

## NOT JUST AN(OTHER): WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE REPUBLIC OF VIRTUE (Originally published in *Rivier Insight*, Vol. 3, 1996)

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When in 1792 the French Minister for Education proposed a revolutionary system of state-supported system of public education for men only, Mary Wollstonecraft was outraged. As a concrete embodiment of the French Revolution's promise to redress the wrongs of the past, this proposal seemed a betrayal of all that the Revolution stood for. Wollstonecraft responded with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, arguing a "simple principle: "that if she [woman] be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice" (4). Just as one year earlier she had leapt to the defense of Richard Price and Thomas Paine in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* against the attack of Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, she now turned her attention to the injustice that presented itself in this "revolutionary" program for "universal" education in France.

But while a milestone in the Feminist movement, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* has not been without its critics. Feminist critics, in particular, have argued over Wollstonecraft's strategy in the *Vindication*, particularly her emphasis on female virtue and chastity, and re-evaluated the consequences of her rationalist position. Critics such as Mary Poovey and Cora Kaplan have seen Wollstonecraft as inherently conflicted in this attempt to redefine female roles within Enlightenment discourse. They view her privileging of reason and her promotion of modesty as bound both to the current female discourse of the time (the novel of sentiment or the "how-to" books for ladies) and limited by her blindness into her own conflicted sexuality (her unhappy affair with Gilbert Imlac and attempted suicide).

But Wollstonecraft's work is a much more sophisticated response to a complex rhetorical situation than has often been credited. As Amy Smith's study of reader cues in the work has established, *A Vindication* is carefully directed to both male and female readers, producing what Judith Lee sees as a vision of social change that requires "a twofold process in which men and women evolve independently but reciprocally" (Smith 557). In order to appreciate Wollstonecraft's achievement and the complex issues she negotiates, it is important to read the *Vindication* in its philosophical and rhetorical context. For example, much of Wollstonecraft's rhetoric in the *Vindication* attempts to counteract Rousseau's essentialist position—the philosophical underpinning of the French educational argument. Wollstonecraft, in contrast, argues for a socially constructed image of woman. Women's equality, she maintains, is inextricably tied to education because only through education can women gain control of language and the social reality it encodes. At the same time, her emphasis on virtue and female modesty needs to be understood in terms of its figural antecedents. In reconstructing a new image of the female ideal, Wollstonecraft must necessarily deconstruct the earlier misappropriations and figurations of the female form in Rousseau and Burke. Read against the background of their work, the *Vindication* becomes a far coherent work and Wollstonecraft's attempt to define a republic of female virtue an imaginative response to a highly conflicted rhetorical and philosophical issue.

## Women in Rousseau's Political Thought

Rousseau's dedication to his *Discourse on Inequality* ends, surprisingly, with praise for what he calls the true unseen legislators in Geneva—its women—by asserting that “the destiny of your sex will always be to govern ours” (65). This power that Rousseau accords women may seem out of keeping with the *Discourse* itself—where women contribute only to the dependency of men—and even more with the *Social Contract*, noteworthy for the complete absence of references to women. And yet the dedication points out Rousseau's recognition that women play a crucial role in the development and maintenance of society. They “perpetuate love of the laws within the state and concord among citizens,” correcting men, as Rousseau states, “through the persuasive sweetness of [their] lessons and the modest grace of [their] conversations” (65). Where in the *Social Contract* “legislative power is the heart of the state, executive power is the brain” (140), in the *Discourse*, women, whose role is to maintain civic virtue, form its conscience: they are the “chaste guardians of our morals” (65), providing a moral check on what is essentially the amoral power of that force that Rousseau terms the General Will. In *Émile*, Rousseau can equate the decline of a society with the degradation of its women: “Alas for the age whose women lose their ascendancy, and fail to make men respect their judgment! This is the last stage of degradation” (423).

