline Hamilton, published a volume entitled *The Hamwood Papers*, comprising the

<sup>77</sup> In Bell, *The Hamwood Papers*, 1.

<sup>78</sup> Hickling, *The ‘Ladies of Llangollen’*, 44.

<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship* (California: Moonrise Press, 2011).

diaries of Eleanor Butler alongside letters, portraits and excerpts of Hamilton's diary. A small portion of Eleanor's diary had been printed in Arthur Ponsonby's *English Diaries* in 1923. Though he finds their story so 'unique' and 'fantastical' that 'local gossip and hearsay had woven the highly-coloured strands of fiction over the bare threads of whatever there may have been of fact',<sup>80</sup> Bell beckons the reader to look for something beyond scandal and the 'carefully prepared disclosures of public men' in their intimate portrayal of their lives.

These volumes are but a few examples of the many sketches and a vast number of material objects making the most of the thin line between fact and fiction that sensationalised the Ladies' lives. What was the cause of their fame? Even though Bell, Arthur Ponsonby and later Mary Gordon, remark on the literary value of Eleanor's diary, they were neither writers nor artists. Mavor locates their celebrity in living out a desired Romantic ideal of Rousseau-inspired retirement, withdrawing from the vulgarity of the world to 'a life of virtue and simplicity'. To their contemporaries, the Ladies' alleged 'secluded life of celibacy', then made them not only 'exemplifiers of perfect 'retirement', but also of 'perfect friends'.<sup>81</sup> Where Fiona Brideoake reads the Ladies' union also as a 'public evasion of erotic decipherability',<sup>82</sup> the guise of celibacy and friendship providing 'epistemic protection',<sup>83</sup> Mavor instead shows how the notion of Romantic Friendship speaks between the lines of their times exactly to the nature of their attachment: 'much that we would now associate solely with a sexual attachment was contained in romantic friendship: tenderness, loyalty, sensibility, shared bed, shared tastes, coquetry, even passion'.<sup>84</sup>

The fame and seclusion of the Ladies, curiously, brought tourists not only to Llangollen after their death, but also prominent contemporaries like Sir Walter Scott, Edmund Burke, William Wordsworth and Anna Seward, to their door and into conversation during their lives. Eleanor's diary records the movement of the skies, the birds, the weather, but it also displays a keen interest in the political affairs of their time from abolition to the French Revolution. For example, they spend a 'Lovely, lovely evening' with Edmund Burke as he had just 'returned from France. Had been in Paris in all the Riots'.<sup>85</sup> Eleanor also records the story of an enslaved man being freed due to finding the cure for the

---

<sup>80</sup> Arthur Ponsonby, *English Diaries: A Review of English Diaries from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (London: London Methuen, 1923), 241.

<sup>81</sup> Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, vii.

<sup>82</sup> Fiona Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen : Desire, Indeterminacy, and the Legacies of Criticism* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2017), 237

<sup>83</sup> Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, 253

<sup>84</sup> Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, xvii

<sup>85</sup> S. Tighe in Bell, *The Hamwood Papers*, 221.

bites of rattlesnakes,<sup>86</sup> and writes about abolitionists dedicating themselves to ‘the relief of those unhappy beings, whose Sufferings are a disgrace to human nature’.<sup>87</sup>

Mary Gordon’s 1936 *Chase of the Wild Goose* might be read as another imaginative sketching of the Ladies. In her foreword, Gordon states how she tries to ground her tale in reality but also how the ‘reconstruction of their very interesting story’ demands something more than reality, namely ‘various artist’s material’.<sup>88</sup> Akin to *Running*, Gordon writes in conversation with other texts: several chapters are prefaced with the poetry of William Shakespeare or Robert Browning, and her historical source is mainly the *Hamwood Papers*, which she deems ‘a despicable production’ full of ‘idle and unpleasant gossip’.<sup>89</sup> Gordon insists that there is no biography of the Ladies, ‘which is not in one particular or another based on hearsay, phantasy, or empty conjecture’,<sup>90</sup> and yet her own rendition might be said exactly to weave the coloured strands of fiction over fact: she fills in where historical records trail off, imagines conversations between the Ladies and their relatives that she could not have overheard, and narrates their inner musings and private thoughts. In her later sections entitled ‘I Meet the Ladies’, and ‘The Ladies Meet Me’, Gordon tells of her own literary pilgrimage to Llangollen. Asking the reader to interpret the events of these chapters ‘according to his own opinion of ghosts’,<sup>91</sup> she meets the ghosts of the Ladies, thereby elaborating notions of collaboration and co-authorship into a spiritual and cross-temporal realm. Gordon draws them into a conversation on the advancements of women’s rights from their time to her own, thereby traversing not only death but also spatiotemporal logic and the narrative rationality of biography.

