## Elizabeth Craven

Writer, Feminist and European

Julia Gasper

Vernon Series on the History of Art





Elizabeth Craven painted by Thomas Beach 1777. By permission of Sotheby's London Ltd.

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To My Mother

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#### **Preface**

This is the third book to be written by Julia Gasper on a champion of the Enlightenment. Her first publication on this theme, *Theodore von Neuhoff, King of Corsica: The Man Behind the Legend* (2012), told the story of a man of action, who attempted repeatedly, though ultimately unsuccessfully, to make the island of Corsica an independent kingdom, free from what he perceived as the tyranny of foreign rule. The second, *The Marquis d'Argens, A Philosophical Life* (2014), has cleared away layers of gossip, myth, and misappropriation to provide a clear and comprehensive account of the life and works of an original, imaginative and influential writer. *Elizabeth Craven, Writer, Feminist and European* shows how Craven (1750-1828) added a woman's perspective, in her life and writings, some of which have been published, translated into English, or correctly attributed, for the first time. The emerging body of work is not only enjoyable as literature but an inspiring landmark in feminist history.

Since 'Enlightenment' is a vigorously contested term, it is necessary to propose a definition: in this context, it is understood to imply honest efforts to distinguish between rationality and prejudice, willingness to adopt a critical attitude to one's own assumptions, refusal to judge people's moral or intellectual potential on the evidence of their ethnicity, sex, or culture, and the conviction that change for the better is not only possible but necessary. Above all, it should provide a sense of continuity with the more liberal and forward-looking aspects of present-day thought. With his dedication to religious toleration and the abolition of slavery, Von Neuhoff (1694-1756) clearly has something to contribute to the unfinished business of the twentyfirst century; so, too, does d'Argens, whose Lettres Juives [Jewish Letters] (1736), inspired by his acquaintance with a Jewish physician who had taken refuge in Constantinople from the Spanish Inquisition, take a wittily critical look at some of the vagaries of European Christendom. Craven, in her comedy Le Philosophe Moderne (1790), sets an exceptionally trenchant exposition of the aims of the French Revolution in the mouth of her main character, but allows the events of the plot to show that he is not only misguided but treacherous. In any case, she presents his cause as doomed to failure, since his revolutionary principles do not offer equality to women: in Craven's view, this excludes any claim to be properly enlightened. D'Argens, it should be noted, went some way to meeting Craven's standards in his personal life, by bestowing on his wife and daughter classical educations, including Greek as well as Latin, that would normally have been considered suitable only for the male of the species.

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Craven's eventful life could have been seen as a triumph or a tragedy: ultimately, her survival and achievements depended on her ability to combat her sorrows, the chief of which was the loss of her children, with courage, energy, and artistic creativity, as a writer, director, and amateur actress. She was also an eager traveller and a keen gardener. She was clear-sighted enough to understand how many of her problems arose from the sexual discrimination which often led to girls in upper-class families being pressured into marriage at an early age. She was sixteen when she married, and the age difference between herself and her husband, though only twelve years, contributed to their unhappiness. The incompatibility of their tastes and temperament made matters even worse. Moralists and novelists at the time deplored such marriages, which they saw as the cause of marital disharmony and subsequent adultery, but their preferred solution was marriage for love rather than female equality. The heroine's desperate attempts to avoid marriage to Mr Solmes (who is, of course, not only physically but morally repulsive) trigger the tragic events of Samuel Richardson's Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady (1748). The correct real-life solution was to proceed with the marriage like a dutiful daughter and wait patiently, and virtuously, until demography took its toll. This strategy was deployed by the redoubtably respectable Mary Granville Pendarves Delany (1700-1788), who married her first husband at 17, was widowed in 1724, and whose happy second marriage to Mr Delany lasted twenty-five years. Sadly, Craven lacked the necessary patience: her indiscretions transformed her from the victim of a forced marriage to an adulterous wife and, eventually, a distressed mother.

In Letters from a Peeress of England to her Eldest Son (1784) Craven, barred from contact with all but one of her children after separation from her husband, protests against the English legal system's treatment of women, especially wives. She combines rational argument with emotional appeals to argue that, if husband and wife separate, mothers should have custody of their own children, and especially of the daughters. Her tone varies, as the argument requires, from acerbic wit to pathos and even humility: she states that even if the wife is a fool, she should still be entitled to custody, because the husband (who, presumably, is not a fool) will be able to keep her under control by his visits. She does not actually argue that custody should be granted to wives who have committed adultery, but since she refers to the possibility that the husband may be living with another woman (her own husband had installed a mistress in his house, and she must have dreaded the effect of her influence on her daughters), there is an unspoken implication that sexual infidelity is equally blameworthy for men and women, so should not enter this debate. Of all Craven's works, this appeals most directly to the future: it deals with an issue so complex that some aspects still await satisfactory resolution. Real progress was not made until the nineteenth century, and even then the arguPreface xiii

ment turned on the rights of mothers who had not committed adultery. Their most powerful advocate was Caroline Norton, née Sheridan (1808-1877), whose own chastity had been vindicated in court: her struggles to gain married women custody of their children, as well as their right to keep their own money, have been cogently set out by Diane Atkinson in *The Criminal Conversation of Mrs Norton* (2012). Norton's cause has formidable literary support: not only is the struggle for maternal custody is a major element in Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1849), but Isabella Heathcliff's determination to keep her son away from his father plays an important part in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Mothers still had a long way to go, but the race for justice was on, and Elizabeth Craven had fired the starting gun.

