



**Re-Viewing
Thomas Holcroft,
1745–1809**

Essays on His Works and Life

Edited by
Miriam L. Wallace and A. A. Markley

RE-VIEWING THOMAS HOLCROFT, 1745–1809

Thomas Holcroft was a central figure of the 1790s, whose texts played an important role in the transition toward Romanticism. In this, the first essay collection devoted to his life and work, the contributors reassess Holcroft's contributions to a remarkable range of literary genres—drama, poetry, fiction, autobiography, political philosophy—and to the project of revolutionary reform in the late eighteenth century. The self-educated son of a cobbler, Holcroft transformed himself into a popular playwright, influential reformist novelist, and controversial political radical. But his work is not important merely because he himself was a remarkable character, but rather because he was a hinge figure between laboring Britons and the dissenting intelligentsia, between Enlightenment traditions and developing “Romantic” concerns, and between the world of self-made hack writers and that of established critics. Enhanced by an updated and corrected chronology of Holcroft's life and work, key images, and a full bibliography of published scholarship, this volume makes way for more concerted and focused scholarship and teaching on Holcroft. Taken together, the essays in this collection situate Holcroft's self-fashioning as a member of London's literati, his central role among the London radical reformers and intelligentsia, and his theatrical innovations within ongoing explorations of the late eighteenth-century public sphere of letters and debate.

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1745–1809
Essays on His Works and Life

Edited by
MIRIAM L. WALLACE
and A. A. MARKLEY

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*This collection is dedicated with gratitude
to Holley Markley and Julia Markley*

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Jonathan Sachs is associate professor of English at Concordia University in Montreal, where he specializes in British Romantic period literature. In 2010 he was the Benjamin Meaker Visiting Professor at the University of Bristol, and in 2011 he will be a Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge University. Sachs has published articles on topics including Robert Wood and Homeric orality in the eighteenth century, Shelley's late poetry, and the Jacobin novel. Most recently, he is the author of *Romantic Antiquity: Rome in the British Imagination, 1789–1832* (Oxford, 2010).

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Jeremy W. Webster is associate professor of English and Dean of the Honors Tutorial College at Ohio University. He is the author of *Performing Libertinism in Charles II’s Court: Politics, Drama, Sexuality* (Palgrave 2005) and has published articles on various aspects of gender, politics, and patriarchy in eighteenth-century British Literature. He is currently working on a book-length study of how representations of Jewish men were embedded in gender and sexual stereotypes in English literature from John Dryden to William Wordsworth.

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I would like to thank Ann Donahue at Ashgate Publishing for her careful shepherding of this project through the initial conception to the final volume. Finally, I thank the anonymous reader for an encouraging, even enthusiastic review that provided helpful guidance for many of the contributions and made this a stronger volume in the end.

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Chronology of Thomas Holcroft: Life and Works

Compiled by A. A. Markley

- 1745 Born December 10 to Sarah and Thomas Holcroft in Orange Court, Leicester Fields, London
- 1760 Apprenticed as a stable boy at Newmarket
- 1764 Teaches reading in Liverpool.
- 1765 First marriage; birth of daughter, Ann
- 1770 Begins acting at Samuel Foote's Haymarket Theatre.
Works as a prompter and actor at William Dawson's Capel Street Theatre, Dublin.
- 1772 Death of first wife; Marries Matilda Tipler
- 1773 Birth of son, William
- 1775 Joins Boothe's company in Carlisle.
Birth of daughter, Sophy and death of Matilda Tipler Holcroft
- 1777 Begins acting at Drury Lane Theatre.
Third marriage to Diana Robinson
Publishes *Elegies: I. On the Death of Samuel Foote, Esq., II. On Age*.
Translates Carlo Goldoni's *La Buona Figliola* as *The Maid of the Vale* (afterpiece; not published).
Begins publishing *The Philosopher* (essays) in *Town and Country Magazine* (through 1779).
- 1778 First play: *The Crisis, or, Love and Fear* (afterpiece) produced by R. B. Sheridan at Drury Lane
Rosamond, or, The Dutiful Daughter produced at Canterbury
Begins publishing *The History of Manthorn, the Enthusiast* in *Town and Country Magazine* (through 1779).
- 1779 *The Shepherdess of the Alps* produced (an afterpiece)
- 1780 *A Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances in the Cities of London and Westminster, and Borough of Southwark ... with an Account of the Commitment of Lord George Gordon to the Tower and Anecdotes of his Life* (as "William Vincent, Esq.")
Alwyn: or The Gentleman Comedian
Birth of daughter, Fanny
- 1781 *The Trial of the Honourable George Gordon ... for High-Treason, at the Bar of the Court of King's Bench* (as "William Vincent, Esq.")
Duplicity: a Comedy
- 1783 Works in Paris as a correspondent for the *Morning Herald*.