*Chase* then represents the dedication of her publisher, Virginia and Leonard Woolf’s Hogarth Press, to distributing genre-bending and modern works. Virginia Woolf was familiar with the Ladies, and while she had not wished to write about them, their story was ‘part of her scaffolding for *Orlando*’,<sup>92</sup> published by the Press in 1928. *Goose* and *Orlando* then both share a source of inspiration, from the nebulous white bird, repurposed from representing the ‘the elusive object of literary genius’ in the conclusion to *Orlando*,<sup>93</sup> to titling Gordon’s book in a nod

<sup>86</sup> S. Tighe in Bell, *The Hamwood Papers*, 92–93.

<sup>87</sup> S. Tighe in Bell, *The Hamwood Papers*, 167–168.

<sup>88</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, xv.

<sup>89</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 226.

<sup>90</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, xv.

<sup>91</sup> Nicola Wilson, ‘Afterword’ in *Chase of the Wild Goose* (Bristol: Lurid Editions, 2003), 253.

<sup>92</sup> Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, 250

<sup>93</sup> Wilson, ‘Afterword’, 258.

to the Ladies' flight, togetherness and shared ideals. The two books and their writers further both depart and unite in their playful approach to the genre of biography. Woolf had variously doubted the possibility of truly recording the life of anyone and of judging works of art as separate entities,<sup>94</sup> making the question 'of whether a narrator will ever fully understand his subjects' 'one of the 'subtler plots' of *Orlando*.<sup>95</sup> Gordon, conversely, positions her biography as a work undertaken by spiritual commission from the Ladies:

How was it that I had been 'called' – as I had phrased it – to come and look for them after 150 years in which we had needed one another, had possibly been dependent upon one another – they on me, that I might give them back some lost coherence in whichever their present life amounted to, I on them for the renewal of my little remaining life, such as it was?<sup>96</sup>

The coherence Gordon wishes to give hinges, not least, on doing justice to what she understands as the 'main feature of the Ladies' lives, their great and abiding love for one another'.<sup>97</sup> Together, *Orlando* and *Goose* bring same-sex desire 'into the historical and representational field of the twentieth century',<sup>98</sup> and show 'the possibility of a fun and hopeful lesbian history, rather than one characterised by suppression and violence'.<sup>99</sup> As the following section elaborates, Gordon holds them as the 'unconscious pioneers' of a 'social epoch' beyond their own,<sup>100</sup> particularly when it comes not only to imagining, but also to living out ideas beyond their age. Making union as a condition for achieving biographical coherence of their story, alongside the discourse of rights and freedom, Gordon underscores love's impact on expanding social limits.

## **Describing the world from the top of a staircase: The lineage of rights and love in *Chase of the Wild Goose***

Where the Crafts' memoir introduces ambiguity into the language and readability of race and gender – and, by extension expand discourses on love, rights, and ownership – Gordon achieves similar nuance by exploring a disjointed

---

<sup>94</sup> Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, 248.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Whitworth in Virginia Woolf, *Orlando, A Biography*, edited by Michael H. Whitworth. 11th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xii.

<sup>96</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 231.

<sup>97</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, xvi.

<sup>98</sup> Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, 238.

<sup>99</sup> Wilson, 'Afterword', 260.

