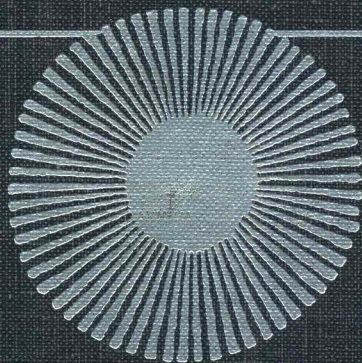

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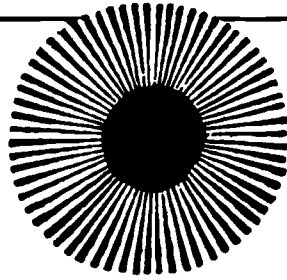
The
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Volume 6

HAROLD BLOOM

General Editor

The
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General Editor

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MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

1759–1797

Mary Wollstonecraft, polemicist and novelist, was born in London on April 27, 1759. She attended the county school in Yorkshire, where her family lived between 1768 and 1774, and left home in 1778 to become a paid companion to a gentlewoman in Bath. In 1784, along with her close friend Fanny Blood and her sister Eliza Wollstonecraft Bishop, she established a school for a time at Islington and then at Newington Green. There she met Dr. Richard Price and other prominent Dissenters, who first exposed her to antiestablishmentarian ideas. The school failed in 1786, and later in the year, after writing *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), Wollstonecraft went to Ireland as governess to Lord and Lady Kingsborough's children. During her stay there she wrote her first novel, *Mary: A Fiction* (1788). She was dismissed, and in 1787 returned to England where her publisher, the radical Joseph Johnson, took her in and hired her, first as a reader and translator, then as an editorial assistant and reviewer, for his journal *The Analytical Review*. Johnson was the sole publisher of her books during her lifetime, including *Mary: A Fiction*, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in a *Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (1790; a reply to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*), and her most influential work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

In 1792 Wollstonecraft traveled to Paris to observe the ongoing revolution at first hand. There she met Gilbert Imlay, an American businessman and adventurer. She was opposed to marriage as a matter of principle, which Imlay found agreeable; their daughter, Fanny Imlay, was born in 1794. Six months thereafter Wollstonecraft published her *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794), but despite her productivity she declined into a severe depression brought on by Imlay's increasingly evident indifference toward her and their daughter. She returned to London with Fanny in April 1795, and made the first of two unsuccessful suicide attempts. Imlay deputized her as his business agent and bundled her off to Scandinavia; her letters to him were published as *Letters-Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). After returning to England in September 1795, she again attempted suicide, but afterward became resigned to her separation from Imlay. In 1797 she married writer and radical political theorist William Godwin, and on August 30, 1797, their daughter, the future Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, was born. On September 10, 1797, Mary Wollstonecraft died of septicemia resulting from complications during the delivery. After her death William Godwin published his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798). He also edited her *Posthumous Works* (1798), which included her unfinished novel *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman*.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

From "Four Figures"

The Second Common Reader

1932, pp. 168–76

Great wars are strangely intermittent in their effects. The French Revolution took some people and tore them asunder; others it passed over without disturbing a hair of their heads. Jane Austen, it is said, never mentioned it; Charles Lamb ignored it; Beau Brummell never gave the matter a thought. But to Wordsworth and to Godwin it was the dawn; unmistakably they saw

France standing on the top of golden hours,
And human nature seeming born again.

Thus it would be easy for a picturesque historian to lay side by side the most glaring contrasts—here in Chesterfield Street was Beau Brummell letting his chin fall carefully upon his cravat and discussing in a tone studiously free from vulgar emphasis the proper cut of the lapel of a coat; and here in Somers Town was a party of ill-dressed, excited young men, one with a head too big for his body and a nose too long for his face, holding forth day by day over the tea-cups upon human perfectibility, ideal unity, and the rights of man. There was also a woman present with very bright eyes and a very eager tongue, and the

young men, who had middle-class names, like Barlow and Holcroft and Godwin, called her simply "Wollstonecraft", as if it did not matter whether she were married or unmarried, as if she were a young man like themselves.

Such glaring discords among intelligent people—for Charles Lamb and Godwin, Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft were all highly intelligent—suggest how much influence circumstances have upon opinions. If Godwin had been brought up in the precincts of the Temple and had drunk deep of antiquity and old letters at Christ's Hospital, he might never have cared a straw for the future of man and his rights in general. If Jane Austen had lain as a child on the landing to prevent her father from thrashing her mother, her soul might have burnt with such a passion against tyranny that all her novels might have been consumed in one cry for justice.

Such had been Mary Wollstonecraft's first experience of the joys of married life. And then her sister Everina had been married miserably and had bitten her wedding ring to pieces in the coach. Her brother had been a burden on her; her father's farm had failed, and in order to start that disreputable man with the red face and the violent temper and the dirty hair in life again she had gone into bondage among the aristocracy as a governess—in short, she had never known what happiness was, and, in its default, had fabricated a creed fitted to meet the sordid misery of real human life. The staple of her doctrine was that nothing mattered save independence. "Every obligation

we receive from our fellow-creatures is a new shackle, takes from our native freedom, and debases the mind." Independence was the first necessity for a woman; not grace or charm, but energy and courage and the power to put her will into effect were her necessary qualities. It was her highest boast to be able to say, "I never yet resolved to do anything of consequence that I did not adhere readily to it". Certainly Mary could say this with truth. When she was a little more than thirty she could look back upon a series of actions which she had carried out in the teeth of opposition. She had taken a house by prodigious efforts for her friend Fanny, only to find that Fanny's mind was changed and she did not want a house after all. She had started a school. She had persuaded Fanny into marrying Mr. Skeys. She had thrown up her school and gone to Lisbon alone to nurse Fanny when she died. On the voyage back she had forced the captain of the ship to rescue a wrecked French vessel by threatening to expose him if he refused. And when, overcome by a passion for Fuseli, she declared her wish to live with him and was refused flatly by his wife, she had put her principle of decisive action instantly into effect, and had gone to Paris determined to make her living by her pen.

The Revolution thus was not merely an event that had happened outside her; it was an active agent in her own blood. She had been in revolt all her life—against tyranny, against law, against convention. The reformer's love of humanity, which has so much of hatred in it as well as love, fermented within her. The outbreak of revolution in France expressed some of her deepest theories and convictions, and she dashed off in the heat of that extraordinary moment those two eloquent and daring books—the *Reply to Burke* and the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which are so true that they seem now to contain nothing new in them—their originality has become our commonplace. But when she was in Paris lodging by herself in a great house, and saw with her own eyes the King whom she despised driving past surrounded by National Guards and holding himself with greater dignity than she expected, then, "I can scarcely tell you why", the tears came to her eyes. "I am going to bed," the letter ended, "and, for the first time in my life, I cannot put out the candle." Things were not so simple after all. She could not understand even her own feelings. She saw the most cherished of her convictions put into practice—and her eyes filled with tears. She had won fame and independence and the right to live her own life—and she wanted something different. "I do not want to be loved like a goddess," she wrote, "but I wish to be necessary to you." For Imlay, the fascinating American to whom her letter was addressed, had been very good to her. Indeed, she had fallen passionately in love with him. But it was one of her theories that love should be free—"that mutual affection was marriage and that the marriage tie should not bind after the death of love, if love should die". And yet at the same time that she wanted freedom she wanted certainty. "I like the word affection," she wrote, "because it signifies something habitual."

The conflict of all these contradictions shows itself in her face, at once so resolute and so dreamy, so sensual and so intelligent, and beautiful into the bargain with its great coils of hair and the large bright eyes that Southey thought the most expressive he had ever seen. The life of such a woman was bound to be tempestuous. Every day she made theories by which life should be lived; and every day she came smack against the rock of other people's prejudices. Every day too—for she was no pedant, no cold-blooded theorist—something was born in her that thrust aside her theories and forced her to model them afresh. She acted upon her theory that she had no

legal claim upon Imlay; she refused to marry him; but when he left her alone week after week with the child she had borne him her agony was unendurable.