Enlightenment, however, was not just a matter of struggle, reason, and energetic reform of the world outside the self. For Craven, it was also a matter of emotions, and of internal sensation. The most appropriate way to end this introduction is at the point where Dr Gasper begins: with the poem "On Dreaming That She Saw her Heart at Her Feet." Her heart is the point where feelings meet thought and inspire further intellectual effort. She realizes this as she asks,

Why, if keen Wit, and learned Sense draw nigh, Does thou with emulation beat so high? (39-40)

The heart describes its role as a substitute for thought:

My genius has with watchful care supplied What Education to thy sex denied; Made Sentiment and Nature all combine, To melt the reader in each flowing line. (77-80)

It is, however, behaving suspiciously like a brain. In fact, what Craven is describing here, in skilfully manipulated heroic couplets, is a synthesis of thought and feeling that allows a new freedom of emotional range to her poetic generation: the Enlightenment has become Romantic.

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#### Introduction

When Elizabeth Craven was little more than twenty, she wrote this beautiful poem, revealing a dazzling talent.

On Dreaming That She Saw her Heart at Her Feet.

When Nature, tir'd with thought, was sunk to rest, And all my senses were by sleep possess'd, Sweet sleep, that soft and balmy comfort brings Alike to beggars and despotic kings, I dreamt of peace I never felt before. I dreamt my heart was lying on the floor. I view'd it, strange to tell, with joyful eyes! And stranger still, without the least surprize! Elated with the sight, I smiling sat, Exulting o'er the victim at my feet; But soon with words of anguish thus address'd This painful, sweet, disturber of my breast: "Say, busy, lively, trembling, hopping thing, What new disaster hast thou now to bring, To torture with thy fears my tender frame, Who must for all her ills thee only blame? Speak now, and tell me why, ungrateful guest, For ten years past, hast thou denied me rest? That in my bosom thou wast nurs'd, 'tis true, And with my life and with my stature grew, At first so small were all thy wants, that I Vainly imagin'd I could ne'r deny Whate'er thy fancy ask'd. Alas! But now I find thy wants my every sense outgrow, And ever having, ever wanting more, A power to please, to give or to adore. Say why, like other hearts, thou dost not bear, With callous apathy each worldly care? Why dost thou shrink at Envy's horrid cries? In thee Compassion Hatred's place supplies. Why not with malice treat malicious men? Why ever pity, where thou shoulds't condemn?

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Why, at the hearing of a dismal tale, Dost thou with sorrow turn my beauty pale? Why, when distress in any shape appears, Dost thou dissolve my very soul in tears? Why in thy secret folds is Friendship bred? In other hearts, its very name is dead. Why, if keen Wit, and learned Sense draw nigh, Dost thou with emulation beat so high? And while approving, wish to be approv'd, And when you love, wish more to be belov'd? Why not, in cold indifference ever clad, Alike unmov'd, regard the good and bad? Why dost thou waste my youthful bloom with care, And sacrifice myself, that I may share Distress in others? Why wilt thou adorn Their days with roses, and leave me a thorn?" But here I saw it heave a heavy sigh, And thus in sweetest sounds it did reply, "Ah! Cease, Eliza, cease thy speech unjust; Thy heart has e'er fulfill'd its sacred trust, And ever will its tender mansion serve, Nor can it from thee this reproach deserve: Against my dictates murm'ring have I found, Which thus has laid me bleeding on the ground. Compare thyself in this same hour depriv'd Of this soft heart, from whence are all deriv'd, The same bewitching graces which adorn, And make thy face appear like beauteous morn, With me its brilliant ornaments are fled. And all thy features, like thy soul, are dead. 'Tis I that make thee others' pleasures share, And in a sister's joy forget thy care; 'Tis by my dictates thou are taught to find A godlike pleasure in a godlike mind; That makes thee oft relieve a stranger's woes. And often fix those friends that would be foes. 'Tis I that tremblingly have taught thine ear, To cherish music; and 'tis I appear, In all its softest dress; when to the hearts Of all beholders, thy dear voice imparts Harmonic strains: 'tis not because 'tis fine, For every note that's felt is surely mine.

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In smoothest numbers all that I indite. For 'tis I taught the fearful hand to write; My genius has with watchful care supplied What Education to thy sex denied; Made Sentiment and Nature all combine, To melt the reader in each flowing line. Till they in words this feeling truth impart: She needs no more who will consult the heart; And own, in reading, what is writ by thee, No study ever could improve like me. And when thy bloom is gone, thy beauty flown, And laughing Youth to wrinkled Age is grown, Thy actions, writing, friendship, which I gave, Shall still remain, an age beyond the grave. Then do not thus, displac'd, let me remain, But take me to thy tender breast again."