But as Rousseau makes clear in that work and elsewhere, the “ascendancy” of woman is something that must be carefully circumscribed and contained, manipulated like all other things in his educational and political system if individuals are to live successfully in society. The power that women have in Rousseau's political doctrine is dependent on the power allotted them by nature. And that power can be reduced to a simple law of nature—the principle of pursuit and resistance:

For nature has endowed woman with a power of stimulating man's passions in excess of man's power of satisfying those passions, and has thus made him dependent on her goodwill, and compelled him in his turn to endeavour to please her, so that she may be willing is superior strength. Is it weakness which yields to force, or is it voluntary self-surrender? This uncertainty constitutes the chief charm of the man's victory, and the woman is usually cunning enough to leave him in doubt. (*Émile* 387)

Throughout *Émile* and elsewhere in his works, Rousseau claims that such a system, maintaining natural differences, is the necessary means to achieve a well-ordered society. In contrast, he criticizes what he calls Plato's “political promiscuity” “under which the same occupations are assigned to both sexes alike, a scheme which could lead to intolerable evils” (390). Plato's attempt to “remake” society based on a metaphysics of mind, disdaining the accidents of nature, fails, according to Rousseau, to respect the inherent nature of sexual difference and the irreducible dependence which is essential for the dynamic of civil society. Even when Rousseau grants women authority, that authority is based on their moral, not political power and it is limited to the domestic sphere:

“Woman's reign is a reign of gentleness, tact, and kindness; her commands are caresses, her threats are tears. She should reign in the home as a minister reigns in the state, but contriving to be ordered to do what she wants. In this sense, I grant you, that the best managed homes are those where the wife has the most power” (*Émile* 444).

Women's “control” is thus based on a mutually acceptable deception, where the means of power are never overt and the cloak of weakness masks the strength of duty. Mutual dependence becomes the guarantee of civic order.

Joel Schwartz sees a close connection between sexual dependence and political dependence in Rousseau. In order to live peacefully in civil society, men like *Émile* “must never overcome their dependence on women” (Schwartz 86). In the logic of Rousseau's naturalistic argument, “*Émile's*

sociality is caused by his sexuality. Before his adolescence, Emile is asocial or independent . . . because the young child must depend only on things, not on other humans” (Schwartz 76). This leads Schwartz to argue that Rousseau’s approach, despite its obvious disadvantages to individuals, does grant women considerable power within civic life as a whole:

Rousseau argue[s] that sexuality can benefit society by making men and women regard themselves as dependent parts, in need of one another for their joint completion. Rousseau contends that the man who recognizes his dependence on women can also be the citizen who recognizes his dependence upon society. (Schwartz 74)

But Linda Zerilli, in *Signifying Woman* claims a far different role for women within Rousseau’s system, one that is not so easily compensated. According to Zerilli, woman, for Rousseau is “the figure who leads mankind into the abyss . . . a scapegoat precipitated by the disorder in men: that feminine other within the citizen-subject. . . ” (19). Woman represents the potential disorder that the social contract is meant to redress. She is the embodiment of that self-indulgence and *amour-propre* which Rousseau sees as fatal to civic virtue, qualities which lead men to behave in ways that are submissive to the will of the one rather than responsive to the general will. Much of the degeneracy of the present day, Rousseau thus contends, can be traced to the “indolent and soft life to which our dependence on women reduces us” (*Letter to D’Alembert* 103). Unlike the Spartan and Roman women who reminded men of their loyalty to the nation, the modern woman, according to Rousseau, transforms men into servile followers and emasculates them by encouraging a code of feminine behavior:

Every woman at Paris gathers in his apartment a harem of men more womanish than she. . . . But observe these same men, always constrained in these voluntary prisons, get up, set down, pace continually back and forth to the fireplace, to the window, pick up and set down a fan a hundred times, leaf through books, glance at pictures, turn and pirouette about the room, while the idol, stretched out motionlessly on her couch, has only eyes and her tongue active. ( *Letter to D’Alembert* 101)

This picture of the degenerate male, made captive by an ascendant female, haunts Rousseau—even the Rousseau who found his greatest sexual satisfaction in prostrating himself before dominating women. Perhaps because of his experience, Rousseau recognizes the power that women can wield over desiring men, drawing them away from their civic responsibilities.

For Rousseau, the theater is the embodiment of this delusive female control and the site of social instability. Seeing a Roman emperor swoon before a lady, Rousseau claims, “debases by effeminate complaints that almost divine character given him by history, who makes us look for the benefactor of the world and the delight of humankind in a vile salon wooer” (*Letter to D’Alembert* 52). But Rousseau reserves his greatest condemnation for the female actresses and the inversion of social order depicted in romantic stories: “What would become of the human species if the order of attack and defense were changed? . . . since the power and the will, always in disaccord, would never permit the desires to be mutually shared, love would no longer be the support of nature but its destroyer and plague” ( 84). By “exposing” herself on the stage, women collaborate in reducing virtue to sexual success and men to sexual slaves.