Thus distracted, thus puzzling even to herself, the plausible and treacherous Imlay cannot be altogether blamed for failing to follow the rapidity of her changes and the alternate reason and unreason of her moods. Even friends whose liking was impartial were disturbed by her discrepancies. Mary had a passionate, an exuberant, love of Nature, and yet one night when the colours in the sky were so exquisite that Madeleine Schweizer could not help saying to her, "Come, Mary—come, nature lover—and enjoy this wonderful spectacle—this constant transition from colour to colour", Mary never took her eyes off the Baron de Wolzogen. "I must confess," wrote Madame Schweizer, "that this erotic absorption made such a disagreeable impression on me, that all my pleasure vanished." But if the sentimental Swiss was disconcerted by Mary's sensuality, Imlay, the shrewd man of business, was exasperated by her intelligence. Whenever he saw her he yielded to her charm, but then her quickness, her penetration, her uncompromising idealism harassed him. She saw through his excuses; she met all his reasons; she was even capable of managing his business. There was no peace with her—he must be off again. And then her letters followed him, torturing him with their sincerity and their insight. They were so outspoken; they pleaded so passionately to be told the truth; they showed such a contempt for soap and alum and wealth and comfort; they repeated, as he suspected, so truthfully that he had only to say the word, "and you shall never hear of me more", that he could not endure it. Tickling minnows he had hooked a dolphin, and the creature rushed him through the waters till he was dizzy and only wanted to escape. After all, though he had played at theory-making too, he was a business man, he depended on soap and alum; "the secondary pleasures of life", he had to admit, "are very necessary to my comfort". And among them was one that for ever evaded Mary's jealous scrutiny. Was it business, was it politics, was it a woman that perpetually took him away from her? He shilled and shallied; he was very charming when they met; then he disappeared again. Exasperated at last, and half insane with suspicion, she forced the truth from the cook. A little actress in a strolling company was his mistress, she learnt. True to her own creed of decisive action, Mary at once soaked her skirts so that she might sink unfailingly, and threw herself from Putney Bridge. But she was rescued; after unspeakable agony she recovered, and then her "unconquerable greatness of mind", her girlish creed of independence, asserted itself again, and she determined to make another bid for happiness and to earn her living without taking a penny from Imlay for herself or their child.

It was in this crisis that she again saw Godwin, the little man with the big head, whom she had met when the French Revolution was making the young men in Somers Town think that a new world was being born. She met him—but that is a euphemism, for in fact Mary Wollstonecraft actually visited him in his own house. Was it the effect of the French Revolution? Was it the blood she had seen spilt on the pavement and the cries of the furious crowd that had rung in her ears that made it seem a matter of no importance whether she put on her cloak and went to visit Godwin in Somers Town, or waited in Judd Street West for Godwin to come to her? And what strange upheaval of human life was it that inspired that curious man, who was so queer a mixture of meanness and magnanimity, of coldness and deep feeling—for the memoir of his wife could not have been written without unusual depth of heart—to hold the view that she did right—

that he respected Mary for trampling upon the idiotic convention by which women's lives were tied down? He held the most extraordinary views on many subjects, and upon the relations of the sexes in particular. He thought that reason should influence even the love between men and women. He thought that there was something spiritual in their relationship. He had written that "marriage is a law, and the worst of all laws . . . marriage is an affair of property, and the worst of all properties". He held the belief that if two people of the opposite sex like each other, they should live together without any ceremony, or, for living together is apt to blunt love, twenty doors off, say, in the same street. And he went further; he said that if another man liked your wife "this will create no difficulty. We may all enjoy her conversation, and we shall all be wise enough to consider the sensual intercourse a very trivial object." True, when he wrote those words he had never been in love; now for the first time he was to experience that sensation. It came very quietly and naturally, growing "with equal advances in the mind of each" from those talks in Somers Town, from those discussions upon everything under the sun which they held so improperly alone in his rooms. "It was friendship melting into love . . .", he wrote. "When, in the course of things, the disclosure came, there was nothing in a manner for either party to disclose to the other. Certainly they were in agreement upon the most essential points; they were both of opinion, for instance, that marriage was unnecessary. They would continue to live apart. Only when Nature again intervened, and Mary found herself with child, was it worth while to lose valued friends, she asked, for the sake of a theory? She thought not, and they were married. And then that other theory—that it is best for husband and wife to live apart—was not that also incompatible with other feelings that were coming to birth in her? "A husband is a convenient part of the furniture of the house", she wrote. Indeed, she discovered that she was passionately domestic. Why not, then, revise that theory too, and share the same roof? Godwin should have a room some doors off to work in; and they should dine out separately if they liked—their work, their friends, should be separate. Thus they settled it, and the plan worked admirably. The arrangement combined "the novelty and lively sensation of a visit with the more delicious and heartfelt pleasures of domestic life". Mary admitted that she was happy; Godwin confessed that, after all one's philosophy, it was "extremely gratifying" to find that "there is some one who takes an interest in one's happiness". All sorts of powers and emotions were liberated in Mary by her new satisfaction. Trifles gave her an exquisite pleasure—the sight of Godwin and Imlay's child playing together; the thought of their own child who was to be born; a day's jaunt into the country. One day, meeting Imlay in the New Road, she greeted him without bitterness. But, as Godwin wrote, "Ours is not an idle happiness, a paradise of selfish and transitory pleasures". No, it too was an experiment, as Mary's life had been an experiment from the start, an attempt to make human conventions conform more closely to human needs. And their marriage was only a beginning; all sorts of things were to follow after. Mary was going to have a child. She was going to write a book to be called *The Wrongs of Women*. She was going to reform education. She was going to come down to dinner the day after her child was born. She was going to employ a midwife and not a doctor at her confinement—but that experiment was her last. She died in child-birth. She whose sense of her own existence was so intense, who had cried out even in her misery, "I cannot bear to think of being no more—of losing myself—nay, it appears to me impossible that I should cease to exist", died at the age of

thirty-six. But she has her revenge. Many millions have died and been forgotten in the hundred and thirty years that have passed since she was buried; and yet as we read her letters and listen to her arguments and consider her experiments, above all that most fruitful experiment, her relation with Godwin, and realise the high-handed and hot-blooded manner in which she cut her way to the quick of life, one form of immortality is hers undoubtedly: she is alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living.

MIRIAM BRODY KRAMNICK

From "Introduction"

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

1975, pp. 40–63

A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is not polite or ladylike. As Wollstonecraft says in the Introduction to the first edition, she means to be useful, not entertaining, and she will write with 'energetic emotions'. One does not go far into the *Vindication* before being plunged into the very heart of her subject. She has lived the hardships of a woman who wanted to earn her own living and, one feels, she is telling it like it is. The energy and volatile personality of Mary Wollstonecraft are all here in its pages; her sense of humour and her anger are both easily apparent. How often she compares English middle-class women to inmates of a Turkish seraglio, or mutters indignantly of one man's portrayal of a patient wife—"Such a woman ought to be an angel—or she is an ass".¹ 'Idle, empty words!' she exclaims of an author's description of romantic love, 'lover-like phrases of pumped up passion' (p. 193).

In spite of Wollstonecraft's best intentions—she said she would not try for elegant polished sentences—her prose is an imitation, and not a particularly felicitous one, of the rounded sentences of eighteenth-century prose; one comes, all too often, panting to the end of hopelessly long sentences, a little unsure of what the subject was. Godwin says the *Vindication* was written hastily in six weeks, and we accept that she probably dashed it off quickly to her publisher, Joseph Johnson, and as quickly set about another project. There are many digressions in the text, with the argument turning suddenly from one subject to another, as in the chapter on physical weaknesses in women when she trails off into a discussion of casuistry and religion. Wollstonecraft would probably have been somewhat defensive about her digressions, however, for she says in Chapter 2, when a train of thought invited her to digress on standing armies, that she would follow the associations that sprang naturally to mind, as if, we may assume, they were some kind of emanation from the well-springs of a natural order. Too many have already apologized for the style and lack of coherent organization in the *Vindication*. It doesn't seem important any longer, since what she had to say was clear enough.

Mary Wollstonecraft set forth to vindicate the rights of women, but one of her earlier stipulations (p. 81 in the Author's Introduction), which may seem curious to the modern reader, is that her argument is intended to be directed towards middle-class women only; what is more, she is herself frankly dubious (p. 102) that she will effect any great change with the *Vindication*. Both of these assertions, actually qualifications, raise such interesting issues that before proceeding

into the heart of her argument one ought to attempt to reconstruct Wollstonecraft's justification for excluding the upper- and lower-class woman from her call to reform, and suggesting limitations on even a middle-class woman's capacity to change. These qualifications form the perimeters of the argument of the *Vindication*, and Wollstonecraft's work is thrown into better perspective against them.