<sup>100</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 21.

relationship with time. Waking up on a similar morning to one that Eleanor enjoyed and recorded 147 years before, Gordon ‘clears a path’ from herself to the Ladies,<sup>101</sup> rendering their overlaps both temporal and narrative. On the open hillside, and later, in their house, Gordon makes the Ladies conversant with the advancements made to women’s sexual and political rights in the years spanning between their lives, of which the Ladies are held as the ‘spiritual progenitors’.<sup>102</sup> Although the reader is left to their own faculties in judging the validity of these chapters, there might also seem a discrepancy between Gordon’s blatant spiritualism and her scientific profession as a doctor, elaborated on later. Nonetheless, meeting ghosts reflects the ‘preoccupations of the time, in which the losses of the First World War led to ‘an upsurge of interest in “talking with the dead”’;<sup>103</sup> in the quasi-public setting of séances, women mediums could voice ‘flagrantly transgressive outbreaks of language and sentiments’.<sup>104</sup>

Within this queer and spiritual temporality, titled by the chapter ‘The Future Arrives Late’, Gordon focuses particularly on how women’s freedom has progressed due to changes made to the institutional life of love. Discussing the historical status of women who did not marry, like the Ladies, Gordon tells them:

I have never married [...] the world said a woman’s condition was an unchangeable quantity predestined for before the foundation of the world. Whereas a man’s destiny is what he chose to make of it. The Church has proclaimed a married ideal, and on that all our social laws are based.<sup>105</sup>

The rights women have obtained and maintained hinges, then, on having access to the same kind of destiny which allows them governance over their own life in body (in the development of birth control and choices about pregnancy), mind (in pursuing education), and spirit (in being called to higher artistic or ethereal purposes). Yet, asking whether marriage ‘seems a reasonable and proper contract’,<sup>106</sup> Gordon also shows that freedom is obtained exactly when women have the right to terminate state-sanctioned bonds of love via access to divorce.<sup>107</sup> While these may all seem like instances of inserting her own ideals into the stories of the Ladies, Gordon also places these discussions on love earlier in the book. In

<sup>101</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 237.

<sup>102</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 245.

<sup>103</sup> Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, 265.

<sup>104</sup> Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 220.

<sup>105</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 238.

<sup>106</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 238.

<sup>107</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 239.

conversation with Mrs Goddard between their first and second flight, Sarah reflects:

We have been so much astonished that the men who proposed to us, as well as our friends who encouraged them, have never cared to tell us about themselves, and their ideas, not whether they had any principles of their own. Nor did they care what ours were. Just a few preliminaries about money or family, and that was enough.<sup>108</sup>

Reflecting on May's thesis that love and personal freedom are not separated, when Mrs Goddard holds that 'Once a man makes love to you, you'll have done with ideas',<sup>109</sup> Eleanor insists that love 'cannot be assessed by any terms but its own'.<sup>110</sup> Equally, when the archbishop reminds her of the Christian duty to marry, she states not only that she belongs 'first of all to myself',<sup>111</sup> but also that in making a financial and religious duty of love, the bishop has 'spoken of 'making love', but not of Love'.<sup>112</sup> Although both Sarah and Eleanor understand the social precarity which falling in love implies for women, they also insist on other possibilities of loving and of 'experiencing the transformative miracle which is love'.<sup>113</sup> In a similar tactic to destabilising the meaning of love and marriage as done in *Running*, Eleanor promises her cousin to take care of Sarah using the words of the marriage vows: 'I want to assure you, for better or worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness or in health, I'll take care of Sally'.<sup>114</sup> As such, developing their own terminology of love not only underscores shared views, but also promises a way of living together against the restrictive definitions of their surroundings.

As for professional life, Gordon speaks of women uniting across classes for the parliamentary vote, and for their direct involvement in political life as Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers. In line with Eleanor's recording of political events and debates in their diaries, Sarah responds: 'Oh! Eleanor, that's where you should have been',<sup>115</sup> which Gordon corrects to 'should be'.<sup>116</sup> The temporal disjoining is then continued in overlapping past and present; implying that Eleanor both *should have* been and *should be* part of the political circuit; is exactly an instance of the future arriving late. This narrative 'chronological triumph'

---

<sup>108</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 93.

<sup>109</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 93.

<sup>110</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 52.

<sup>111</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 28.

<sup>112</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 29.

<sup>113</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 18.

<sup>114</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 105.

<sup>115</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 241.