Zerilli sees this fear of dissolving gender boundaries as lurking behind Rousseau’s diatribe against the theater. It is not just that the theatre promotes illusion, making men applaud on the stage the display of vice and folly that they would disdain in real life. But the theater itself is the scene of female power, a world of appearances tied neither to natural or moral purpose:

for Rousseau the theater is a woman in masquerade, a cunning coquette who courts the look of a captive male bewitched by the spectacle of female self-display. Thus fixated

on the simulacrum of womanly virtue, thus beguiled by a ‘counterfeited sweetness,’ men are lured away from their civic duties and toward that other sort of woman in society: the disorderly and disordering woman who is without modesty, utterly without shame, and whose illicit desire for mastery confounds the natural order of an active masculinity and passive femininity. (16)

Thus Rousseau’s greatest fear, according to Zerilli, is that gender is only a social construct. If gender boundaries are not carefully maintained the result could be a “frightening . . . loss of manly constitution” (Zerilli 18). And this, indeed, is the threat posed by universal education—that the same education for women as for men will unfit women for their “natural,” and therefore dependent and constricted, role in society and threaten the whole “constitution” of society.

### Burke, Gender and Rhetoric

Edmund Burke, though an ideological opponent of Rousseau, expresses a similar fear in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. *The Reflections* focuses on the need to maintain those privileges and institutions that “derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers” (13). Burke figures the enemy of this male order as female, with France depicted as a female prostitute and Marie Antoinette its helpless female victim. As Burke put it, “France has not sacrificed her virtue to her interest, but she has abandoned her interest, that she might prostitute her virtue” (*Reflections* 176).

For Burke the illegitimacy of the French Revolution and its subsequent excesses stem from this refusal to acknowledge the power of tradition and law—with the law of property and primogeniture the most important. Burke figures this refusal as a sexual violation, a ripping away of the shreds of decency, as in Burke’s hyperbolic description of Marie Antoinette fleeing naked from a murderous crowd. The Revolution threatens to strip away those social codes which maintain civic and sexual order. Later in the *Reflections* Burke makes clear that the proper functioning of society requires a fictive covering of gentility and decorum:

All the pleasing illusion, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion. (*Reflections* 89)

This threat of baring the naked body of truth that lies beneath the “decent drapery of life” equates revolution with sexual violation and dissolving gender barriers. Burke is disturbed by the thought of those lower-class French women who have broken all bounds of decency—“ . . . the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the shape of the vilest of women” (*Reflections* 84). The distance between considering “a queen . . . but a woman” and “a woman but an animal” (*Reflections* 89), for Burke, is short indeed.

Keeping “our naked shivering nature” covered, both literally and rhetorically, becomes Burke’s overriding concern. While in the *Enquiry Concerning the Nature of the Sublime* Burke warns against those “despotic governments . . . [which] keep their chief as much as may be from the public eye”

(II.1.50), in the *Reflections* Burke subscribes to the “sublime power” that results from cloaking the sovereign with a certain majesty and mystery. Burke’s aesthetics are consistent with his politics. Where Thomas Paine in *The Rights of Man* claims a plain style of discourse that will do away with rhetoric and other attempts to disguise the naked truth, Burke defends his rhetorical “figures” as reflecting authentic feelings. In Burke’s aesthetics, the realm of the sublime depends on such obscurity and ignorance:

It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions. Knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little. (*Enquiry* II.4.52-53)

We remain in awe at the power of what we do not fully understand—the same awe that inherited institutions and practices should inspire. Thus, for Burke, the “pleasing illusions” of manners and customs are valuable precisely because they discourage us from penetrating too far, from stripping away the “decent drapery of life” and revealing the coarse animal passions underneath.

In her earlier *Vindications of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft had picked up on this passage in Burke to question the sincerity of his feelings and attack him for allowing his emotional reactions to the Revolution to cloud his reason. She points out that despite his protestations about the horrors of this political drama, he is not a naive viewer:

You have been behind the curtain, and, though it might be difficult to bring back your sophisticated heart to nature and make you feel like a man, yet the awestruck confusion in which you were plunged must have gone off when the vulgar emotion of wonder, excited by finding yourself a Senator, had subsided. Then you must have seen the clogged wheels of corruption continually oiled by the sweat of the laborious poor, squeezed out of them by unceasing taxation. (*Vindications of the Rights of Men* 43-44)

For Wollstonecraft, this feigned shock at naked revolution by one who has already peeked behind the curtain of governmental power is hypocritical. But even more significant, Wollstonecraft accuses Burke of the same type of emotionalism that he and Rousseau attribute to females. In thus calling attention to Burke’s ‘hysteria’ over political events, Wollstonecraft undercuts both the privileging of Burke’s position and the dramatic basis of his rhetoric.