Wollstonecraft directs her argument to the middle-class woman because this woman lives in a 'natural state'. By contrast the aristocratic woman, Wollstonecraft explains in her Introduction, p. 81, is dissipated by great wealth and is incapable of any redemption by education. Eventually the aristocratic woman's class will be eradicated in a reformed society. Wollstonecraft does not explain, however, why she has excluded the poor woman from her audience, nor can her reader be certain what the status of the poor will be after reform, except that they will be less miserable. Wollstonecraft was far from indifferent to the sufferings of the poor, which makes her failure to provide for their relief in the *Vindication* all the more curious. Her pity for the poor had been sincere and profound throughout all her writing, and continued to be so after the *Vindication* was written. Three years later, while travelling in Scandinavia and preparing the *Letters* Johnson published, Wollstonecraft was moved to write with a mixture of sorrow and anger when watching peasant women scrub linen in cold water, their hands already cracked and bleeding. These were women 'to whom the most menial and even laborious offices' are left while 'men stand up for the dignity of men'.² And years earlier, Wollstonecraft's most memorable criticism of Burke in the *Rights of Men* was that his proud chivalry was callous and indifferent to the brutality inflicted on poor women.³

While Wollstonecraft obviously sincerely pitied poor women, and while she found, individually, their simplicity and 'frankness of heart' appealing, she is not concerned in the bulk of her writing to suggest what kind of change they may look for in a reformed society, except that in overthrowing the tyranny of the aristocracy they will be restored to happiness. Except for an occasional suggestion for dividing up large estates into smaller farms in the *Letters from Scandinavia*,⁴ and a suggestion to Burke that he find employment for women rather than 'squandering alms' in the *Rights of Men*,⁵ Wollstonecraft leaves the issue of what the poor woman may expect after reform for the reader of the *Vindication* to determine alone. But the reader may easily assume from the *Vindication* that Wollstonecraft did not believe the poor lived in a 'natural state'. The mind-numbing routine of domestic drudgery put the poor woman beyond the call of abstract argument. Wollstonecraft was not one to idealize the state of poverty. She had been too close to it herself. The life of the poor was more brutalizing than ennobling. The ideal existence, as this one described in the *Vindication* (p. 225), was one in which women were

Raised sufficiently above abject poverty not to be obliged to weigh the consequences of every farthing they spend, and having sufficient to prevent their attending to a frigid system of economy which narrows both heart and mind . . .

The question one would like to have asked Mary Wollstonecraft was whether all women would have been able to aspire to this balanced, 'natural' state. To be sure, the vehemence with which Wollstonecraft requires the abolition of all ranks would suggest that they might, for, as she says in the *Vindication* (p. 311): 'We shall not see women affectionate till

more equality be established in society, till ranks are confounded and women freed . . .' Unfortunately, in spite of this projected elimination of rank, some servants and some 'needy' still exist in Wollstonecraft's vision of a reformed society. The emancipated and enlightened woman will have a 'servant maid to take off her hands the servile part of the household business' (pp. 254-5). In fact, a close reading of Wollstonecraft's letters, it will be seen, reveals that her enjoyment of motherhood, a sacred responsibility clearly propounded in the pages of the *Vindication*, may very well have rested on the availability of competent nursemaids. The existence of this servant class worries us more (in a society which was to have been without rank and privilege) when Wollstonecraft explains in the *Vindication* (p. 287) her plan for national education—in which higher education is provided for those of 'superior abilities or fortune', while an unspecified group of children 'intended for domestic employments, or mechanical trades' go to specialized schools. Even more disconcerting, in a reformed society, the 'needy' will still need the charity of the more fortunate; in fact one of the reasons for having superfluous money on hand is to be able to dispense it philanthropically. Not all of these visions of a reformed society are reconcilable with Wollstonecraft's egalitarian principles. And she has not attempted to make them so.

The limitations Wollstonecraft placed on her own likelihood of effecting change through argument are easier to justify. Wollstonecraft felt it was possible, but unlikely, that the middle-class woman could rise above the inhibiting influences of her own environment. Although she was not dissipated by great wealth, nor stupefied by hard work, the middle-class woman was enmeshed in a tradition which discouraged reasoning and which certainly discouraged defiance. Wollstonecraft was aware that, paradoxically, she was attempting to argue rationally with women, who, according to Wollstonecraft's own understanding of the force of environmental influence, might be uninclined to follow her hard logic. The author of the *Vindication* was clearly hoping to reach an ambitious and courageous few, like herself. 'To prevent any misconstruction', she explains early in her argument (p. 102),

I must add, that I do not believe that a private education can work the wonders which some sanguine writers have attributed to it. Men and women must be educated in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in . . .

The weight of 'popular opinion' might be stronger than any single virtuous argument like her own, she continues. 'It may then fairly be inferred, that, till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education.'

A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* proceeds in spite of the author's misgivings because some individuals, some talented few, might resurrect themselves. But the misgivings explain the anger and frustration which occasionally erupt behind such exclamations as this: 'I have throughout supposed myself talking to ignorant women—for ignorant ye are in the emphatical sense of the word' (p. 302).

The main work of the *Vindication*, putting these qualifications aside, is establishing the basic principles on which the case for women's rights is made (Chapters 1, 2, 3) and examining closely the character of women as it is shaped by early environmental influences (Chapters 4, 6). Chapter 5 is a close reading of and commentary on notable eighteenth-century authors of the traditional anti-feminist school, including sizeable quotations from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The concluding chapters of the *Vindication* (7-12) are a consider-

ation of ethical problems related to the status of women, which allows Wollstonecraft to discuss family life, the education of children, and the specific role to be played by a rehabilitated, educated woman. But Wollstonecraft was by no means scrupulously faithful to this organization, and the reader confronts an argument built concentrically rather than logically, progressively. To be faithful to the richness of Wollstonecraft's apprehension of women in society, this presentation of her argument cannot follow strictly a sequential consideration chapter by chapter. One must expect to meet, even in the closing chapters of the work, defences of principles made in its early pages, as if Wollstonecraft felt that by dint of repetition alone she might make headway against the opposition she knew quite well her argument would face.

And there was no question but that the *Vindication* would be received largely by a sceptical, in fact, a hostile readership. The middle-class women to whom Wollstonecraft says she will address her argument, women neither dissipated by inherited wealth nor brutalized by poverty, were, by definition, comfortable and content with the status quo. There was, to be sure, a small receptive circle of liberal reformers who would welcome the *Vindication* with enthusiasm; but for the most part, once concern grew over the association of English radicalism with the ideas of the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft's assault on established authority, and her denial of the divine rights of kings and men, was greeted with predictable alarm and outrage.

In the first two chapters Wollstonecraft undertakes to refute the dogma on women which had long preceded her work. For hundreds of years people had written that God created woman inferior to man. Wollstonecraft simply said 'nonsense'. This violated basic and self-evident principles of human nature, principles she had absorbed in her youth at Stoke Newington with the liberal reformer Dr Price. Both men and women were born with an innate capacity to reason, an apprehension of 'the true nature of things'. God gave human beings reason so that they might, by acquiring knowledge, perfect themselves. Human beings formed societies which would become perfect through successive constructive experiences. If individuals in society did not educate themselves, they would remain in a flawed state of ignorance, never capable of true virtue, or what Wollstonecraft called 'morals', instead imitating what they thought was morality with what Wollstonecraft called 'manners'. To conceive, she writes, of a just God who would create a woman and then deny her the rational capacity to seek the knowledge that would make her virtuous—is impossible. Her reason will not permit such a conception of divinity.

But the progress of civilizations, and the progress of individuals, has been impeded by enemies Wollstonecraft calls 'the pestiferous purple'. 'It is the pestiferous purple,' she says at the close of her first chapter (p. 99), 'which renders the progress of civilization a curse.' Any group which coerces the individual by force, or collectively coerces society, eventually corrupts itself, and inhibits the development of reason in its victims. Wollstonecraft emphasizes again and again that power corrupts the powerful at the same time as it enslaves the weak. Institutions and individuals which exercise over others authority based on artificial criteria such as inherited wealth or noble names gradually undermine themselves, become slaves to flattery and are weakened by indolence. Her criticism of the aristocracy, the army and the church in Chapter 2 is part of a longstanding Wollstonecraftian hostility to arbitrary authority. When these tyrannies are overcome, the natural order of equality will reassert itself and the sexes will find their proper

spheres. It is useless, then, to seek changes in society until these institutions are put down and reason is allowed to assert itself. To suggest superficial changes in the condition of women, to alleviate an isolated grievance here or there, or to allow an élite number of women to rise in the social order, is not a direct confrontation with the problem. There can be no significant improvement in society while the social and economic system prevails which honours aristocratic titles and passes on great wealth from father to son without either having needed to exercise reason to attain status or comfort. Inherited property weakens character and is the great foe of reason.