- Ellen, or, The Fatal Cave* (a tragedy)
Human Happiness; or, The Sceptic. A Poem, in Six Cantos
The Family Picture; or, Domestic Dialogues on Amiable and Interesting Subjects; Illustrated by Histories, Allegories, Tales, Fables, Anecdotes &c. Intended to Strengthen and Inform the Mind (for children)
- 1784 Edits *The Wit's Magazine; or, Library of Momus*.
 Translates M. Foucher D'Obsonville's *Philosophical Essays on the Manners of Various Foreign Animals; with Observations on the Laws and Customs of several Eastern Nations*.
 Translates *Memoirs of the Life of Voltaire*.
The Noble Peasant, A Comic Opera, in Three Acts and Songs, duets, glees, choruses, &c. in the comic opera of The noble peasant; as performed at the Theatre Royal in the Hay-Market.
- 1785 Translates Stéphanie de Genlis's *Les Veillées du château* as *Tales of the Castle, or Stories of Instruction and Delight*.
 Translates Pierre Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro* as *The Follies of a Day The Choleric Fathers: A Comic Opera*.
 Translates *Memoirs of Baron de Tott*.
- 1786 Translates Genlis's *Théâtre d'éducation* as *Sacred Dramas Written in French by La Comtesse de Genlis*.
 Translates Isabelle de Montolieu's novel *Caroline de Lichtfield*.
 Translates Claude Étienne Savary's *Letters on Egypt, with a Parallel between the Manners of its Ancient and Modern Inhabitants*.
 Translates L. E. Billardon de Sauvigny's *An Amourous Tale of the Chaste Loves of Peter the Long ... and the History of the Lover's Well*.
 Translates Dom L. M. Chaudon's *Historical and Critical Memoirs of the Life and Writings of M. de Voltaire*.
 Meets William Godwin.
- 1787 *Seduction: a Comedy*
 Translates Stéphanie de Genlis's *Alphonso and Dalinda; or, The magic of art and nature: A moral tale*.
- 1788 Translates M. Chenier's *The Present State of the Empire of Morocco*.
- 1789 Translates *The Life of Baron Frederick Trenck, containing his Adventures*.
 Translates Count Mirabeau's *The Secret History of the Court of Berlin*.
 Translates Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essay on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*.
 Suicide of his son, William
- 1789–1790 Translates *Posthumous Works of Frederick II, King of Prussia*.
- 1790 Death of Diana Robinson Holcroft
 Translates *The German Hotel: A Comedy* of Johann Christian Brandes.
Try Again: A Farce, in Two Acts
- 1791 Translates Philippe Destouches's *Le Glorieux* as *The School for Arrogance: A Comedy*.
 Joins the committee to publish Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, Part 1.