### Refashioning the Rhetoric of Revolution

Wollstonecraft’s approach to the issues in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is quite different. While Wollstonecraft’s call for a “revolution in female manners” requires a redress of political wrongs, at the same time she is wary of either “clothing” her reconstructed female citizen in the garb of conventional gendered sexuality or stripping away the cloak of modesty that grants women in her society a degree of autonomy. As she puts it in her prefatory letter to the *Vindication*, “to render the human body and mind more perfect, chastity must more universally prevail, and that chastity will never be respected in the male world till the person of a woman is not, as it were, idolized. . . “ (4). While she aspires to an approach that will not turn away from the “simple unadorned truth” (10) of such basic principles as liberty and equality, at the same time she wishes to retailor “modesty, the fairest garb of virtue!” (4) so that it can appropriately invest women with the moral power that comes from intellectual reflection and self-possession. If the realm of the feminine is corrupted in its characterizations by Rousseau and Burke, then she must reappropriate those *manly* virtues by which women can be more themselves without becoming the Other. And she must do so within a discourse that privileges reason without denying the claims of experience and the truth of emotions.

One of the ways Wollstonecraft does this is by describing a new republic of female reason and virtue based on a redefinition of woman to replace Burke's "unchangeable custom" and "forefathering." As Mary Poovey has pointed out, Wollstonecraft makes two significant "breakthroughs" in the *Vindication*. The first is to locate the source of individual responses in the social situation that women find themselves in. The second is to identify these attitudes and expectations as "institutionalized by the very texts that purport to be 'authorities' and even by the values encoded in language" (Poovey 69). This encoding takes place through the education system which inculcates a set of false values and preserves inequality by denying women the intellectual training by which to challenge the system. If the male definition of woman is promoted as essentialist and logical, then Wollstonecraft must expose it as constructed and irrational. Drawing on associational psychology, Wollstonecraft points to the inevitable chain of associations, "this habitual slavery to first impressions," by which society binds women to false assumptions about their roles and capacities, viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone" (*Vindication* 9). The only way to overcome this mediated identity is through education, allowing women to achieve an unmediated relationship to truth and virtue.

### The Other as Object, Self as Subject

Despite her rejection of Rousseau's essentialist thinking, Wollstonecraft's tactical moves in the *Vindication* are similar to Rousseau's. Like Rousseau, Wollstonecraft sees power as the corrupting influence in all relationships, affecting both master and slave alike. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau emphasizes how dependence on others is the root of all subsequent evil. In particular, he focuses on the transformation of *amour-de-soi-même* into its antithesis, *amour propre*. That change comes about at the moment that natural man becomes self-conscious of his difference: "Thus the first look he directed into himself provoked his first stirring of pride. . . ." (*Discourse* 110). Once identity is mediated by the social gaze of others and appropriated in our own self-consciousness, social ranking and conflict for power results:

Each began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself; and public esteem came to be prized. He who sang or danced the best; he who was the most handsome, the strongest, the most adroit or the most eloquent became the most highly regarded, and this was the first step towards inequality and at the same time towards vice. (*Discourse* 114)

The only way to avoid this social valuation resulting from the admiring gaze of others is either to establish a new social contract or eliminate that gaze entirely, as Rousseau attempts to do in the *Reveries*. In *Émile* Rousseau describes a process which allows Emile to escape, as much as possible, this figuration by others. Part of this process involves removing Émile as soon as possible from the company of women. But as Mary Jacobus points out, *Émile* is not so much an educational treatise as "an account of how the child becomes father to the man without the help of his mother." And Zerilli notes that while a man may be a subject of representation in Rousseau, he is one "who always represents himself, who is never signified by another" (*Signifying Woman* 27). This is clear even in *The Social Contract*, where Rousseau argues against any form of representative government for male citizens, since "sovereignty cannot be represented . . . a will cannot be represented" (SC143).

Just as Rousseau wishes to limit this appropriation of [male] self by others, so too Wollstonecraft sees much of the inequality suffered by women resulting from the social valuation of the male gaze, shaping the image of woman and reducing her to dependence on the male reflection of her worth.

Women, as Wollstonecraft argues, are never allowed to signify for themselves but are only seen in relation to a male economy that capitalizes on their sexual availability.