It is useless, then, to seek reform for women alone, without speaking about a general reformation of all society. For the same economic and social system which oppresses women and limits their natural development, constrains and restricts with the exercise of arbitrary power vast numbers of men as well. These criticisms of established power are repeated often in the *Vindication* and, indeed, were a vital part of Wollstonecraft's previous political writing. For the most part her criticism of established power is general and does not allude to the specific issues of parliamentary reform which were as familiar to her through her association with Dr Price and the circle around Joseph Johnson as the exploitation of women itself. But occasionally the radical dimension of her politics emerges, and, of course, it had been apparent enough all along in her descriptions of the 'unnatural distinctions and pernicious effects' of inherited property. It is a sharp reminder of how solidly Wollstonecraft adhered to radical proposals for political reforms when she says in Chapter 9 (p. 256), that 'The whole system of British politics, if system it may courteously be called', consists of 'multiplying dependents and contriving taxes which grind the poor to pamper the rich'. Ministers, she complained, were only interested in patronage and keeping their places. 'Yet it is not necessary that a minister should feel like a man, when a bold push might shake his seat.'

The 'bold push' will reform women, as it reforms all of society by eliminating the degenerating influence of property and reconstructing an environment more favourable to the growth of enlightened, virtuous citizens. In arguing for reform, Wollstonecraft, like liberals before and after her, is led to manipulate the environment to improve the product. Wollstonecraft inherits a tradition of sensationalist psychology associated with John Locke and his notion that upon the *tabula rasa* or 'clean slate' of a person's mind at birth are written all the experiences which will shape his or her character. Chapter 6, 'The Effect Which an Early Association of Ideas Has Upon the Character', will be a formal presentation of this principle, but the whole of the *Vindication* is based on this set of Lockean associational and environmental assumptions. To answer traditional dogma on women, Wollstonecraft must confront directly the conservative attitude that found women inferior by divine ordination, but an inferiority they proved daily with foolishness and ignorance.

Wollstonecraft does not for a moment pretend that her feminine contemporaries were more serious and more virtuous than they were. Her own criticism of the rich, indolent, aristocratic and would-be aristocratic ladies resembles the more scathing of the misogynist satirists of the eighteenth century. Unfortunately, since she is so outspoken, she can be too easily misconstrued as being unsympathetic to women altogether. Nothing could be further from the truth. She is angry because of what she perceived was a waste of potential and because she realized that it was women themselves who, by their ignorance and uselessness, provided the fuel for the traditional anti-feminists. 'It is your own conduct, O ye foolish women!' she

says, 'which throws an odium on your sex' (p. 256). But as she said elsewhere of Marie Antoinette, the most idle and empty-headed aristocrat of Wollstonecraft's time, 'In such a voluptuous atmosphere, how could she escape contagion'?⁶ The fault lay not in their stars, nor even in themselves, but in their environment.

Young girls, Chapter 6 of the *Vindication* argues, are encouraged by their parents, their teachers, by the very structure and sedentary nature of their daily routine, to become the kind of woman conceived of popularly as the feminine ideal. Few rebels can escape this moulding, not only because Wollstonecraft thought only a native genius was free from the influence of environment, but because young girls soon perceive that pleasure and power will be theirs only in proportion to their ability to please men. More than likely, then, a girl will be a willing participant in a process of socialization which leaves her finally dependent and feeble, intellectually and physically. Rather than robust, she would be delicate, instead of prudent, she'd be foolish; she'd not be learned, she'd be ignorant, not clever, but cunning, vain rather than self-respecting, sentimental rather than sensible, and good mannered rather than moral. But how does this happen?

Clearly the small girl, even before she was self-consciously instructed in femininity, had before her the example of her own mother. One of Wollstonecraft's more amusing vignettes is set forth in Chapter 3 (p. 130), where she argues that women are enervated by an inactive domestic routine.

I once knew a weak woman of fashion who was more than commonly proud of her delicacy and sensibility. She thought a distinguishing taste and puny appetite the height of all human perfection and acted accordingly. I have seen this weak sophisticated being neglect all the duties of life, yet recline with self-complacency on a sofa, and boast of her want of appetite as a proof of delicacy that extended to, or perhaps arose from, her exquisite sensibility.

Little girls imitate their mothers, and physical delicacy was one of the ideals imitated. All too soon the delicacy would be real frailty, reinforced by a sedentary life. Boys frolic in the open air, complained Wollstonecraft, while girls are kept indoors and advised not to soil their frocks. Wollstonecraft allows men a natural superiority in bodily strength, but she feels that female frailty is no incurable affliction. 'But should it be proved that woman is naturally weaker than man, whence does it follow that it is natural for her to labour to become still weaker than nature intended her to be?' (p. 127). Not only is this carefully cultivated physical frailty achieved at the expense of the natural pleasures a young girl would find in playing hard out of doors, but it also undermines intellectual achievement. 'Shakespeare never grasped the airy dagger with a nerveless hand, nor did Milton tremble when he led Satan far from the confines of his dreary prison' (p. 124). Wollstonecraft's conception of physical weakness, it should be clear, goes beyond what modern feminists construe as an inability to change a car tyre. She is quite evidently talking about real physical infirmity, not at all unusual in young women who seldom saw the light of day except from the windows of their carriages. The *Vindication* argues that the rigours of intellectual life, its long hours of study, demand a more sturdy physical constitution than the fashionably delicate standard of femininity would allow.

The domestic routine is not only sedentary, explains Wollstonecraft, it is noisy, crowded and disjointed. A girl's

academic curriculum, superficial at best, is offered her 'by snatches' (p. 105). Interrupted, distracted, seldom alone, she is denied the long concentration necessary for good study. It was, after all, not at all unusual for several women to be part of the same household—sisters, sisters-in-law, cousins, a wife, a mother—all continually thrown into each other's company, willing or not. The *Vindication* argues in Chapter 4, 'Observations on the State of Degradation to which Woman Is Reduced by Various Causes', that this familiarity among women denies them the solitude necessary for reflection. John Stuart Mill makes the same point almost one hundred years later in *The Subjection of Women*.⁷ Nor will the young girl read anything which might be considered indelicate, like botany or biology, so widespread was the notion that subjects like these were improper for women. In fact, that a lady should be knowledgeable enough to converse easily and learnedly with men at all offended, in itself, traditional notions of female modesty. The *Vindication* will confront this problem directly in Chapter 7, 'Modesty', arguing that nothing in God's creation could be unlovely or unfit for human understanding, male or female. True modesty is not blushing ignorance. True modesty is a soberness of mind which knows its own worth. Not only is education compatible with modesty, education is its necessary precursor. It is impossible to be modest, obviously self-respecting in Wollstonecraft's understanding of the word, without education.

When she does turn to read, then, this 'delicate' girl does not read substantial material which will build her character and contribute to her store of wisdom. She will read little or no history, no philosophy. She will read mainly novels. Mary Wollstonecraft did not wholly disparage novels; 'any kind of reading I think better than leaving a blank still a blank . . .' (p. 306). And noble sentiments could be found in novels, indeed she had written one herself. But a steady diet of novel-reading, interrupted only by music and poetry, the whole undertaken in the cloying company of women much like herself, was no education. 'All their thoughts', said Wollstonecraft of young girls, 'turn on things calculated to excite emotion and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions are wavering' (p. 152). Furthermore, novel-reading was an exercise in fantasy. Girls, hopelessly sheltered from life, ignorant and vulnerable, were fed romantic illusions about their future which made them the natural prey of fortune hunters and rakes. Ignorance, as Wollstonecraft was fond of saying, was a frail base for virtue, and was frailier still if sensibility was for ever supplanting sense. But of course Wollstonecraft and the traditional educators of women did not agree about what constituted virtue in a woman. Wollstonecraft distinguishes between 'decorum' which is manners, such as any puppet might learn, and 'morals' which is based on an educated understanding. And the kind of 'decorum' considered feminine, cunning, vanity, immaturity, is often an offence against morality itself.