- 1792 *The Road to Ruin: a Comedy*
Anna St. Ives: A Novel
 Joins the Society for Constitutional Information.
 Contributes reviews to the *Monthly Review* (through 1796).
- 1794 Adapts O. H. Gemmingen's *Der deutsche Hausvater* as *Love's Frailties: A Comedy in Five Acts*.
 Adapts Henry Fielding's *Covent Garden Tragedy* as *The Rival Queens, or, Drury-Lane and Covent-Garden* (a prelude; not published).
Heigh-ho! for a husband. A comedy
The Adventures of Hugh Trevor, volumes I–III
 October: charged with high treason; imprisoned in Newgate and finally acquitted without the opportunity to make a defense.
- 1795 Publishes *A Narrative of Facts Relating to a Prosecution for High Treason; Including the Address to the Jury, Which the Court Refused to Hear*.
 Publishes *A Letter to the Right Honourable William Wyndham on the Intemperance and Dangerous Tendency of His Public Conduct*.
 Adapts Richard Cumberland's *Fashionable Lover* in *The Deserted Daughter: A Comedy* (performed as a work by Elizabeth Inchbald; published anonymously).
- 1796 *The Man of Ten Thousand: A Comedy*
 Revival of *Duplicity* as *The Mask'd Friend* at Covent Garden
The Force of Ridicule: A Comedy produced at Drury Lane (not published).
 Translates Leopold Count Stolberg's *Travels through Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Sicily*.
- 1797 *The Adventures of Hugh Trevor*, volumes IV–VI
- 1798 *Knave, or Not? A Comedy: in Five Acts*, based upon Goldoni's *La serva amorosa* and *Il padre di famiglia*
He's Much to Blame: A Comedy: in Five Acts, adapted from Antoine de Ferriol Pont de Veyle's *Le complaisant* and Goethe's *Clavigo*
The Inquisitor: A Play, in Five Acts, from Johann Christoph Unzer's *Diego und Leonor*
 Translates Kotzebue's *Die Indianer in England* as *The Indian Exiles*.
- 1799 Fourth marriage to Louisa Mercier
The Old Cloathsman (a comedy) performed
 Moves family to Hamburg to live with his daughter, Sophy Cole.
- 1800 Launches *The European Repertory*.
 Moves to Paris.
- 1801 Translates Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's *L'Abbé de l'épée* as *Deaf and Dumb: or, The Orphan Protected: An Historical Drama*.
The Escapes, or the Water-Carrier produced at Covent Garden (musical piece)
 Translates Goethe's poem *Herman and Dorothea*.

- 1802 *The Times* reports in January that Holcroft works for the French secret service.
Returns to London.
Adapts Guilbert de Pixérécourt's *Coelina; ou, l'Enfant du mystère* as *A Tale of Mystery, A Melo-drame*.
- 1803 *Hear Both Sides: A Comedy, in Five Acts*
- 1804 *Travels from Hamburgh, through Westphalia, Holland, and the Netherlands, to Paris*.
- 1805 *The Lady of the Rock: a Melo-Drame*
Memoirs of Bryan Perdue: A Novel
Launches *The Theatrical Recorder* periodical.
- 1806 Birth of daughter, Louisa
Tales in Verse; Critical, Satirical and Humourous
The Vindictive Man: a Comedy
- 1809 Begins his *Memoirs*.
Dies on March 23 in London and is buried in Marylebone Greater Cemetery, leaving Louisa Mercier Holcroft with six children under the age of nine.
- 1816 William Hazlitt publishes *Memoirs of the Late Thomas Holcroft, Written by Himself and Continued to the Time of His Death; from His Diary, Notes and Other Papers*, after both Godwin and Louisa Holcroft drop objections.
- 1819 Publication of *The Steward, or Fashion and Feeling, A Comedy* (based upon *The Deserted Daughter*)

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Frontispiece James Gillray, detail from *New Morality*, published in *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, 1798. The small figure wearing glasses and leg-irons and writing “Letter from an Acquitted Felon” represents Holcroft, probably composing his 1795 letter to William Wyndham; the donkey carrying *Political Justice* is William Godwin.

Introduction

Miriam L. Wallace and A. A. Markley

[M]an is happy in proportion as he is truly informed; ... in proportion as he advances in the knowledge of facts, he will increase the means of happiness; and that, as facts are unlimited in number and variety but still are subject to certain unvarying laws, the increase of his happiness is likewise certain, yet unlimited.¹

Best known to some as a close friend and “oral instructor” of William Godwin, to others as the successful playwright who brought Beaumarchais’s *Le Mariage de Figaro* to the English stage as *The Follies of a Day* or the introducer of the “melodrama” to Britain, and to still others as a victim of the 1794 London Treason Trials, Thomas Holcroft has long been due for a reassessment. Where his close colleagues in literary politics from William Godwin to Thomas Paine or Joel Barlow have received critical attention, Holcroft is more often a footnote. Important feminist recovery work has enriched our understanding of the rich debates about the “rights of men” and of women as they percolated through lettered debate, yet this male author’s contributions and engagements remain unavailable to most modern readers even as his colleagues Elizabeth Inchbald and Mary Hays have become common reference points and subjects for undergraduate classrooms.