Just as the distinctions resulting from this social valuation for Rousseau leave their mark in the elaborate signs of rank and preferment that characterize a corrupt society, so too Wollstonecraft notes how the chain of impressions resulting from women's proscribed education leaves its mark, giving a "sexual character to the mind":

But females, who are made women of when they are mere children, and brought back to childhood when they ought to leave the go-cart forever, have not sufficient strength of mind to *efface* [my italics] the superinductions of art that have smothered nature. (*Vindication* 117)

Those marks on the mind are indeed revealed in the young girl's face—the socially constructed personality that she presents to men. "Must a wife," Wollstonecraft asks, ". . . condescend to use art and feign a sickly delicacy in order to secure her husband's affections?" (*Vindication* 29). Forced to repress her true feelings as a result of this "habitual slavery" to impressions, she spends the rest of her life effacing herself in order to please men. In the *Enquiry* Burke literally effaces the female when he describes the source of attraction in women:

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix or whither it is carried. (III.15.94)

Although it is the male who is in danger of "losing his head" in this rapturous gaze, this "headless woman" serves Burke's purposes. The "deceitful maze" of a woman's body becomes the site of indeterminacy, a deferral of meaning that leads us into delusive and potentially dangerous areas. Like the revolutionary body politic of Burke's *Enquiry*, it promises the illusion of freedom but without a corresponding principle of order. The man who enters the realm of the beautiful risks becoming an Eve "amazed" at the serpent's "many a wanton wreath" (*Paradise Lost* 9.517) or a Red Cross "wrapt in Errours endlesse traine" (*Faerie Queene* I.i.18.162). Mellor points out the inherent contradiction forced on women by this image of seductive but ultimately frustrating desire:

Forced to be flirts and sexual teases, [women] were encouraged to arouse male sexual desire by allowing their suitors to take 'innocent freedoms' or 'liberties' with their person, but were forbidden to experience or manifest sexual desire themselves, a situation that left them blushing in unconscious—yet necessarily fully conscious—modesty. (Mellor 36)

Woman is the source of temptation and error, a beautiful but deceptive site of imaginative play.

"Reading" the feminine in this way excludes women from participating in the interpretation of their own actions and controlling their own significance. Why, Wollstonecraft asks, if a woman asserts herself that she is "darkly to be told that men will draw conclusions which she little thinks of" (*Vindication* 28). In contrast, Wollstonecraft in the *Vindication* proposes a different way of "inscribing" and thus "reading" the feminine—one that is moral rather than aesthetic, determinate rather than indeterminate, and semiotic rather than erotic:

To render the person perfect, physical and moral beauty ought to be attained at the same time; each lending and receiving force by the combination. Judgment must reside on the brow, affection and fancy beam in the eye, and humanity curve the cheek, or vain is the sparkling of the finest eye or the elegantly turned finish of the fairest

features: whiles in every motion that displays the active limbs and well-knit joints, grace and modesty should appear. But this fair assemblage is not to be brought together by chance; it is the reward of exertions calculated to support each other; for judgment can only be acquired by reflection, affection by the discharge of duties, and humanity by the exercise of compassion to every living creature. (171-172)

Wollstonecraft's description here presents a whole person, in whom outer features reflect inner character, unified by a single "animating spirit." In place of the "deceit" and ambiguity which is the province of Burke's ideal of beauty, Wollstonecraft substitutes a portrait that is organized and determined. The figure that results is the product of a purposeful act of self-creation, quite different from the enticing, but morally dangerous portrait of Burke's beautiful woman. Wollstonecraft's "fair assemblage" is also quite different from the reconstructed individual presented in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. As an embodiment of its male creator's delusive and fragmentary understanding of life, the creature in *Frankenstein* is a rationalist's nightmare come true—a symbol of the male imagination's failure to understand the inner principle or animating spirit that transforms the socially constructed individual into an integrated and independent self.