<sup>116</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 241.

inserts discourses of rights and possibilities of self-governance into the Ladies' lives, whereby they 'give birth to the future Gordon embodies'.<sup>117</sup> Reflecting rights and reading with one's heart, Gordon places the question of language bibliographically and materially, making books a key component in the generational transmission of rights. Recounting her overview of the inventory of books in Plass Newydd, Gordon states, 'I counted a hundred and thirteen and you must have had many more – by or about women. It is plain that you cared about the subject'.<sup>118</sup> For the Ladies, it is stories by and about women that can help formulate and imagine a life of 'individual freedom'.<sup>119</sup> As with *Running*, books and reading are underscored as a key materiality and practice in obtaining the rights that make the love-lives of the Ladies, and subsequently Gordon, possible. When they ask Gordon what they did to bring the future – Gordon's present, the reader's past – into being, Gordon articulates her answer in the realm of books and imagination: 'You meditated among your books', Gordon replies, 'and dreamed us into existence',<sup>120</sup> as rights are reliant on spiritual lineage, cross-generational solidarity and historical alliances, but equally on the creative and imaginative opportunities available in books.

The retroactive placement of the Ladies as 'political visionaries' is in keeping with Gordon's bending of the biographical genre,<sup>121</sup> but Brideoake also suggests that this disruption breaks the logic of the heterosexual life-narrative, working instead as a 'queer reproduction'.<sup>122</sup> As both their biographer and a 'self-proclaimed heir',<sup>123</sup> Gordon finds a place of belonging in their lineage, and extends the disjointed prism of time to include her own biography. The kinds of emphasis she places on rights and love reflects her own preoccupations: she was a part of the first generation of doctors to be trained at the London School of Medicine for Women, after which she undertook work as a general practitioner and prison inspector. In 1907, she published *A Jury of the Virtuous* under a pseudonym, examining the ostracisation of her protagonist following incarceration, and in 1922 she published *Penal Discipline* outlining the structural inequalities she had observed in the treatment of women in prisons and the criminalisation underlying their incarceration in the first place.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>117</sup> Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, 261.

<sup>118</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 225.

<sup>119</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 225.

<sup>120</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 245.

<sup>121</sup> Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, 264.

<sup>122</sup> Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, 264.

<sup>123</sup> Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, 238.

<sup>124</sup> Brideoake, *The Ladies of Llangollen*, 249; Deborah Cheney, 'Dr Mary Louisa Gordon (1861–1941): A Feminist Approach in Prison', *Feminist Legal Studies* 18:2 (2010).

Gordon's connection of the 'personal to the political' might be traced in the emphasis on specific rights that she extracts from the Ladies' story,<sup>125</sup> but also in being 'called' to her writerly task from a place of mutual interdependence. Gordon asks: 'where was I to place myself. I was not far from the end of a long and full life. I was the same age as Sarah Ponsonby had been when she had – gone away'.<sup>126</sup> Overlapping her own biography with the figure of Sarah and the quasi-fictional retelling of the story of the Ladies shows a collaborative, and perhaps even, co-writerly desire, to continue their story and reverberate in the echo of the noise they made 'in the world which has never since died out'.<sup>127</sup> This continues when Gordon reflects on what comes after she – goes away. 'Change', inevitably, yet would it be 'the kind of change that had come to these two, and should I acquire the impersonal view of my own past history which they had acquired towards theirs?'<sup>128</sup> Using similarly reflective methods for both her own life and that of the Ladies in turn strikes a kindred invitation to narrative and rights-based interdependence with the reader, reflected also in her use of 'we' throughout the book. For example, when introducing Sarah to us, she writes: 'we make the acquaintance of Sarah Ponsonby',<sup>129</sup> or, when reading Eleanor's journal, she proposes it is not only something she and the reader do together, but also in company with the Ladies: 'We can see the sun set in flames of crimson and gold. We can enjoy with herself and the Beloved their moonlight walks'.<sup>130</sup> Gordon finds grounds for this plural in Eleanor's journal, which 'is of "We"',<sup>131</sup> even though it describes a life lived together. It is then a 'love-song, since all the pleasures and happiness it records depend upon their intimate life together',<sup>132</sup> which are not only recorded, but 'recorded because they are felt and lived in'.<sup>133</sup> As such, the journal functions not only as a co-writing and co-storying materiality for biographical and rights-discursive overlap, but also as a bridge between writing and imagining, living and loving.