Perhaps one reason that Holcroft has been treated with only passing attention is precisely what makes him so important—the way that his life and work fail to fit tidily into conventional scholarly and historical categories. As the son of skilled laborers he was like other autodidacts haphazardly educated through his own efforts, but he also hungered for continual self-improvement and refashioning for himself and others. The range of his work in terms of genre, style, literary skill, and engagement with both classical and new ideas is directly tied to this ongoing project, “Thomas Holcroft.” Even his personal life, about which relatively little is known, suggests this drive in his multiple marriages, from the first wife about whom we know not even her name to his final and fourth wife, Louise Mercier, who was the daughter of a prominent French revolutionary.

This collection of essays reexamines the literary and cultural significance of this cobbler’s son who transformed himself into a popular playwright, influential reformist novelist, and controversial political radical. The extensive range of his

¹ Thomas Holcroft, *A Narrative of Facts, Relating to a Prosecution for High Treason; Including the Address to the Jury, Which the Court Refused to Hear, with Letters to the Attorney General, Lord Chief Justice Eyre, Mr. Sergent Adair, The Honorable Thomas Erskine, and Vicary Gibbs Esq. and the Defence the Author Had Prepared, if He Had Been Brought to Trial* (London, 1795), pp. 5–6.

literary and political contributions tends to be misrepresented or underappreciated by contemporary scholarship, organized as it is by genre, discipline, or period and dividing biographical or historical significance from literary or writerly impact. The records of Holcroft's life and his own contributions to late eighteenth-century social and literary culture mark him as a distinctive case in the history of English letters, particularly—though not solely—for his role in developing a full range of political writing during the turbulent 1790s.

Although he is associated with the revolutionary end of the eighteenth century, Holcroft was born into the mid-eighteenth century and came of age in the later 1760s. Holcroft's own *Life of Thomas Holcroft* acknowledges the significant impact of Enlightenment writers from Defoe to Addison, Goldsmith to Sterne, and of course, Richardson. Yet he was also an active participant in the later eighteenth-century's Romantic and revolutionary upheavals; he was a fellow-traveler with first generation Romantic-era writers and radical thinkers William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, August von Kotzebue, Stéphanie de Genlis, and Louis-Sébastien Mercier (whose daughter became his fourth wife). Thus in his own life and associations both intellectual and social, he traverses two key ways of understanding the long eighteenth century, its preoccupations, and impact on our contemporary world.

These essays work together to situate Holcroft's multiple self-fashionings—as a member of London's literati, as a radical reformer and intellectual, and a theatrical innovator—within ongoing explorations of the late eighteenth-century public sphere of letters and debate. Reassessing Holcroft's significance begins with his literary self-fashioning in the 1780s, moves through his famous radical decade, and includes his later years, from his family's self-exile on the continent from 1799–1802, to his death in 1809 in the midst of composing his memoirs. By re-viewing Holcroft's life and work in tandem, much that is sometimes oversimplified or segregated by a genre approach comes into new focus. The work of Thomas Holcroft is not merely important because he himself was such a remarkable figure, but because he was for good or ill, a bridge figure between laboring Britons and the dissenting intelligentsia, between Enlightenment traditions of rational inquiry and satirical moral critique and developing "Romantic" concerns with insight and transformation, between the world of self-made hack writers and that of cultural and literary critics. This collection begins the work of re-examining and re-assessing the transformational moment of which Holcroft is a fitting emblem and to which he contributed so significantly.

Reassessing the Life

Thomas Holcroft's uncompleted memoirs furnish us with an account of a laboring-class background of near destitution that was an inauspicious foundation for the literary career he achieved as an adult. The son of a failed shoemaker who continually shifted from one means of attempting to provide for his family to

another, the young Holcroft himself worked as cobbler, stable-boy and jockey, tutor and private secretary, then prompter and actor as he gradually transformed himself into a man of letters, embarking on a life of the mind characterized by continual self-education and self-fashioning. His brief account of his childhood provides an invaluable glimpse of how a young man in such circumstances managed a limited access to books through the intense study of the few texts available to him. Holcroft absorbed as much as he could from his occasional exposure to a copy of the Bible and even from ballads posted on the walls of local alehouses. To his great fortune, he found a shopkeeper associate of his father's who lent him books, among them *Gulliver's Travels* and the *Spectator*, both of which influenced him profoundly.²

Holcroft became ardent about the religious texts he was able to access as well, including the popular, anonymous *The Whole Duty of Man*, Anthony Horneck's *The Crucified Jesus*, and particularly John Bunyan's writings. In addition, his discovery of an opportunity to be instructed in the art of psalmody led to an intense immersion into John Arnold's *The Compleat Psalmist*. Studying Arnold enabled Holcroft's entrance into the world of musical composition and performance, which he used in theatrical afterpieces and informed his later work in melodrama. His musical education no doubt influenced his ear for poetry, which he published intermittently throughout his career and often included in his novels. His resourcefulness even led him to invest any extra coins he could manage in lessons in singing and in arithmetic.