Wollstonecraft, similarly, sees the dangers of a male erotic imagination which mistakes beauty for truth, truth for beauty, deceiving itself into believing its own psychological and social constructions of those truths. It was, after all, Rousseau's own "effervescence of . . . imagination" that produced his "ecstasy and misery" (*Vindication* 91): "When he should have reasoned he became impassioned, and reflection inflamed his imagination instead of enlightening his understanding" (*Vindication* 91). However, it is not imagination itself that Wollstonecraft deprecates. She avoids the trap of simply privileging reason at the expense of imagination and passion. Earlier in the *Vindication* she describes the characteristics of a "vigorous" imagination, one which can "give existence to insubstantial forms, and stability to the shadowy reveries which the mind naturally falls into when realities are found vapid. . . it can imagine a degree of mutual affection that shall refine the soul, and not expire when it has served as a 'scale to heavenly'" (74). But Rousseau's "inflamed imagination" was neither natural nor "vigorous" as Rousseau claimed; instead, Wollstonecraft clearly understood, it resulted from "unnatural" repression, the same type of artificial restraint imposed on women:

for, born with a warm constitution and lively fancy, nature carried him toward the other sex with such eager fondness, that he soon became lascivious. Had he given way to these desires, the fire would have extinguished itself in a natural manner; but virtue, and a romantic kind of delicacy, made him practice self-denial; yet, when fear, delicacy, or virtue restrained him, he debauched his imagination, and reflecting on the sensations to which fancy gave force, he traced them in the most glowing colours, and sunk them deep into his soul. (*Vindication* 91)

Wollstonecraft connects this repressive move in Rousseau with the sexual repression and hypocrisy that Mellor describes as the female's scripted role in the male dramatic fantasy. Both result from a rejection of real passion. The result is not freedom from female tyranny, as Rousseau believed, but a different type of slavery. As Poovey puts it, "Rousseau, as a 'voluptuous tyrant,' simultaneously rationalizes his own sensuality and gratifies it, and, at the same time, he punishes the being who tempts him to this self-indulgence by making her responsible for sexual control" (Poovey 71). Rousseau's move successfully displaces women from the realm of the literal and relegates them to the realm of the symbolic where they can become a *supplément* to men's erotic needs without danger of rejection—a process which Rousseau then presents as "natural" [because based on principles of nature] and therefore reasonable.



## Imagining An(Other)

Thus it is not only man's imagination but his reasoning, too, that is inherently flawed. In the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft takes pains to expose the faulty logic and *post hoc* reasoning by which male prerogatives are universalized. While this reasoning is presented as objective and deductive in Burke and Rousseau, Wollstonecraft shows that it is based on a tradition encoded in language rather than derived from rational principles—the mediation of books rather than the immediacy of experience. This she attributes, in a reversal of associations, to men's, rather than women's, restricted upbringing:

I must therefore venture to doubt whether what has been thought as an axiom in morals may not have been a dogmatical assertion made by men who have coolly seen mankind through the medium of books, and say, in direct contradiction to them, that the regulation of the passions is not always wisdom. (*Vindication* 110)

In fact, where men derive their greater authority is not from their greater ability to reason and therefore prevent themselves from acting irrationally, but the greater freedom they have to err and learn from their errors:

On the contrary, it should seem, that one reason why men have superior judgment and more fortitude than women, is undoubtedly this, that they give a freer scope to the grand passions, and by more frequently going astray enlarge their minds. If then by the exercise of their own reason they fix on some stable principle, they have probably to thank the force of their passions, nourished by false views of life, and permitted to overleap the boundary that secures content. (*Vindication* 110)

Wollstonecraft wants for women that same freedom to “overleap the boundaries” that artificially prevent them from gaining knowledge from experience. But in this request, she faces a rhetorical dilemma. As Steven Blakemore points out, Wollstonecraft's assertion that she, like other women, needs to pursue her investigation beyond those limits commonly authorized by society makes her own moral character suspect in the eyes of her audience. In a work, such as the *Vindication*, that refers so extensively to *Paradise Lost* and the figure of Eve, Wollstonecraft remains vulnerable to the charge of being “Eve-like” in her aspirations, refusing to be “lowly wise” (PL 8.173). Thus even as Wollstonecraft criticizes the encoding of feminine weakness in such works, she remains caught within a system of references which call into question her own questioning project.

## The New Body Politic

While Wollstonecraft has been accused in the *Vindication* of forsaking the realm of passions, valorizing male reason at the expense of the full sexual expression of women, her strategy in the *Vindication* goes beyond such simple opposition. Poovey, for example, sees Wollstonecraft's invocation of reason as a “transvaluation of feeling . . . [and] her masculine persona . . . a cover for the feminine position she has all along retained” (Poovey 68); she finds her “indicting sexual desire itself” (75). Cora Kaplan sees the emphasis on reason in Wollstonecraft as stemming from her fear of the body (*Sea Changes*). But rather than denying the body—or women the experiences of their bodies—Wollstonecraft attempts to distinguish the ways by which women can control their bodies and the meanings they signify by examining the ways in which male society inscribes its lessons on the mind through the body. Wollstonecraft indeed points out that “women as well as men ought to have the common appetites and passions of their nature—they are only brutal when unchecked by reason. . .” (*Vindication* 130). Therefore, control of the body—or the education of the body—is as crucial a means of liberating women from the dominant ideology as is control of the language by which that ideology is inscribed.