"Yes, soft persuader, (I return'd), I will, "And if I am deceiv'd, deceive me still. "Seduced I was in haste;" then, stooping low, Soon re-instated my sweet, pleasing foe; And waking found it had nor less, nor more, Than all the joys, the pangs, it had before. 1

So why didn't she go on to become a major poet like Byron? Obviously, because she was a woman. When she wrote the poem, she was already married and would go on to have seven children by the age of twenty-eight. She did continue to write, and her output is very miscellaneous, but her name was surrounded by scandal, and her life is better known than her writings. She separated from her husband, had a series of indiscreet love affairs and lived with her second husband before they were married. The biographical essay written about her in 1914 does not even mention the poem above. It is

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> John Almon ed. *The New Foundling Hospital for Wit: Being a Collection of Fugitive Pieces in Verse and Prose* (London: J. Debrett, 1784), 6 50-55. It appears that the words "Seduced I was in haste," are part of the preceding speech, but they have no speech marks in the original text. Other small corrections have been made.

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dominated by moral disapproval, and in more recent times, when that disapproval waned, critics have taken a dim view of her for other reasons.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, her works are overlooked. If they were read more widely, she would surely be recognized as one of the most significant early feminist writers in English, belonging to the generation of Mary Wollstonecraft. When she wrote *Letters from a Peeress of England to her Eldest Son* in 1784, it was published anonymously, but is certainly hers, as the French translation that appeared four years later names her in its title.<sup>3</sup> The book is a treatise on marriage, advising her son on how a husband should treat a wife, and deploring the laws of marriage as they then existed in England. At the outset, she protests that "Marriage is the source of all the misery of that part of human kind which most deserves to be happy, I mean the softer sex, whose education and nature makes it bear in patient and dumb regret the arbitrary power an English husband has over his wife." She writes, memorably,

Do not imagine, because the law has put your wife intirely in your power, that it is just or right she should be so. I have heard men boast of that power, as if it was constituted by their merit. Trace that power to its source, and you will find it proceed from the natural propensity Englishmen ever had for tyranny. It was men who made the laws, and those give man an unlimited power over his wife. Jack Ketch might, with the same propriety and delicacy, boast of his hanging his fellow-creatures with impunity, as a husband to say he may lock up his wife, not give her any money, or suffer her to enjoy the amusements and societies she likes, as I have heard some observe... Some husbands boast of these barbarous privileges.

Everything in the book confirms that it is hers, and there are plenty of hints about the authorship, not least the preface that claims the letters were found on a pathway between Fulham and Hammersmith - the exact location of her hideaway, Craven Cottage.  $^4$ 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Broadley, Alexander Meyrick, & L. Melville., eds. *The Beautiful Lady Craven, the Original Memoirs of Elizabeth, Baroness Craven.* 2 vols. (London: John Lane, 1914).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> E. Craven, Letters from a Peeress of England to her Eldest Son (London: Debrett, 1784). Lettres de Mylady Craven à son fils / traduites de l'anglais. Trans P. N. Durand. Paris: Durand fils, 1788.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> E. Craven, *Letters from a Peeress of England to her Eldest Son* (London: Debrett, 1784), A3.

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The first thing that strikes woman's mind upon the first disagreeable thing her husband does, are the words she pronounced at the ceremony of her marriage; she has promised to love, to honour, and obey. The first is not in her own power; the second is impossible, if her husband is a despicable object; and the third, let him be what he may, she must fulfil to the utmost extent of the word, and therefore detests the sound of it from natural consciousness, that no human being has a right to control our actions, when we are arrived at the age of reason.<sup>5</sup>

She observes, "It is innumerable the persons who have in this and past ages addressed women on every subject and in every situation in life. This general address has been a general error, particularly in this country, where, from the laws and dispositions of men, women are almost in every respect made a second sort of beings, depending on (and deriving their only consequence from) the approbation of men". All these volumes of instruction have achieved nothing, she says, "Because all those who have given us rules to follow have not considered that our state of dependence makes it impossible for us to act for ourselves: the men we belong to are the first causes of every action, good or bad, that we commit; to them, therefore, we ought to address our eloquence and reason, if we mean to make the world in general more rational or happy than it has hitherto been." It is a very bold suggestion that women need to tell men how to be more rational. Even the fact that a woman is presuming to advise a man is distinctly uppity. 6

Craven's ideas on marriage were the product of the Enlightenment. She frequently uses the word "rights" and stresses that women are rational beings, not to be regarded as a property of another.

Craven has a threefold claim to notice for historians and readers of literature. Firstly, as an author in her own right, who wrote the important treatise above, as well as poems, plays, stories, and cheerful political skits; she contributed to the nascent Feminist and Romantic movements. Secondly, she was a translator, who translated works from French, Italian and German into English, and was one of the first to introduce Schiller to an English audience. Thirdly, she inspired other writers, including Anne Damer in whose novel *Belmour*, she features as the thinly-disguised heroine. She was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> E. Craven, *Letters from a Peeress of England to her Eldest Son* (London: Debrett, 1784), 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> E. Craven, *Letters from a Peeress of England to her Eldest Son* (London: Debrett, 1784), 9-11.

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personally connected with the great public drama of the Regency period, the trial of Queen Caroline, which highlighted the injustice of women's status in marriage.