When she has described her present (the Ladies' future) some pages earlier, Eleanor marvels: 'It is as if you were describing the world from the top of a great staircase', to which Gordon replies 'Then climb it with us and be on a level'.<sup>134</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup> Cheney, 'Dr Mary Louisa Gordon', 117.

<sup>126</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 230.

<sup>127</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 1.

<sup>128</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 230.

<sup>129</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 9.

<sup>130</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 147.

<sup>131</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 143.

<sup>132</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 143.

<sup>133</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 147.

<sup>134</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 241.

Reflecting on a time beyond her own in an already dislodged temporal frame and with multiple possibilities for narrative kinship points the reader up the staircase too, allowing consideration as to what kind of story – of rights, of love, of individual freedom – might be told beyond the pages of the book.

## Continuing to read with one's heart

In reading love and rights across these works, I have sought not to conflate contexts, issues or literary specificities that need separate attention. Nor have I sought to suggest that the liberatory possibilities of love and human rights were the practice, and not an aspiration, of the nineteenth century. Rather, I have underlined how declarations – of rights and of love – are of an aspirational nature and need both imagination and expression to become practice. Rather, I have proposed how reading with one's heart might make visible where love and rights converge as universal and agentic approaches to transforming the social limits and rightlessness around perceived transgressive unions.

The above has not directly compared the two works, but I end by drawing out a few ways in which they meet across questions of rights and love. Firstly, both works make ambiguous a core aspect of literature: the meaning of words and the sense of time. This draws the reader into worlds, where orientational points for making meaning are continually dislodged, allowing instances and ideas of love, ownership, rights, past and present to be held in question and ongoing interpretation. Secondly, the materiality of books, and the acts of collaboration and co-writing across temporal, racial and gendered lines are also present in both works, as are instances of performativity and seeming other-than through disguise and double or multiple meanings. Ellen Craft draws this vividly, in traversing gendered and racial decipherability. Yet, this was true also for the Ladies. In 1820, for example, comedian Charles Matthew wrote in a letter to his wife that on seeing the Ladies in the theatre, he found there was 'not one point to distinguish them from men', rather they 'looked like two respectable superannuated clergymen'.<sup>135</sup> Although there is some dispute on whether the Ladies' gentlemanly dress was simply an adopting of the Welsh costume, or whether they added flair of their own,<sup>136</sup> their contemporaries' commentary and prolific portrayals of the Ladies on trinkets, attests to a desire to understand their dress and gender. On such a voyeuristic or collecting note, Matthews

---

<sup>135</sup> In Hickling *The 'Ladies of Llangollen'*, 35.

<sup>136</sup> Michael Freeman, 'Welsh Costume / Gwisg Gymreig: Welsh Costume – Descriptions, Illustrations, Surviving Examples, 1700–1950'. n.d.

continues: 'I longed to put Lady Eleanor Butler under a bell-glass, and bring her to Highgate for you to look at'.<sup>137</sup> The notion of collaboration and kinship crosses divides of politics and time in both works, but also shows literature and writing extending beyond the page towards obtaining rights. Writing in continual conversation with other texts, legal, literary, anecdotal, displays this effort on a sentence-level. Yet, Gordon also shows how, from the Ladies' time to her own, women compared the state of marriage to that of being enslaved.<sup>138</sup> While this might seem an insensitive parallel to current readers, it also underpins exactly the notion of collaboration across textual and political spaces. For example, Cecilia Walsh-Russo shows how women took on public roles in advocating for abolition, even when they were being excluded from public debates like the 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention.<sup>139</sup>