Chapter 5 of the *Vindication* surveys the field of important writers on women in the eighteenth century; but the figure who looms largest in this company is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Wollstonecraft's political ideas are not that far removed from those of Jean-Jacques. She had read *Émile* while a governess herself, approving its proposals for the education of a young boy, and she shared Rousseau's disdain for aristocratic claims to privilege and power. The message of his *Social Contract*, with its emphasis on popular sovereignty and its egalitarian vision of society, were part of Wollstonecraft's own radical sympathies, sympathies she would make quite clear in her defence of the French Revolution, in her answer to Burke, and

in the *Vindication*. Like many English people, she had been impressed by Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, the most widely translated of Rousseau's books in England, with its lyrical description of romantic passion, and its moral resolution of willing submission to family and marriage. Rousseau was such a favourite of hers, she once teased Imlay, that she was half in love with Jean-Jacques all along. But favourite or not, Wollstonecraft would have no part of Rousseau's views on women.

When she came to treat Rousseau's opinion of women, Wollstonecraft was not remiss in explaining where Rousseau went astray. Much of the *Vindication* is a refutation of Rousseau's theories about women, and clearly, to Wollstonecraft, Rousseau's acceptance of traditional attitudes about female inferiority is a more painful betrayal of liberalism than the platitudinous fatherly preachings of a Gregory or a Fordyce. Wollstonecraft, like Catherine Macaulay before her, explains Rousseau's anti-feminism as an error in reasoning arising out of his sensibility. 'When he should have reasoned,' explained Wollstonecraft in the *Vindication*, 'he became impassioned' (p. 189). Rousseau, according to Wollstonecraft, is a victim of his own philosophy, for after instructing all women to be adorable and alluring, he loses all ability to evaluate their essential humanity. 'Is this the man,' asks Wollstonecraft, introducing the subject of Rousseau into the *Vindication* (p. 107), 'who delights to paint the useful struggles of passion, the triumphs of good disposition, and the heroic flights which carry the glowing soul out of itself? How are these mighty sentiments lowered when he describes the pretty foot and enticing airs of his little favourite!'

'Sophie' is Rousseau's creation of a young girl bred to be the ideal wife for 'Émile'. 'Sophie' is the antithesis of Wollstonecraft's rational woman. Not only is she by nature inferior, but she exists only to provide entertainment for men. Wollstonecraft challenges Rousseau's major assumptions about women: that a state of dependence is natural to them, therefore they should be dependent on men; that they are naturally uninclined to learn, therefore they should be given little opportunity; that they should have little liberty, but become accustomed to 'habitual restraints' since dissipation, levity, and inconstancy are also natural to them. Wollstonecraft argues with all these assumptions. That women were created for the entertainment of men is offensive to Wollstonecraft's notion of reason. She will argue that women's faults are not a proof of their natural inferiority but proof instead of the intrinsic inferiority of their environment.

What Wollstonecraft finds most pernicious in Rousseau are the ethics he teaches women. If a virtue is one which is applied differentially to men and women, Wollstonecraft calls it a 'sexual virtue'. Concern with one's reputation, cunning, dissimulation, patience and forgiveness are all sexual virtues, or praiseworthy in a woman while demeaning to a man. Wollstonecraft's evaluation of these feminine virtues is often pragmatic and seldom unconvincing. Concern for reputation alone, for example, is a shallow virtue, for

If the honour of a woman, as it is absurdly called, be safe, she may neglect every social duty; nay, ruin her family by gaming and extravagance; yet still present a shameless front—for truly she is an honourable woman! (p. 247)

Furthermore, to be concerned always with mere appearances inevitably inhibits a woman's adventurousness. But while, according to Rousseau, a young woman should cultivate a good reputation, she can be indifferent to the virtue of simple

honesty, and rightly so. Rousseau enjoyed the notion of a feminine coquette and he would actually encourage young girls to cultivate little schemes to have their own way with their teachers. But women, cautioned Wollstonecraft, having to exercise power only through men and at the same time to please them, were instructed enough in the fine art of deception. What Rousseau thought charming, Wollstonecraft thought immoral and dangerous. After all, if a woman thrives for many years wholly on flattery and admiration, and is schooled in deception, where will she turn when her husband no longer finds her amusing or attractive? Surely the appetite for flattery and the practice of deception can only lead her to infidelity and further neglect of her children.

The ideal woman Rousseau described was not only a mindless coquette but, according to Wollstonecraft in the *Vindication*, she was a cheerfully submissive one. It was not at all unlikely, Wollstonecraft reads from Rousseau on p. 180, that a husband might occasionally unfairly accuse his wife of a misdemeanour. Rather than defend herself, Rousseau teaches, a woman should bear the insults of her husband without complaining. Replies Wollstonecraft (p. 181), 'Of what materials can that heart be composed which can melt when insulted, and instead of revolting at injustice, kiss the rod?' The character of a woman is continually corroded as she tries to mimic these unnatural manners. She cannot submit, dissimulate, flatter without finally doing permanent harm to the moral imperative to seek reason and justice with which she was born. Rousseau and teachers like him had encouraged the development of a non-reasonable human being, another kind of person, always seeming to be, never being. 'Why are girls to be told that they resemble angels,' she asks (p. 194), 'but to sink them below women?'

One apprehends in the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft's profound sense that the middle-class girl is not being raised in the world and for the world, but raised instead, protected from the world, for the man she will one day marry. Isolated, sequestered, she is taught that life is like an intricate dance she will one day be called upon to perform. She learns to move like a puppet on a string, imitating other puppets as artificial and as unreal as she is. She is applauded for accomplishments which are in themselves hollow, and encouraged to anticipate a future which is mostly fantasy. And why? To be called an angel, a truly feminine woman, to have handkerchiefs retrieved and doors shut behind her, which she could have done herself if she moved a pace or two—a false and empty sovereignty—raised upon a pedestal within a prison or as Wollstonecraft puts it, 'Confined, then, in cages like the feathered race,' pluming themselves, stalking 'with mock majesty from perch to perch' (p. 146).

But Wollstonecraft was more than merely contemptuous of this feathered majesty. She was genuinely concerned for the future of the often self-satisfied and self-confident middle-class girl who was so ill-prepared to leave the protection of a father's home. Nothing could be quite so illusory as a young girl's fantasies about romantic love. And nothing could so completely mislead her about the realities of married life. The reader may find a few of the pronouncements the *Vindication* makes on marriage and motherhood frankly surprising. 'The neglected wife is, in general, the best mother' is one sober suggestion, and 'an unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to the family' another (p. 114). One can scarcely accept such sentiments from the same woman who in a few short years will attempt suicide for the unrequited love of Gilbert Imlay. But, in fact, what Wollstonecraft is trying to do is to tip the scales against romantic love, so heavily weighted down were

young girls in its illusions. In Chapter 6 Wollstonecraft makes a careful distinction between romantic love and 'friendship'. The first explains Wollstonecraft, is an 'arbitrary passion', a stalking mischief, (p. 222), the very opposite of reason which cannot last long in marriage without exhausting itself. Friendship, on the other hand, is a more sublime affection, because it is founded on principle and cemented by time. Again, we have the pragmatic commonsensical Wollstonecraft, pursuing here the simple wisdom that the young girl ought to look beyond superficial charms when she chooses a marriage partner, for a compatibility of interests and temperament which will endure. But unhappily for them, this kind of caution was unlikely in young girls, educated as they were to delight in flattery and chivalry, scarcely knowledgeable enough to recognize good sense in another if they should be so fortunate to find it. Perhaps later, Wollstonecraft would say, after a revolution in human affairs, love might be a nobler passion. If women were, says Wollstonecraft, 'in some future revolution of time, to become, what I sincerely wish them to be, then love would occupy its proper sphere in human activities, and a woman would marry out of love made more durable by judgement' (p. 223).

Wollstonecraft is, then, no permanent detractor of romantic love; she is only wary of its excesses in an imperfect age. As she wrote, romantic love was the fantasy only of young girls, exhausting their imagination, starving their ambition while worldly experience and academic study modified this influence on the growing boy. Since marriage would inevitably dispel the rosy illusions, the young girl should be undeceived and expect to find satisfaction in life as a reward for achievements beyond that of finding an attractive husband. 'No woman ought to rely for all her happiness on a being subject to like infirmities with herself'

But, while girls were taught to exaggerate romantic love out of all proportion to reality, they were not taught to respect the duties of motherhood. Wollstonecraft belonged to an age as conscious as our own of the important influences of the early years on the character of an adult, but one more optimistic about one's ability to control this influence. That most women are destined to be mothers is Wollstonecraft's best argument for educating them—in terms of the ease with which these arguments would be accepted; so it is an argument she will bring out again and again. One must realize again, however, that the fundamental imperative for education in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is that a woman has an innate capacity to reason which is its own moral justification for development. Wollstonecraft asserts candidly that a woman's first responsibility is to herself as a rational creature, and should one conceive of a conflict between domestic duties, motherhood, and reason, it is reason which should be served. But such a conflict was highly unlikely. Right conduct, motherhood, and developing reason could never be at variance. 'Reason is absolutely necessary to enable a woman to perform any duty properly' explains Wollstonecraft (p. 156), and no duty was as important as her duty to her children.