It is a mistake to judge Craven on the *Memoirs* written at the end of her life. Nobody should be judged on what they are at seventy-six. It makes much more sense to judge her on what she wrote when she was twenty-six or thirty-six. There are many oddities about the text of the Memoirs, such as the adulation of Sir William Gell, close friend of her son Keppel, and claim that he became like a "second son" to her. In fact Craven disliked Gell thoroughly, and knew he loathed her. Such passages suggest that Keppel Craven had a hand in editing and revising this book. She certainly took care to forget all her love affairs and her money problems when she wrote the *Memoirs*. They offer as many anecdotes of royalty and the great and powerful as could entice the general public to buy her book. Writing memoirs is usually a game of namedropping. She gives little hint of her real opinions and feelings about these people, referring in a neutral way to the Prince of Wales, whom she privately execrated, and who was by the time of the *Memoirs*, King George IV.

The *Memoirs* are full of conventional opinions that are inconsistent with her entire life. It says in one place that she told Charles James Fox that politics was "out of the province of a woman." What a strange remark from the woman who wrote a comedy Le Philosophe Moderne (The Modern Philosopher) entirely concerned with the most revolutionary political ideas of the time. This is one of her most significant works. It has been neglected because she wrote it in French and it has never been translated into English. Written shortly after she visited Paris in 1789, it concerns the learned Longinius, who is devoted to studying the newest philosophy and political ideas. He gets all the latest books off the press from Paris, including a treatise on religion written by a financier and a treatise on finance written by an ecclesiastic - this is a joke about Necker, the French king's finance minister, who wrote a book Of the Importance of Religious Opinions in 1788. Believing that education is a blessing, Longinius reads all this philosophy to his servants, and is then surprised when they rebel and take over the household. In one scene Longinius reads to his niece and his valet from a Treatise on Nature and the Rights of Man. It is full of Rousseau-esque arguments for liberty, equality and fraternity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> E. Craven, *Memoirs of the Margravine of Anspach, Written by Herself* (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), 2:394.

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The nature of man is active and spontaneous – thus, free! In childhood he jumps, he runs, he rolls on the ground - so, active - and it is his own instinct, without reason, that makes him move, for he cries, makes grimaces and scratches his nurse when his limbs are constrained - thus, acting freely! Scientific proof that he is born to be free, which is to say, he is not meant to obey others.<sup>8</sup>

It goes on to argue that all men, kings or peasants, are equal,

In respect of behaviour, the peasant laughs, the king laughs, The master thinks, the lackey thinks, the gentleman and the servant both weep in the same way. So then, heaven has formed us all out of the same material. Physical matter! Innate instinct!<sup>9</sup>

The valet, Blaise, takes the lesson to heart and refuses to be a servant any longer. He and the maid Babet announce that from now on they are the bosses, and give orders to Longinius, leading to some very amusing comic scenes. Longinius has to serve dinner to Blaise, who dresses up in his clothes. Longinius's niece Hortense wants to marry Duval, a young lieutenant, but her uncle does not like or approve of soldiers, so she advises him to talk of mathematics, science, philosophy and politics in order to impress him. Duval's interview with Longinius does not go well. After attempting to discuss current affairs, he says that he is a patriot. Longinius asks him what he would do if the populace rebelled against the decree of their sovereign and tried to seize the king's person, in order to force him to grant their demands. This was exactly what had taken place at Versailles in 1789. Duval replies that no one with any sense of honour could hesitate for a moment in such a situation! For a second.

<sup>8 &</sup>quot;La nature de l'homme est d'etre agissant, volontaire – libre, enfin! En enfance il saute, il court, il se roule par terre – vidé agissant - et c'est sa volonté non raisonné encore qui le fait mouvoir, car il pleure, il fait des grimaces, il égratigne sa nourrice quand ses membres sont contraints - vidé, volontaire. Preuve physique qu'il est né pour être libre. C'est-à-dire qu'il ne doit point obeïr aux autres. - Entends -tu?" Craven, Le Philosophe Moderne Ansbach, 1790.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> "La Nature en physique n'a donné a chaque homme qu'un estomac, deux bras, deux jambes, deux pieds - ainsi, quel avantage un Roi peut-il prétendre physiquement sur un paysan?" "Dans le moral aussi, le paysan rit, le Roi rit. Le Maitre pense, le lacquais pense. Le Monsieur pleure, le valet pleure de meme. Or donc, le Ciel nous a formé tous d'une meme pâte! Pâte physique! Essence morale!" Craven, *Le Philosophe Moderne*, ibid.

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Longinius is pleased, but it transpires that Duval means he would defend the sovereign. Their differences are irreconcilable.

At the end of the play, the arrival of the Duke of Ursol restores the status quo, and Longinius is dismissed; the mutinous servants are not punished or harshly reproved, just let down very gently. When Blaise says to him "Are we not all brothers?" the Duke merely replies, "No, my friend," and the servants return to their previous roles without any visible discontent. There is never any attempt to refute the logic of Longinius's book: the comedy simply turns on his naiveté in failing to realise that it is not in his own interests to teach it to his servants. The play is remarkably honest about the threat to the existing order of things posed by such subversive ideas. Few women writers of her time dared to take the bull by the horns and handle such major ideas, even in a comic fashion. When we recall what Craven had written only a few years earlier in Letters to Her Son, about marriage, she could not really object to the Rousseau-esque arguments, since she herself had used a similar argument about women and men. The idea of a "natural consciousness, that no human being has a right to control our actions, when we are arrived at the age of reason" is libertarian and egalitarian, and by challenging the idea that wives must obey husbands, Craven was showing the influence on her own mind of these Enlightenment ideas.