Crossing borders and finding freedom elsewhere have run as implicit strands across both stories. Underscoring how the Crafts became central to the political debate on abolitionism, their crossing of borders renders the discourses implicit in themes of their memoir transnational, but also functioned as a way for English abolitionists to condemn slavery in America further.<sup>140</sup> Such condemnation worked also to make nationalist arguments. For example, Sara Salih wrote in the foreword to Prince's memoir about William Blackstone's 1825 *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, that it is the 'very soil', and the 'spirit of liberty', which is 'so deeply planted in our constitution', which makes English laws especially effectual in preserving the 'civil liberties even in the meanest subject'.<sup>141</sup> Nationalising the discourse of freedom within the confines of narrative is apparent also in *Chase*. Gordon shows how the Ladies continually longed for the Ireland they had left behind to be together. On leaving their worldly and wordy goods to Caroline Hamilton, Eleanor reflects that their story will eventually be told, if not by her, then by some future generation. Sarah responds 'with what patience you await the fulfilment of our story! It is only comparable to your patience over Ireland'.<sup>142</sup> Gordon thereby implies that the patience and longing of homesickness is akin to the narrative desire in awaiting one's story to be told.

So, how do love stories end? A glance across this volume suggests all possible conclusions from death to happily ever after. Disjoining the temporal frames and

---

<sup>137</sup> In Hickling, *The 'Ladies of Llangollen'*, 36.

<sup>138</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 237.

<sup>139</sup> Cecelia Walsh-Russo, 'Mutual Brokerage and Women's Participation in Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Abolitionist Movements', *Social Movement Studies* 16:6 (2017), 633–46.

<sup>140</sup> Blackett, 'The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft', 64.

<sup>141</sup> Sara Salih, 'Introduction', xvii–xviii.

<sup>142</sup> Gordon, *Chase of the Wild Goose*, 208.

continuing the linguistic ambiguity explored in reading rights and love across this chapter, these stories might have a chronological ending. However, a new edition of *Chase of the Wild Goose* came out in 2023, attesting to the ongoing relevance of Gordon's work and the Ladies' lives to historical and contemporary debates on queer relationships and women's rights. Similarly, the Crafts' story remains in adaptive rotation and central to discourses on race. For example, Ilyon Woo published a 2023 biography of the Crafts entitled *Master, Slave, Husband, Wife*, and in 2017, Tanya Landman's novel, *Passing For White* came out, recasting the Crafts' story for a young adult audience. As such, Gordon's invitation to sustain a narrative relationship with a past-present of rights, and this chapter's broader prism of reading with one's heart, extends to how both stories do not end but continue climbing that staircase for the right to love and freedom.

## Bibliography

- Adams-Campbell, Melissa M., *New World Courtships: Transatlantic Alternatives to Companionate Marriage* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2015).
- Allen, Jessica L., 'Pringle's Pruning of Prince: The History of Mary Prince and the Question of Repetition', *Callaloo* 35:2 (2012), 509–19.
- Bell, Eva Mary, *The Hamwood Papers of The Ladies of Llangollen and Caroline Hamilton*, ed. G. H. (John Travers) Bell (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1930).
- Blackett, R. J. M. 'The Odyssey of William and Ellen Craft', *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999).
- Brake, Elizabeth, 'Love and the Law', in Christopher Grau, and Aaron Smuts, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Love* (2024; online edn, Oxford Academic, 6 Feb. 2017), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199395729.002.0003>>, accessed 8 July 2024.
- Brideoake, Fiona, *The Ladies of Llangollen : Desire, Indeterminacy, and the Legacies of Criticism* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2017).
- Cheney, Deborah, 'Dr Mary Louisa Gordon (1861–1941): A Feminist Approach in Prison'. *Feminist Legal Studies* 18:2 (2010), 115–36. <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-010-9151-4>>.
- Cima, Gay Gibson, *From Anti-Slavery Celebrity to Cosmopolitan Self-Possession* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), <<https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781107447653.005>>.