The *Vindication* places a great deal of importance on the role of women in the home, although Wollstonecraft is by no means convinced that this is the only place for her to be. 'When I treat of the peculiar duties of women . . . it will be found that I do not mean to insinuate that they should be taken out of their families, speaking of the majority . . .' (p. 155). She is frankly torn by this dilemma, even as modern feminists are. On the one hand she believes that mothering is crucially important to the ongoing process of perfecting civilizations, on the other hand she accepts that great achievements and family

life do not walk hand in hand. Her attempt to resolve this dilemma is curious, and one she would probably not have been long happy with. If the demands of family life were such that it would be difficult for a woman to achieve any worldly distinction, one was to be comforted with the following: 'The welfare of society is not built on extraordinary exertions; and were it more reasonably organized, there would be still less need of great abilities, or heroic virtues' (p. 155). More progressive proposals for women were made later in the *Vindication*; meanwhile in acknowledging motherhood to be a responsibility, Wollstonecraft insists that education be provided for the future mother. If government is to be based on the consent of its citizens, then the citizens must be virtuous. If a change in the affairs of society must be made, the need for a change must be recognized by wise men and women. Not only was it an inherent right of women to be educated, it was a social imperative; if not, succeeding generations would inherit their parents' ignorance, instead of their wisdom.

Wollstonecraft uses the same blend of environmentalist eugenics and ideology when she deals with the issue of sexual promiscuity. When women are morally lax, the fault, argues the *Vindication*, is the man's. Until her education is improved, it is unjust to consider a poor, ignorant, foolish girl, brought up only to reverence sensibility, a free moral agent. The *Vindication* suggests (p. 249 in Chapter 8, 'Morality'), that until such time as women are educated, a man who fathers an illegitimate child should be required to support the mother and child . . . all the causes of female weakness . . . branch out of one great cause—want of chastity in men'. But the real victim of moral laxity is neither man nor woman, but society itself, since

the weak enervated women who particularly catch the attention of libertines, are unfit to be mothers, though they may conceive; so that the rich sensualist, who has rioted among women, spreading depravity and misery, when he wishes to perpetuate his name, receives from his wife only a half-formed being that inherits both its father's and mother's weakness (p. 249).

Ideology, ethics and simple humanity were not so well blended again until William Blake's 'London':

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.⁸

Beyond the general argument for the emancipation of women the *Vindication* advocates more specific social reforms in education and the family (Chapters 10 and 11, 'Parental Affection' and 'Duty to Parents'). Wollstonecraft speaks now not of male or female children, but of all children, given equal advantages. The home, with an educated mother and father presiding over it, looms large in shaping good character in the child. In an affectionate and well-regulated home, children will develop a love for family life which will inspire their own home-making when they are adults. In return for parental affections and care, children will respond with loyalty and protection when they mature. Filial duty, in the *Vindication*, is treated in a manner consistent with Wollstonecraft's progressive ideology. Children should acknowledge the authority of their parents until they have attained the age of reason. Then they must follow the dictates of their own conscience. There must be no tyranny over children when they are able to reason, just as the virtuous citizen should be free of the tyranny of the state. When they are ready for school, they will go, not to

boarding school, where isolated from adults they would compound each other's ignorance, but to a day-school near their home. In Chapter 12, 'On National Education', Wollstonecraft, like Thomas Paine, considerably in advance of her time, recommends the establishment of a national system of instruction, which would operate co-educational day schools. Assuming a reformed state, which represents the collective wisdom of its citizenry, Wollstonecraft would, by nationalizing education, free schoolmasters from economic dependence on individual parents which might be injurious to good teaching. With a schoolteacher independent of individual prejudices, a child, in the more natural atmosphere of comradeship with both sexes, would receive basic instruction, after which the more able would continue academic work while the others learned a trade.

Girls, according to the *Vindication*, would not receive this excellent education merely for their eternal amusement. And it is with this distinction that Wollstonecraft must be so sharply distinguished from those who wanted to reform women's manners either to make them more attractive companions for men, or to enrich their moments of leisure. Wollstonecraft is educating women so that they will be independent and useful to society. Independence is necessary in maintaining Wollstonecraft's notion of virtue, and to be useful to society is the ultimate responsibility of an educated person. Independence, said Wollstonecraft, is derived from the ability to earn one's living. So long as women can lean on another for support they will inevitably dissipate their native intelligence and imperil their virtue. 'Happy is it when people have the cares of life to struggle with; for these struggles prevent their becoming a prey to enervating vices, merely from idleness' (p. 144). Having to struggle with the cares of life is what Wollstonecraft calls the 'virtue of necessity', and she urges its embrace tirelessly.

Give a woman back, she says, the simple need to earn her own bread, take from her the false manners and artificial chivalry which isolate her and corrupt her, and put her to work. 'It is true,' she says of dependent women, 'they are provided with food and raiment, for which they neither toil nor spin; but health, liberty and virtue, are given in exchange' (p. 146). Wollstonecraft is happiest when she sees a woman working. She had her own remedy for the odd assortment of maladies and vapours which too often afflicted the delicate women of fashion. 'I have often wished, with Dr Johnson,' she said, 'to place some of them in a little shop with half a dozen children looking up to their languid countenances for support' (p. 259). Then some health and vigour might return to the pale cheeks, and a more thoughtful expression might accompany the dimples.

But what work was a woman to do? We have already seen that even as Wollstonecraft was writing, employment for women was becoming more limited. Not all women had capital enough to be a milliner or a mantua-maker with a shop, and the apprenticeship for these trades was gruelling. The women who had earned their living with a dairy farm, or a small brewery, or in domestic industry were finding employment eliminated by industrialization. What work was there for a woman to do which would allow her to meet the familial responsibilities which were important to the welfare of the whole society? Clearly this was Wollstonecraft's dilemma, as it is ours in the twentieth century. Wollstonecraft is certain, however, that women should be allowed to rise as high as their industry and intelligence can take them. Chapter 9, with its ponderous title, would have left her readers breathless with its daring. If tradition and law stand as obstacles to a woman's rise

in working society, argues the *Vindication*, referring to Blackstone's 'civil death' of women in marriage, such laws must be changed. '... In order to render their private virtue a public benefit, they must have a civil existence in the state,' says Wollstonecraft (p. 262); adding, 'How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop ...' She goes so far as to say that they ought to be represented in government, although in 1792 they were well accompanied among the many disenfranchised.

The force of the *Vindication* is clearly to derive education for women so that they might be the virtuous mothers of a reform-minded new generation of citizens. While Wollstonecraft did not hesitate to propose in the *Vindication* the expansion of the role of women in society to proportions that match the demands of feminists almost two hundred years later, it would simplify her argument dreadfully, and do a disservice to the woman who so enjoyed watching her own young daughter develop, not to appreciate how profoundly and sincerely the *Vindication* esteems motherhood. Wollstonecraft was too enamoured of nature not to consider that bearing children, breast-feeding them, protecting them, were self-evidently duties of women. Wollstonecraft would like to engage all women in an independent economic relationship with the community, but if she cannot, she is still adamant that women fulfil their responsibilities as mothers with the devotion, the seriousness, the intelligence that such a role demands.

To be sure, Wollstonecraft is addressing the middle-class women, for she is asking that women occupy themselves with their children rather than give them up to the exclusive care of servants. But the happy young mother who wrote the following letter two years later to Gilbert Imlay would scarcely have tolerated as well the modern woman's total isolation with her baby.