Craven was always interested in politics. She was brought up a Whig, believing in government by the aristocracy, upholding immemorial laws and customs arrived at by consent; not autocratic rule by an all-powerful monarch. When she travelled around France in the 1780s, she observed the signs that it was not thriving. The rural areas were full of dilapidated, abandoned chateaux, the homes of nobles who were all at Versailles clustered around the monarch as the only centre of power, while peasants lived in almost unbelievably primitive conditions, in miserable huts or caves. No wonder they caught "agues and fevers frequently, by returning home warm, and resting in these damp cells." She was far from blaming Marie-Antoinette, who had come to France as a bride of fourteen for an arranged marriage and been executed because of bad harvests and rigid institutions that were not of her making. Of course Craven writes of the bloody Terror with repugnance. She also, in her comical verses, ridicules the British government for fighting the American rebels, and the Pitt government for being so "servile" and "submissive" to the monarch, George III.

She interfered blatantly in the election of an MP for Coventry in 1782, and wrote a long letter to a journal in 1791, "Of the Defects of the English Constitution - and on the difficulty of characterizing the English Nation."

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My Dear Sir,

Your literary Journal for the month of March contains matters upon which I must have something to say to you. I mean your Letters on England. In one of the first you appear to have seen everything concerning the dress and behaviour of our ladies at the theatre in a light so very opposite to the truth that I had written to you on the subject in a strain of pleasantry; but I have since burnt the letter, because I considered it of no consequence to the honour of my country that you found us awkward and that we were wearing dyed heads of hair, or that we did not carry ourselves in so graceful a manner as did two or three French women, whom you distinguished in the midst of us, by their peculiar gracefulness. But as what you have said on our legislature may be eagerly read by the present modish philosophers and patriots, and may be credited by them, as implicitly, as Pethion, Robespierre, &c believe they are framing a constitution, I must tell you, as a friend, that you are mistaken when you say the greatest part of the elections rest in the hands of the King. The King may create a Peer whenever he pleases, and consequently confer a right of voting in the Upper House to any one who is attached to him, but the King can do nothing in an election.

Do not suppose that I should be mortified if you were to tell all Europe that abuses have crept into our noble constitution; but you have as yet too slight an acquaintance with the beauties and defects, the good and evil, of my country. You were in England only three weeks; you were astonished with what you saw; you were not sufficiently acquainted with the country to describe it, unless you supposed you could amuse and instruct your readers by giving them a description of the world in the moon, or any other world you have only seen in a telescope, and that a telescope after the French fashion: for you have lived so long in Paris that, notwithstanding your wit, your good humour and your urbanity, you reason and you form systems entirely in the French manner.

You do not, perhaps, know, that one of the greatest defects of our Lower House is, that there are members belonging to it chosen by boroughs, and not by the country at large; that all these boroughs are more or less venal, and consequently are corrupted; and that there are some of them which consist of no more than from twenty to ten voters. You may judge what weight of influence is thereby thrown into the hands of a minister, when he can by dint of money alone command a majority of voices to carry any measure he thinks necessary.

In the Upper House there is another very great defect, which is, that the number of Peers is unlimited. His present Majesty has created so many that it is to be wished the appellation of Lords were disused, because it has been given to so many low people who are but little entitled to such distinction.

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The judges are not chosen by the people. If you suppose that being a member of parliament confers a power of saying or doing any thing with respect to the administration of justice in my country, you are mistaken; the member of parliament (a commoner) chosen for a county is obliged to carry in petitions from that country for bills to be passed, but these bills do not relate to the laws of the land, or suits of law within the county. For example they are either bills for a canal to join two rivers; to enclose public pastures called by us common land; to alter the high road in order to shorten it; to make an exchange of lands, or some other matter which the inhabitants of the county are desirous of doing, and which may require the sanction of a bill. The member is obliged to present all requests or petitions; petitions to repeal such and such duties; petitions to build a hospital; in short, every work which has relation to the public good of his county; but as to suits at law, or matters in dispute, they are carried before another court, when the judges appointed for the purpose go into the country on their circuit.

Take my advice, my dear Mr Meister, and before you finish your letters on England, go there once more; and be sure, go into the country, for you will there behold us in perfection; you will there see that every family and every individual of it has something peculiar. We are not to be described in a mass, but by an infinite variety of minute particulars. Every Englishman has a character and sentiments peculiar to himself; there is no individual but employs himself and spends his time in a way agreeable to his own views and sentiments; and it is by reason of these striking contrasts that England is, to every thinking being, the most amusing country I have ever seen.

I have never yet read any impartial or good account of my own country; foreigners either censure us too much, or are over lavish of their praise. It is seldom that a foreigner sees much of what is truly great or praiseworthy amongst us, and that for reasons which I do not chuse to explain in a letter; almost all that in reality redounds to the nation's glory is hid from him; how then is he to come at this knowledge, shut up in his lodgings? A foreigner is conducted amidst the bustle and confusion of London, and there (as I am informed,) that our city may be as like Paris as possible, are to be found some of our women who can chatter nonsense about patriotism and the constitution.