- Craft, William, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom : The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*, ed. R. J. M. Blackett (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999).
- Crushman, Thomas, *Handbook of Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- Davidson, Alistair, *The Immutable Laws of Mankind: The Struggle for Universal Human Rights* (New York: Springer, 2012).
- Ernest, John, *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
- Freeman, Michael, 'Welsh Costume / Gwisg Gymreig: Welsh Costume – Descriptions, Illustrations, Surviving Examples, 1700–1950'. Wordpress. Accessed 12 February 2024. <<https://welshhat.wordpress.com/contact/>>.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr, 'Foreword: In Her Own Write', in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- Gordon, Mary Louisa, *Chase of the Wild Goose* (Bristol: Lurid Editions, 2023).
- Hickling, John, *The 'Ladies of Llangollen' as Sketched by Many Hands; with Notices of Other Objects of Interests in 'That Sweetest of Vales'* (Dublin: Thomas Catherall Edition, 1847)
- hooks, bell, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000).
- Hunt, Lynn, *Inventing Human Rights, A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2007).
- Ishray, Micheline R., *The History of Human Rights* (London: University of California Press, 2008).
- Jacobs, Harriet, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- Laird, Holly A., *Women Coauthors* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).
- Mavor, Elizabeth, *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship* (California: Moonrise Press, 2011).
- May, Simon, *Love: A History* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).
- McCaskill, Barbara, 'Yours Very Truly': Ellen Craft – the Fugitive as Text and Artifact', *African American Review* 28:4, (1994), 509–29.
- *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999)
- *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery : William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).
- Merrill, Lisa, 'Exhibiting Race "under the World's Huge Glass Case": William and Ellen Craft and William Wells Brown at the Great Exhibition in Crystal

- Palace, London, 1851', *Slavery and Abolition* 33:2 (2012), 321–36. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2012.669907>>.
- Moore, Lisa L., Joana Brooks, and Caroline Wigginton, *Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- Morsink, Johannes, *Inherent Human Rights: Philosophical Roots of the Universal Declaration* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).
- Owen, Alex, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- Parikh, Crystal, *The Cambridge Companion to Human Rights and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
- Pinto, Samantha, *Infamous Bodies: Early Black Women's Celebrity and the Afterlives of Rights* (Durham, US: Duke University Press, 2020).
- Ponsonby, Arthur, *English Diaries: A Review of English Diaries from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (London: London Methuen, 1923).
- Prince, Mary, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave*, edited by Sara Salih (London: Penguin, 2004).
- Salih, Sara, 'Introduction', in *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (London: Penguin, 2004).
- Samuels, Ellen, "'A Complication of Complaints': Untangling Disability, Race, and Gender in William and Ellen Craft's Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom', *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 31:3 (2006), 15–47. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/31.3.15>>.
- Sanborn, Geoffrey, 'The Plagiarist's Craft: Fugitivity and Theatricality in Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom', *PMLA* 128:4 (2013), 907–22. <<https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2013.128.4.907>>.
- Seacole, Mary, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*, ed. Ziggi Alexander and Audrey Dewjee (Bristol: Falling Well Press, 1984).
- Sinha, Manisha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
- Slaughter, Joseph R., 'Becoming Plots: Human Rights, the Bildungsroman, and the Novelization of Citizenship', *Human Rights, Inc. The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York, 2007; online edn, Fordham Scholarship Online, 1 Sept. 2011), <<https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823228171.003.0003>>, accessed 8 July 2024.
- Stewart, Philip, 'Introduction' in Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, edited by Philip

- Stewart and Jean Vaché (Lebanon, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 1997). <[https://www.google.dk/books/edition/Julie\\_Or\\_The\\_New\\_Heloise/H4PGHmtJoOkC?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PT1&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.dk/books/edition/Julie_Or_The_New_Heloise/H4PGHmtJoOkC?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PT1&printsec=frontcover)>.
- Tribbett, Marcus Charles, 'Three Williams and a Subversive Text: Collaboration, Communal Agency, and Resistant Identities in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860)', *The Southern Quarterly* 55:1 (2017): 9–29. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/672750>>.
- Walsh-Russo, Cecelia, 'Mutual Brokerage and Women's Participation in Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Abolitionist Movements', *Social Movement Studies* 16:6 (2017), 633–46 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2017.1344543>>.
- Wardrop, Daneen, 'Collaboration in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*: William's Key and Ellen's Renaming', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 61:3 (2005), 57–73. <<https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2005.0015>>.
- Wilson, Nicola, 'Afterword' in *Chase of the Wild Goose* (Bristol: Lurid Editions, 2003).
- Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando, A Biography*, ed. Michael H. Whitworth. 11th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).