This concern accounts for some of the more puzzling parts of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*—for example, her attack on the practice of wet-nurses:

I advert to well known facts, for I have frequently heard women ridiculed, and every little weakness exposed, only because they adopted the advice of some medical men, and deviated from the beaten track in their mode of treating their infants. I have actually heard this barbarous aversion to innovation carried still further, and a sensible woman stigmatized as an unnatural mother, who has thus been wisely solicitous to preserve the health of her children, when in the midst of her care she has lost one by some of the casualties of infancy, which no prudence can ward off. (176)

Wollstonecraft protests the fact that this basic and exclusive female activity has been denigrated by a male-imposed image of woman that wishes to hide the literal facts of the female body in order to better sustain the fantasy of sexual availability. What Wollstonecraft takes as a material condition of female slavery to “unnatural” custom has its important ramifications throughout the Romantic period. The image of nursing is used by male Romantic poets in their attempt to depict their dependent relationship to Nature, to draw sustenance from a Nature or “Other” troped as female. In the “infant babe” passage in *The Prelude*, for example, Wordsworth describes how the child “drinks in the feelings of his Mother’s eyes” even as he “drinks in” her nourishment at her breast (2.238). Coleridge, in an early letter, speaks about his own attitude towards nature as a physical dependency that transforms a mountain into rocky breasts: “From Llanvunnog we walked over the mountains to Bala—most sublimely terrible! It was scorchingly hot—I applied my mouth ever and anon to the side of the Rocks and sucked in draughts of Water cold as Ice, and clear as infant Diamonds in their embryo Dew! (*Letters I*, 88-89). Here, as elsewhere, male exclusivity appropriates the relationship of mother and child, reserving it for its own narcissistic use.

The connection between body and mind is as strong for Wollstonecraft as it is for Rousseau: “Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison” (*Vindication* 44). Bound to a chain of early associations, without the education to untwist its links, women are unable to “throw off their factitious character,” and are relegated to “worse than Egyptian bondage” (*Vindication* 117):

Every thing they see or hear serves to fix impressions, call forth emotions, and associate ideas, that give a sexual character to the mind. False notions of beauty and delicacy stop the growth of their limbs and produce a sickly soreness, rather than delicacy of organs. . . . This cruel association of ideas, which every thing conspires to twist into all their habits of thinking, or, to speak with more precision, of feeling, receives new force when they begin to act a little for themselves; for they then perceive that it is only through their address to excite emotions in men that pleasure and power are to be obtained. (*Vindication* 117)

This is one reason for Wollstonecraft’s insistence later in the *Vindication* that young girls have as much physical freedom as boys. What Wollstonecraft characterizes as the “play of the mind” (118) can only result from the freedom to expand the circumference of one’s concerns and experience the same lack of physical restraints granted men. Instead of supporting a new single identity for women, however, from the very beginning of her work Wollstonecraft argues against this attempt to circumscribe a single notion of woman—in Wang’s terms, “trying to break that singular identity . . . by exposing the identity’s dependence upon linguistic and pedagogical structures” (Wang 134).

Another puzzling section of the *Vindication* can also be understood in terms of this mind/body dilemma that Wollstonecraft sees as, in part, at the root of women’s enslaved and deprived condition. In

the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft expresses her disgust with the masturbatory practices in girls as well as boys who have been forced to board together. This disgust can be seen not so much as a fear of sexuality as a fear of one more “educational” practice which restricts girls’ capacities, which “deadens” the mind and dries up its “generous juices” (*Vindication* 165)—a part of a larger conspiracy to defraud them of their birthright:

The pure animal spirits, which make both mind and body shoot out, and unfold the tender blossoms of hope, are turned sour, and vented in vain wishes or pert repinings, that contract the faculties and spoil the temper; else they mount to the brain, and sharpening the understanding before it gains proportionable strength, produce that pitiful cunning which disgracefully characterizes the female mind—and I feel will ever characterize it whilst women remain the slaves of power! (*Vindication* 164)