But go there once more; go, and make yourself thoroughly acquainted with the city; you will there find men in whom are united all the solid sense of an active commerce, and the virtuous patriotism of the ancient Romans before they were immersed in luxury.

Avoid the court, unless you chuse to divert yourself for a moment to see [i] the King, in his state coach, going down to the House of Peers, [i] or the group of royal children at the palace. Go into the country, into Derbyshire; to our towns of Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool; see our harbours, our dock-yards;

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dine with our farmers; visit my sisters and my cousins; and behold the first women in England walking on foot six or eight miles round their country houses, and observe them, without declaring who they are, succouring the distressed and unfortunate every where about them, and only at short intervals exhibiting to the eyes of the public that degree of splendour which they judge due to their rank and name. You will find these ladies have, moreover, established hospitals, and founded charity schools. You will find in every station of life mothers of families who would shrink with horror at the thought of putting a child from them to nurse; a French custom with people of every degree, which I have been shocked at a thousand times. Ah! Perhaps the time is not far distant when I can say to you, come, and see England with me!

Now, to let you into a secret, I am going there next month, and the Margrave goes along with me. You have time to write to me before I set off; and pray let me know if you can read this scrawl, and whether you approve of the liberty taken by your friend, E.C.

[dated] T...., April 13th, 1791.<sup>10</sup>

Craven had strong opinions on all the great political issues of the day, from the independence of America to the partition of Poland. After travelling around Greece, she eagerly looked forward to its liberation from Turkish rule, writing that "Greece's glory is diminished by the oppression under which the people have laboured, and from which, it is to be hoped, they will shortly be emancipated..." <sup>11</sup> Much of her criticism of the Turks has to be seen in the context of their domination of Greece, a domination she deplored. Her achievement in travelling all over the continent in the 1780s and 1790s should not be underestimated; she broke bounds of convention in everything that she did. Horace Walpole's comment, "She has been *infinitamente* indiscreet" was one way of saying that she completely defied convention, travelling the continent with her lover.

In this book I have called Elizabeth a "feminist" but of course she was a feminist in eighteenth-century terms, not those of the twentieth or twenty-first. She believed women were rational creatures who ought to be emancipated from enforced marriage, treated as equals by their husbands, enabled to earn their own living as far as possible, and be entitled to far better education than they usually got. She objected to the double standard in judging sexual

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Henri Meister, Letters Written During a Residence in England... (Translated by William Duprée from Meister's Souvenirs, London 1799), 77. Translation of Lady Craven's letter to the author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Craven, *Memoirs*, 1: 323.

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behaviour and defied disapproval and vilification to live freely and fully. She knew women differ from men, loved children and gloried in her maternal instincts, but she was angry and indignant when women were treated as a "second sort of beings" under the law. In fact, she was an indomitable powerhouse of a woman who survived early marriage, the birth of seven children and immense social disapproval, to pursue her life and loves with energy and undying appetite for experience.

To understand how forthright and liberated Elizabeth was, we need to read the disapproving comments of her contemporaries. When her travelogue, A Journey Through the Crimea to Constantinople, was published in 1789, Elizabeth was already notorious because of her separation from her husband, Lord Craven, and there had been many rumours about her affairs. 12 The review did not mention her private life but instead complained about her strong opinions and sometimes blunt language. It was unseemly for a woman to have too many opinions, and the reviewer thought words such as "dead drunk", "hot weather" and "shoulder of mutton" were far too coarse for a lady to use. 13 It was true that Elizabeth had recorded some comical details of the sea voyage from Greece to Istanbul. The Greek pilot of the frigate she was on got too drunk to steer the vessel, and the mariners only succeeded in navigating the straits successfully with the aid of a map Elizabeth herself had brought along. Today it appeals to us precisely because she calls the captain "dead drunk" and not "intoxicated", "inebriated" or "the worse for liquor". Elizabeth had lived with a husband who was habitually drunk, she had left him, and she knew what she was talking about. If they needed a map, she, a woman, would take charge. Similarly, she says "hot weather" not "oppressively warm" or "somewhat sultry". She disdains the prissy, lady-like euphemisms of her time.

She goes on to offer a vivid description of the Golden Horn:-

Rocks, verdure, ancient castles, built on the summit of the hills by the Genoese, modern Kiosks, Minarets, and large platane-trees, rising promiscuous in the vallies, large meadows - multitudes of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Craven, A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople. In a series of letters from the Right Honourable Elizabeth lady Craven, to His Serene Highness the Margrave of Brandenbourg, Anspach, and Bareith. Written in the year MDCCLXXXVI (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The Historical Magazine, Or, Classical Library of Public Events Consisting of Authentic Anecdotes, Biographical Memoirs, Manners and Customs, Philosophical Papers, Natural History, Theatrical Intelligence, Analysis of Historical Books, Domestic News, &c. &c. (1789), 1:177.

