Helen Maria Williams- letters From France

Helena Maria Williams, (1762- 1827) was an English poet, novelist, and social critic best known for her support of such radical causes as abolitionism and the [French Revolution](https://www.britannica.com/event/French-Revolution).Helen Maria Williams a British women writer has made her mark, most notably as a correspondent from revolutionary France. Also a popular poet and sentimental novelist of the late eighteenth century she used her verse to speak out on the oppressions of war, the slave trade, and colonialism. Williams traveled to France in July 1790 and began a series of letters to an imaginary friend in support of the Revolution.  Williams’ *Letters From France* is a cross section of genres, merging personal correspondence, travel narrative, sentimentalism, and radical politics. It is a dramatic tour of French life and politics, In volumes I and II (1790 and 1792). The letters are most dramatic and emotional. Her twenty-six letters recounting old regime tyranny and revolutionary events provide both an apology for the Revolution and a representation of it as sublime spectacle.*Letters Written in France*, is a work central to the study of Romanticism, history, and women’s literature. This splendid collection of letters contain a brilliant and informative introduction that situates Williams in the landscape of revolutionary, literary, and women’s history. Williams’s *Letters Written in France* offered readers in England a sympathetic view of the Revolution, which she hoped would hasten democratic reforms. In her letters she depicts the turmoil in France with the personal excitement of a tourist, detailing the spectacle of the nascent republic and cheering the victory of the revolutionaries in the impassioned style of sentimentalism. she went back to [London](https://www.britannica.com/place/London) in 1781 to publish her poem *Edwin and Eltruda*, she made a wide literary acquaintance, which included Dr. [Samuel Johnson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Johnson) and [Robert Burns](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Burns) as well as such prominent radicals as [Joseph Priestley](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Priestley) and [William Godwin](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Godwin). In the 1780s she achieved some success with her poetry, her collected poems (1786) .She spent the summer of 1790 in Revolutionary France, returned again in late 1791, and settled there in late 1792. Her sympathy for the Revolution is recorded in volumes of *Letters* published from 1790 to 1796.

In ​[*Letters Written in France*](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N18502.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext), Helen Maria Williams documents events after the revolution in France for her British readers. As she describes France’s societal changes, she asks them to also adopt a more liberal worldview and provide equal opportunities to all citizens, especially women. For hundreds of years, the notion that social class and gender determine a person’s value had been considered undeniable.  During the period of the French Revolution, the majority of the British opposed the Revolution. To convince her readers, Williams traveled to the frontlines in Paris and documented what she saw and experienced. By writing letters, she could easily send them back to her friends and the people of Britain so they could know the truth about events in France. The French Revolution began in 1789 when the people took control and overthrew the monarchy .The main purpose of the French Revolution was to address rising social and economic inequality in the country. During the first year of the revolution, the French demolished the Bastille prison and signed the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Women were essential to the revolution, and they marched on Versailles to force King Louis and Marie Antoinette back to Paris. When power struggles over the next few years led to the Terror, the king was beheaded at the guillotine.

With her letters Williams takes her readers on a tour of the most important revolutionary sites in Paris and the way it had united people of all genders and social classes in their struggle for liberty. Williams also uses her letters to advocate for women’s importance to the revolution. She points to the contributions they make to society, such as at the Champ de Mars, where “Ladies took the instruments of labour in their hands”, and helped to construct the site. Women at the time were often stereotyped as only caring about superficial material things such as money and clothing. Williams proves these stereotypes false by showing her readers how willing the women of France were to give up such luxuries to help the new government. While women did not have political power, Williams shows how they use their femininity to inspire change. Williams not only provided a first-hand account of one of the most historical events of the day, but she also was able to persuade readers to her point of view, all at a time when women writers were not taken as seriously as their male peers. Her letters helped promote ideals of liberty and redefine the role of women in politics during the late eighteenth century. She was arguably ahead of her time in classical liberal thought, as well as the advancement of women’s rights. Such ideas have continued to inspire movements for equality and universal suffrage around the world for the past two centuries.