... this said little girl, our darling, is become a most intelligent little creature, and as gay as a lark, and that in the morning too, which I do not find quite so convenient. I once told you, that the sensations before she was born, and when she is sucking, were pleasant; but they do not deserve to be compared to the emotions I feel, when she stops to smile upon me, or laughs outright on meeting me unexpectedly in the street, or after a short absence. She has now the advantage of having two good nurses, and I am at present able to discharge my duty to her, without being the slave to it.⁹

Wollstonecraft does not conceal that her vision of maternal bliss depends on household help, and in acknowledging this she may be embraced with gratitude by women for whom 'two good nurses' are not always available. In a reformed society, an equitable, universally satisfying division of labour is easier to ask for than to describe. And if Wollstonecraft's implied solution may seem facile, or class-bound, it is interesting to observe that the feminist Germaine Greer, who accepts childbirth for women, but not marriage or the nuclear family, cannot wholly escape the problem of who will do the domestic work to maintain the species. Miss Greer's hypothetical solution, in *The Female Eunuch*, to child care is a communal home in Italy where 'the house and garden would be worked by a local family who lived in the house'.¹⁰

In Wollstonecraft's reformed society, the enlightened woman must inevitably depend on some assistance with domestic labour. She would have no flocks of servants to assist her, but she would be no household drudge. She would be 'an

active citizen', says Wollstonecraft (p. 259), 'equally intent to manage her family, educate her children and assist her neighbours'. If she is this, one understands, then she fulfils an obligation to the community which earns her the support she derives from her husband, and frees her at least from the spirit of economic dependence, if not its actuality. The *Vindication*, then, offers no romanticization of motherhood, nor of housework, just as Wollstonecraft herself, although she despised luxury, was no romanticizer of poverty. The ideal woman pictured in the *Vindication* is active and intelligent, blending civic and familial responsibilities, freed from drudgery and debasing frugality. But Wollstonecraft will not yield the principle that the reformation of community and the socialization of children is the important work of educated parents; and that society could ill afford to delay, considering the immensity of the task, to offer an equal partnership to women. 'It is time', she says, thinking of the great waste of human resources, 'to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them their lost dignity—and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world' (p. 132).

Notes

1. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Miriam Brody Kramnick, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1975, p. 195. Further citations from this edition will be given in the text.
2. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, London, 1796, p. 27.
3. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, London, 1790, p. 26.
4. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, p. 75.
5. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 138, 140.
6. Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origins and Progress of the French Revolution*, London, 1794, p. 33.
7. John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, London, 1929, pp. 289–91.
8. *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, ed. John Sampson, Oxford, 1905, p. 131.
9. *Love Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft to Gilbert Imlay*, London, 1908, pp. 57–8.
10. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, New York, 1971, p. 328.

MOIRA FERGUSON From "Introduction"

Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman

1975, pp. 5–16

I. General Preface

The continually growing interest in the life, thought, and works of Mary Wollstonecraft serves, finally, to vindicate her reputation. Scorned by earlier critics, she had lapsed into relative obscurity. Now, however, a more sympathetic audience recognizes her pivotal position in the history of humanist thought.

In particular, her theoretical tract of 1792, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is nowadays regarded as a crucial early document in the annals of feminism. Her fiction, on the other hand, has had little effect despite its similar ideas. *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman*, the novel she was writing at the time of her death in 1797, echoes and often transcends the notions expressed in the *Vindication*. That this and her other works of fiction have been virtually inaccessible till recently reflects not

only a judgment on their value as literature in a traditional sense but indicates, in addition, the cultural preferences of the patriarchal society against which she rebelled.

The subtitle of her final novel, *The Wrongs of Woman*, suggests its main focus. She is at pains in the preface to explain this emphasis. The "wrongs of woman" are the legally and socially permissible acts of injustice perpetrated against women in eighteenth-century Britain. Women at that time had no voice in Parliament; they could neither make laws nor abrogate them. Married women were virtually non-persons. The law subsumed all married women within their husbands' identity—women were *de jure* and *de facto* the property of their spouses. No money was theirs by right. If they were heiresses like Clarissa Harlowe and they married, their money automatically transferred to their husbands. They were denied child custody. A married woman could not leave her husband unless he continually beat her. If she left her husband, she could be compelled to return by law or physical force. Divorce for women was almost impossible. Single women fared little better, and as the story of *Jemima the maid* in *Maria* shows, women from the lowest social class fared even worse.

Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman is probably the first novelistic attempt in English realistically to depict female degradation. Though the work is incomplete, it is clearly articulated and offers a graphic picture of the wrongs done to women. Mary Wollstonecraft's husband, William Godwin, the prominent radical philosopher, collated the manuscripts and edited the work so as to preserve even "the broken paragraphs and half-finished sentences" (of which there are many in Parts II and III). Only Part I was left by its author in any semblance of final form. Although there are several gaps in the manuscript (indicated by asterisks) and even four suggested endings, her meaning is inescapable.

The work stands as a fictional corollary to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft analyzes the effects on women—middle-class women for the most part—of a partial educational system where women learn "accomplishments" only to please men. She argues that human rights apply equally to men and women and that, therefore, women should be given the education which will enable them to achieve equality. In *Maria* she depicts in a fictional setting how the denial of all civil and political rights keeps every class of women from true fulfillment in their day-to-day existence. Further, she extends her analysis beyond those problems peculiar to women—to the most underprivileged in her society, the poor and the imprisoned, men and women alike.

II. Biography

(. . .) Her first two works, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and *Mary: A Fiction*, though conventional enough in form, contain many glimpses of ideas she developed more thoroughly in her later works: her recognition of the constraints imposed on women in education and hence in occupation; her realistic view of marriage and her hatred of tyranny; her belief in the supremacy of reason and the crucial effect of environment.

About this time, she was invited to be a translator and reviewer for Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review*, and from here on her writings reveal a growing political consciousness. She criticized Rousseau's theories of education. To Lord Chesterton's pronouncement that women "are only children of a larger growth" she responded that precisely this kind of indoctrination was what made members of her sex "artificial, useless creatures."¹

With the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of*

Men in 1791, Wollstonecraft joined the ranks of the notorious. Not only was she the first to challenge Edmund Burke, one of the country's most revered statesmen, but she was a woman. The publication one year later of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* added further insult to the public injury.

The second *Vindication*—as is now well-known—polarized British and, to a lesser extent, European intellectual thinking. She challenged with impunity sacred and cherished tenets of eighteenth-century society. She horrified a public that was not ready to confront a progressive thinker who was also an avowed and proselytizing feminist.

All her previous embryonic notions about social inequities are put forward here with courage, confidence, and vigor. She deplores women's social role, especially the traditional female education in external accomplishments that only trivialize the mind. She denounces marriage as an institution definitively oppressive to women. Her sex is "in silken fetters." She urges that educational opportunities be open to all and that women cease to be stereotyped as pretty, vain, jealous, fickle creatures. She denounces writers, such as Rousseau, who have degraded her sex. She cuts deftly and deeply. Overnight she had become, in Horace Walpole's terms, one of the "philosophizing serpents in our bosom"—"the hyena in petticoats."²

With the public uproar at full pitch, she put her theoretical concepts into practice by hastening to revolutionary Paris. There she wrote *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, one of her most neglected works. While writing the history she met Gilbert Imlay, an American adventurer. They soon became lovers. When the Girondins fell in May 1793, and it became dangerous for British citizens to be in Paris, Imlay claimed immunity for her at his embassy. In April 1794, she gave birth to Fanny Imlay, named for her dead friend.

Her passionate letters to Imlay, whose affections for her had now begun to wane, point up a contradiction in her life between dependence and independence. Her childhood and adolescence were quite deprived of affection and caused her to place a high priority on love and security. Her letters to Imlay, together with the *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, 1795, provide a record of their relationship. In the *Letters*, she approaches the peak of her prose. Though studded with perceptive political comment, her writing displays an equanimity—unequaled in her other writings—attained from a long solitary sojourn in the beautiful countryside. The resuscitating powers of nature enable her—at times—to transcend her deep sadness.

After her tempestuous relationship with Imlay and the two suicide attempts which it fostered, she again met William Godwin, with "friendship melting into love." But she was not to enjoy for long the hard-won fruits of a life dedicated to notions of justice and equality. She died at thirty-seven, ten days after giving birth to a second daughter, who was to become Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*.

III. Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman

When Wollstonecraft began her last work, she gave heed to her own injunctions in the final chapter of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, "Some Instances of Folly which the Ignorance of Women Generates." In this section she talks of women "who are amused by the reveries of the stupid novelists who . . . work up stale tales, and describe meretricious scenes."³ Since pap fiction keeps women from necessary duties, she suggests that they defend themselves against this form of corruption by ridiculing the novels.