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people, and boats swarming on the shore and on the water, and... nothing to be seen like a formal French garden.---the Turks have so great a respect for natural beauties, that if they must build a house where a tree stands, they leave a large hole for the tree to pass through and increase in size, esteeming the branches of it the most desirable ornament for the top of the house. In truth, contrast a chimney to a beautiful foliage, and judge whether they are right or wrong? A large fleet of Turkish vessels is to be seen in every creek, masts intermingled with the trees, and a graceful confusion and variety make this living picture the most poignant scene I ever beheld. <sup>14</sup>

It is romantic in its liking for the disorderly, the spontaneous, unruly "natural beauties". Thirty years before Wordsworth would enthuse over hedgerows as "hardly hedge-rows, little lines Of sportive wood run wild", she notes with approval how the Turks allowed trees to grow right through the centre of a house, showing a veneration for Nature. Her observation was accurate, as this is something you can still see in parts of Istanbul today.

Elizabeth's discovery that the South of France was beautiful was an original one in her time. She wrote about it with such vividness and excitement that other travellers were inspired to follow her. Yet there is often a flash of humour and irony that we would not find in the descriptions of, say, Anne Radcliffe. At the Fountain of Vaucluse she noted that there was "a cavern pretty much in the shape of one of those which lions come out of in an opera". As she is writing letters and not fiction, she remains flexible to play with the reader in this way.

She was in the first generation for centuries to be able to travel overland through the Crimea, which had just been liberated by Russian forces. Elizabeth's travelogue is highly subjective and uninhibited, displeasing contemporary critics for not always describing the things they expected, such as the ruins that were high on the list of most upper-class travellers, and even displeasing some modern critics, who have found her too severe on the Turks. When Lady Mary Wortley Montagu visited a Turkish bath, she described the naked women she saw by comparing them to Milton's description of the naked Eve in *Paradise Lost*, and to the pictures of idealised nudes by Guido

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Craven, A Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople, 198.

Historical Review ibid p.183. Katherine S. H. Turner, "Changing Visions of Turkey in the Eighteenth Century", in Steven H. Clark, ed., Travel Writing and Empire: Post-colonial Theory in Transit (London & New York, Zed Books, 1999, 113-128),120.

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Reni and Titian. She sees them through the eyes of men, if indeed she saw them at all, for her description is so conventionalised one wonders if she ever went further than the doorway.

When Craven went to a Turkish bath in Athens, she did not find the naked bodies of the women there an edifying sight. She saw them through her own eyes, and they were so fat and flabby she describes them as disgusting. Elizabeth's distaste for the slack bodies is very modern and it is not merely an aesthetic reaction - though that would be fully justified. She perceives that their condition is the result of their captive existence, their passivity and lack of exercise. This flaccid condition is also a sign of their status in a society where women are undervalued and hence have low self-esteem. They eat to console themselves for having nothing better to do, like battery hens. 16 Her own vigorous, active existence gave Elizabeth a very different physique. Despite having had seven children, she rode, walked and drove sledges herself across the snowy plains of Poland, remaining slim and active all her life. The critic who ascribes to Elizabeth a submissive, marital identity in her letters, could not be more mistaken. 17 She had parted willingly from her first husband, Lord Craven, and the man she was addressing the letters to was not her husband. In fact, she was travelling Europe with her lover, Henry Vernon, who is occasionally mentioned in the letters as Mr V----. She does notice the relative indolence of the Turks and, thirty years before Byron, she looked forward to the time when Greece would escape from Turkish domination. The same critic is mistaken about Elizabeth setting off on her journey to distract attention from her residence at Ansbach; the journey was undertaken before she had ever been to Ansbach. Another scholar even questions whether Elizabeth really wrote her letters to the Margrave at all, but there is no doubt that she did. $^{18}$ 

In her later life, she set up a private theatre at her home in Hammersmith and put on performances of her own and other plays. The idea that they had no significance for a wider public but are merely "self-referential" is, I think, a misunderstanding that can easily be dispelled. One of the first productions she put on there was Sir John Vanbrugh's *The Provok'd Wife*, in which she acted the role of Lady Brute, the long-suffering and downtrodden wife. By putting it on, she was making a statement about marriage and protesting about the way that society treated women such as her, who were divorced or separated. The production was a significant feminist event. And in the plays

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Katherine Turner, ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Turner, ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Barros, Carolyn A. and Johanna M. Smith, eds. *Life-Writings by British Women*, 1660-1815: An Anthology. Northeastern University Press (UPNE, 2000), 240.

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that followed, particularly her own greatest success, *The Princess of Georgia*, she often returns to the theme of enforced marriage, which was a problem for women of all classes.<sup>19</sup>

Inevitably, Elizabeth's writing was disparaged, one critic in her own time even saying her travelogue was "superficial ...the letters of an agreeable, prattling female..."20 She did indeed write as a woman, and that is a positive quality. Her maternal and protective feelings are often revealed. On the road south from Paris, she finds and assists a little boy called Cassius, travelling all alone to join the French navy. Horrified that his family has sent him to walk from Paris to La Rochelle alone, with hardly any money, she gladly allows him to ride postilion on the back of her carriage. "The word enfant always strikes to my very heart," she wrote. In Athens, at a performance of dancing, she is enchanted by a sweet little Greek girl, five years old, the adopted daughter of Mme Rogne, the French consul's sister. She is delighted when the child comes and sits in her lap and falls asleep for the rest of the evening. Once again, she is reminded of her own children. <sup>21</sup> In her *Memoirs*, she recalls how she was once staying with friends when their two-year-old child had a tantrum, throwing itself screaming on the carpet. Elizabeth coped with it by throwing herself on the carpet likewise, disregarding her clothes and her hair, and joining in the screaming, which amused and pacified the child. I think this is an anecdote that no man would record. <sup>22</sup> She longed for freedom, but she is still a very womanly woman.