After this early period of religious piety, Holcroft became a devoted rational dissenter and ultimately an atheist. Holcroft transferred his energies from religious concerns to political thinking. When he met William Godwin around 1786, the two became close friends and spent time together regularly debating and developing their emerging political philosophies. In fact, Godwin came to call Holcroft one of his "four principal oral instructors," setting him in company with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Dyson, and Joseph Fawcett.³ Ultimately Holcroft was one of only two individuals whom Godwin acknowledged in the manuscript preface for *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, the influential work of political philosophy Godwin published in 1793 and revised and republished into the nineteenth century.⁴ The *written* record of Holcroft's literary output, large and varied as it is, thus leaves to one side a major element of his contributions to

² Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, CT, 2000) gives many examples of laboring figures who wrote in their memoirs about the deep impact of their first book. He argues that working class readers were both canny and thoughtful receivers of classic literature, not solely of the popular literature more overtly directed to them as their proper study. See in particular "A Preface to a History of Audiences," pp. 1–11 and "Chapter One: A Desire for Singularity," pp. 12–57.

³ Charles Kegan Paul, *William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries* (2 vols, London, 1876; Repr. New York, 1970), vol. 1, p. 48.

⁴ Pamela Clemit, ed. *Lives of the Great Romantics Part III: Godwin, Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley by Their Contemporaries* (3 vols, London, 1999), vol. 1, pp. 321–2.

contemporary political thought, contributions that are at least obliquely visible in the *Life of Thomas Holcroft* and in what remain of his letters.

Holcroft and Godwin shared the deep conviction that a superior political system must be based upon a strong value for conversation, dialectic, absolute sincerity, and simplicity of manners as modes for self-improvement and mutual instruction. These were values to which Holcroft held firmly throughout his life. Central to the precepts of *Political Justice* was the conception that a more perfect and more progressive society could be gradually achieved upon the basis of universal independence, justice, and the eradication of an unequal distribution of property. These principles were best promulgated through dialog and conversation they believed, although both men also turned to a variety of print genres to explore and elucidate their developing ideas. Holcroft and Godwin were convinced that just values would guarantee to all freedom of enquiry, intellectual cultivation, and the right to pursue personal pleasure and happiness.

Thomas Holcroft's range of professional activities was immense, and the genres of writing and intellectual endeavor in which he engaged and succeeded is remarkable. He was a practicing actor beginning as an amateur "spouter" and progressing through comic roles in the licensed London theaters, who became an important and innovative playwright. He wrote and published poetry both on its own and as character-revealing elements in his novels. As a novelist, he incorporated a multitude of genres from polite letters, journals, and poetry to political exhortation and legal argumentation. In his dramas there is an extensive range of discourses, including cant, dialect, and elevated speech as well as music and lyrics. He wrote also in genres associated with periodical press, including letters to the editor, reviews of performances and publications, essays and philosophical reflections, and direct responses to contemporary political speech. In assessing his literary output closely today, the reader is afforded a truly rare glimpse at the specific ways that literary tastes and nearly every contemporary genre of writing of the time changed and developed in the latter decades of the eighteenth century, as Europe was shaken by revolutions in America, France, and San Domingo, and as the newer interests and emphases of the Romantic movement began to emerge out of the Enlightenment. In this volatile period of political ferment and relentless literary innovation, Holcroft was a long-lived and very active participant.

Reassessing Radical Reform

Over the past decades our understanding of the literary and political history of the late eighteenth century has been expanded dramatically by efforts to rediscover and reclaim the voices of many women writers who had been neglected as the literary "canon" emerged in the early nineteenth century. As a result, the extent to which women contributed fundamentally to developments in poetic experimentation and the degree to which women authors dominated the publication of the novel in the