Yet it was a work in this very genre, which she had seen as so injurious to women's minds, to which she devoted her final literary energies. Her change of outlook reflected the social evolution of the genre itself. In 1792, when she wrote her first *Vindication*, the novel was about fifty years old. Many women adopted the pastime of reading novels to while away time afforded them by the advent of the "nuclear family"—the bourgeois revolution in family life. Middle-class husbands preferred wives at home: they were status symbols, as were servants. To these women, deprived of outside employment and jobs at home, the circulating library was the coffee shop of the day, and the impoverished female flotsam of the revolution served their need for distraction by becoming what George Eliot later termed "silly lady novelists."

Wollstonecraft was alive to this phenomenon. She also knew of women like Mary Astell, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Catherine Macaulay who had written on behalf of their sex and been ridiculed for their unpopular views. So the idea occurred to her of infusing her notions about female oppression into a popular and ordinarily "silly" genre. It was a perfect combination, in theory.

The Wrongs of Woman is her most militant work of fiction. It comes full circle from the ideas in her first educational tract on females, leaving the religious base behind and exposing establishment solutions to women's problems as no solutions at all. This final piece of writing is a compendium of the ideas she had been developing and refining throughout her career as a writer. As Godwin states in his suffix to the novel, "It was particularly the design of the author . . . to make her story subordinate to a great moral purpose . . . This view restrained her fancy."

Yet, as Godwin testifies, the form of the work was a problem for her. Her attempt to create a convincing fictional situation which would encompass and illustrate her ideas was not successful. She knew that her intellectual aim had forced her to make literary sacrifices: "In writing this novel, I have rather endeavored to pourtray [sic] passions than manners. In many instances I could have made the incidents more dramatic, would I have sacrificed my main object, the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society."

Though more unlikely allies could hardly be imagined, she agrees with Samuel Johnson's literary tenets. She does not want to number the tulip's streaks; she is not interested in an individual woman's plight, vividly portrayed with all its idiosyncrasies. It is the history of women in their social situation, the history, in fact, of the female species, which concerns her. The point is "to show the wrongs of different classes of women, equally oppressive, though from the difference in education, necessarily various." An important contrast is that between the problems of Maria, the middle-class protagonist, and those of the maid Jemima, who is so often passed over by critics.

The book often reflects, in fine detail, the complexities of Mary Wollstonecraft's own life. Maria's family, for example, is an exact fictional equivalent of Wollstonecraft's, consisting of a father-tyrant, a submissive mother, and four siblings. The brutality and callousness of the older brother, the father's conduct during the mother's last illness, Wollstonecraft's role as nurse, and the dependence of the sisters are all present in the novel.

The choice of marriage as a central theme is also a matter of re-created life experience. Her family, friends, and employers all led crippled lives from its effects. Her family and the Blood family were both disastrously unhappy. Fanny Blood's marriage, uprooting to Lisbon, and pregnancy caused her

death. Her sister Eliza's situation had given Wollstonecraft great anxiety, and court records at the Guildhall Library in London document—as Eleanor L. Nicholes has pointed out—that her marriage was effected under some pressure, with her father and eldest brother in collusion. The example of Lady Kingsborough, her employer when she was a governess in Ireland, had demonstrated the vacuity of aristocratic marriages given over to the vapid social round, with its corollary of child neglect. Wollstonecraft's own attempts to secure a stable relationship, most notably with Gilbert Imlay, were, till William Godwin, utterly disastrous.

The opening scene graphically depicts the effects of marriage on Maria, who is literally manacled in the cell of an insane asylum where her scheming and abusive husband has legally placed her. While in the asylum she is tended by Jemima, who arranges meetings between Maria and Henry Darnford, another unjustly held prisoner. Although his role in Maria's future life is questionable by the end, he does vividly illustrate an important aspect of Wollstonecraft's beliefs: that society is able to oppress men as well as women.

Part I continues with Jemima's joyless soliloquy, Darnford's narrative, and Maria's story to the point of her marriage to Venables. Without her knowledge, Maria's uncle-benefactor has offered money to encourage Venables to marry her. Shortly thereafter, when her sisters are in financial need, Venables refuses aid. Maria begins to comprehend her folly and bad judgment. According to eighteenth-century law, her money now belongs entirely to her husband. "One trait in my character," Maria exclaims after her recognition, "was extreme credulity; but when my eyes were once opened, I saw but too clearly all I had before overlooked." (All this parallels Eliza's naiveté, seduction, and forced marriage.)

The remainder of Maria's story is almost a blow-by-blow account of Eliza's hair-raising dash from her husband's house to Hackney. This incident, which lasted only one half hour, becomes the window through which Wollstonecraft shows how marriage and husbands can oppress eighteenth-century women.

Eliza's escape and subsequent dependence on her sister caused Mary Wollstonecraft to open a suburban school to support her family. Maria's escape ends with her capture on the Dover road and incarceration in the madhouse. At this point, though only fragments of Parts II and III remain, it is clear that Maria's stand in court after her escape from the asylum was to be a final triumph, a thorough and roaring indictment of the system which renders women the slaves of men. Much the way Wollstonecraft rose to attack the theories of Burke when she was relatively unknown, Maria confronts a corrupt judge and argues for female equality and justice within the law.

She delivers an impassioned speech in court about the fundamental injustices to women, injustices which range from being bartered for prostitution to being legally incarcerated in an asylum by their husbands. The judge is intransigent. In his summation of the evidence, he remarks on

the fallacy of letting women plead their feelings, as an excuse for the violation of the marriage vow. For his part, he had always determined to oppose all innovation, and the new-fangled notions which encroached on the good old rules of conduct. We did not want French principles in public and private life—and, if women were allowed to plead their feelings as an excuse or palliation of infidelity, it was opening a flood-gate for immorality. What virtuous woman thought of her feelings? It was her duty to

love and obey the man chosen by her parents and relations who were qualified by their experience to judge for her.

Marriage and marriage laws, then, are Maria's main enemies. But Jemima's brutalization by society is total. Every imaginable agony and humiliation is heaped upon her. Her life is a case history of the problems of the neglected poor generally, and the fact that she is a woman greatly intensifies her plight. One of the few jobs open to her is washing other people's dirty clothes, and she remarks laconically, "On the happiness to be enjoyed over a washing-tub, I need not comment." She could never be a court defendant, as Maria is. Money is required for that.

The list of specific misfortunes Jemima faces may be implausibly long. But the individual misfortunes were all common and real enough so that she is a compelling composite picture of the plight of poor women in Wollstonecraft's time. Indeed, in many ways Jemima is the more heroic of the two. Her trials are greater and more strenuous, sadistic and more degrading. She is treated as the scum of humanity, barely on the rungs of the human ladder at all. But still she refuses to be duped, coerced or intimidated, though the severity of her treatment could easily produce a social vegetable. It is exactly in her independence and personal firmness of purpose—her "resoluteness" as her overseer puts it—that she is heroic.

It is the will to struggle, coupled with the growth of self-awareness, which allows Jemima and Maria to tackle the problems facing them. This, above all, is Wollstonecraft's lesson. But the underlying questions are political and more difficult to answer. Why does Maria have so little means of redress and, conversely, why does her spouse wield so much power over her? What role do institutions play in this? Why are so many women (assuming Wollstonecraft's vignettes are representative) subjected to the capricious brutality of their husbands in secrecy and penury? Why are poor women so exposed to exploitation? Why, indeed, are women "the outlaws of the world"?

Wollstonecraft raises these questions and more. She also demonstrates the dearth of ready solutions. The judge peremptorily brushes aside Maria's speech. He elaborates on the dangers of such speeches; it proves women should have no power, he argues. He is grotesquely prophetic.

The Wrongs of Woman has serious imperfections: the sheer quantity of the heroines' problems, the lack of subtlety in message, and its technical crudity. Yet this accumulation of Wollstonecraft's life experiences, filtered through the sieve of fiction, offers a unique exposé of eighteenth-century oppressed womanhood.

As she struggled to complete the story, time and medical incompetence overtook her. Her own words stand as her best epitaph:

All the world is a stage, thought I and few are there who do not play the part they have learnt by rote. And those who do not, seem marks set up to be pelted at by fortune; or rather as signposts which point out the road to others, whilst forced to stand still themselves amidst the mud and dust.⁴

Notes

1. *Analytical Review*, V (1789): 218.
2. *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, ed. Mrs. Paget Toynbee (Oxford: 1905), XV: 131–32, 337–38.
3. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1967), p. 272.