Reading her pages one is reminded of Beaumarchais's aphorism, "Sans la liberté de blâmer, il n'est point d'éloge flatteur" (Without the freedom to find fault, there is no genuine praise). She often finds fault, but she is delighted by beautiful landscapes, both the wild and the well-cultivated, and on these she lavishes praise. Although Elizabeth wrote comparatively little poetry, she was always a poet by instinct. Poetry flashes out of her letters everywhere: "I could have almost have fancied the river ran thus fast, rejoiced to quit the mansion from whence it sprung". <sup>23</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Judith Hawley, "Elizabeth and Keppel Craven and the Domestic Drama of Motherson Relations", in Laura Engel, Elaine M. McGirr, eds., *Stage Mothers: Women, Work, and the Theater*, 1660–1830 (Bucknell University Press, 6 Nov 2014), 199-216. Says that the productions Elizabeth put on at Brandenburgh House express only the "narcissistic reflexivity of the upper classes". I disagree.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Historical Review ibid., 215.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> E. Craven, *Journey*, 6-8, 265.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> E. Craven, *Memoirs*. 1:62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> E. Craven, *Journey*, 30

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Wherever Craven goes, she is as free in her praise as in her blame. She does say the Turkish women wear far too much make-up, of an unsubtle kind, but she says the same thing about the women in Austria, who paint their faces white. In Vienna she notes with approval the fact that you cannot buy laudanum and arsenic without a prescription and immediately says this law should be adopted in England, "A very prudent caution against the madness of those who choose to finish their existence with a dose of laudanum, or their neighbour's with one of arsenic". <sup>24</sup> Her suggestion was not followed until the Pharmacy Act of 1868. And before saying that Elizabeth is too critical of foreigners, we need to read what she said about London. She wrote that the great capital contained far more poverty than other cities, along with drunkenness, begging and vice. Children were sent out to beg or steal, and were beaten if they returned empty-handed. "A thief or pickpocket is highly accomplished at fifteen." They could steal a watch without the owner knowing it was gone. And she wrote all this long before Dickens. No Englishwoman was ever more critical of England and its laws than Elizabeth Craven. In Letters to Her Son she wrote, "Do not imagine, because the law has put your wife intirely in your power, that it is just or right she should be so. I have heard men boast of that power, as if it was constituted by their merit. Trace that power to its source, and you will find it proceed from the natural propensity Englishmen ever had for tyranny." <sup>25</sup>

To a modern reader, Elizabeth appeals because of her forthright way of writing, her emancipated attitudes, and her continental outlook. She was English, but she had a bust of Napoleon on display in her home, even during the Napoleonic wars.

A journalist of her own time criticizes Elizabeth for being "unsettled - erratic" and impelled by some "fever of the soul" to wander from place to place, as if being fixed were the greatest feminine virtue. <sup>26</sup> The subtext is probably that she was unruly and unfixed in more ways than one. It is precisely that transgressive fever of the soul that interests me. In this book, I have tried to highlight not only Elizabeth's boldness and defiance of convention, but also her cosmopolitan outlook, which made her fully and enthusiastically a European. In an age when travel was difficult, and England was frequently at war with most of its neighbours, she translated French, German and Italian works into English and, at the age of forty, married a German, making their home into a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> E. Craven, *Journey*, 111,112.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Craven, Memoirs, 2:273. Letters of a Peeress of England to her Son, 14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> The European Magazine: And London Review, Volume 15, February 1789 and ensuing months, p.304.

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refuge for continental asylum seekers. In her last years, she retired to Naples. Here is a woman who was thoroughly European, cosmopolitan and modern.

One person who certainly read *Letters to Her Son* was Jane Austen. Musing on the subject of marital obedience and fidelity, Craven writes, "I never walked in a shrubbery, surrounded by a sunk fence, that I did not imagine I had half a dozen good reasons for wishing to cross the fence in half dozen different places. Believe me, my dear son, there are many wives who would, at the hazard of their necks, leap the many sunk fences husbands place round their free-will." Who can read this passage, without thinking of *Mansfield Park?* 

On the subject of marriage, Craven wrote that the fear a wife feels for her husband kills off any affection. "Mild, generous, romantically faithful are English women by nature; but their minds, plunged into despair by the men whose victims they are, are forced to fly their tyrants - or seek by cunning to mitigate the harshness of their fate." She added that she drew her opinions about marriage from a general survey and not only from her own experience, which she referred to as "my chains". <sup>27</sup>

She survived that marriage and many severe setbacks, to live to old age when she looked back and wrote the memorable poem "I thank thee God, that I have lived". Few people could have said so with more truth and certainty.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> E. Craven, Letters of a Peeress of England to Her Son, 57, 55.

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