The language of this passage, highly sexual itself, talks about the ways in which potential sexual experience is inevitably “contracted” by a thoughtless education system, preventing a young girl’s natural “animal spirits” from animating her body in adulthood. The lack of such constriction would “unfold the tender blossoms of hope”—the flower image here suggesting the full and natural flowering of sexual passions as well as the sexual organs. Thus masturbation becomes for Wollstonecraft not “an expression but . . . a repression of the potential of mind and body. . .” — Wollstonecraft’s rejection of Rousseauian “substitution” (*supplément*), the continually deferred enjoyment of “natural” desire which is replaced by masturbatory fantasy which characterizes Rousseau’s relations with women and nature in *The Confessions* and *The Reveries*. Wollstonecraft, however, does not advocate repressing passion in favor of a repressive reason; instead, she attacks passion when it is not allowed “to become part of a lived experience, but instead is exploited as the fuel for what amounts to a solipsistic, masturbatory imagination” (Wang 137).

The ultimate sign of this degeneration, for Wollstonecraft, is when men, no longer sated by the women who fail to satisfy their erotic imaginations, turn to other men:

This intemperance, so prevalent, depraves the appetite to such a degree, that a wanton stimulus is necessary to rouse it; but the parental design of nature is forgotten, and the mere person, and that for a moment, alone engrosses the thoughts. So voluptuous, indeed, often grows the lustful prowler, that he refines on female softness. Something more soft than woman is then sought for; till, in Italy and Portugal, men attend the levees of equivocal beings, to sigh for more than female languor. (*Vindication* 138)

This hedonistic move away from the literal and closer to the figurative reveals the inherent narcissism of the male romantic quest. By forgetting their part in the “parental design of nature,” such libertines pursue passion in a manner destructive of the family and social values. Wollstonecraft’s greatest fear is that having fathered children, males will ultimately abandon them in homoerotic “languor,” “doubly defeat[ing] the purpose of nature. . .” (*Vindication* 140). Such “voluptuous excess,” associated with the feminine that they cannot possess, ends in “unsexing” these males. In this sense, Wollstonecraft endorses Rousseau’s fear of dissolving gender boundaries and effeminate men. But the cause is not women but men’s “emasculated” social construction of them, condemning women to the realm of weakness and frustrated desire and men with them. In pursuing so passionately their figuration of women, they have elided the social consequences of self-absorbed passion: “for virtue is only a nominal distinction when the duties of citizens, husbands wives, fathers, mothers, and directors of families, become merely the selfish ties of convenience” (*Vindication* 140).

## Fe(Male) Romantic Quest

This solipsistic imagination, pursuing its solitary erotic quest, is associated with the sublime quest of masculine self-identity. Anne Mellor, in distinguishing “feminine romanticism” from “male romanticism,” points to the ways in which female writers of the period saw the need to domesticate the sublime, associated with the isolated, brooding, male self, by rehabilitating the second of Burke’s categories, the “beautiful,” as the realm of community and relation. The sublime, in Burke’s terms, produces the sense of terror and isolation, a visionary transcendence in which one experiences the radical independence of the self. The beautiful, however, Burke had associated with the domestic and feminine, which in turn is connected to weakness and imperfection:

But in these, so far is perfection, considered as such, from being the cause of beauty, that this quality, where it is highest, in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness. In all this, they are guided by nature. Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty. Blushing has no little power; and modesty in general, which is a tacit allowance of imperfection, is itself considered as an amiable quality, and certainly heightens every other that is so. (*Enquiry* III. 9. 90)

Beauty and strength are thus incompatible within this aesthetic formulation. Indeed, as Burke adds, “an air of robustness and strength is very prejudicial to beauty. An appearance of *delicacy*, even of fragility, is almost essential to it” (*Enquiry* III. 16. 95). Wollstonecraft refers specifically to this section of the *Enquiry*, knowing that Burke’s aesthetic is part of a larger social program for control of women and rationalization of it:

You may have convinced them [these ladies] that *littleness* ... [is the] essence of beauty; and that the Supreme Being, in giving women beauty in the most supereminent degree, seemed to command them, by the powerful voice of Nature, not to cultivate the moral virtues that might change to excite respect, and interfere with the pleasing sensations they were created to inspire. (*Vindication* 112)

Thus “feminine romanticism” faces a dual problem—combatting the privileging of the sublime quest, associated with imaginative self-sufficiency and wholeness, while rehabilitating the realm of beauty, associated with the domestic sphere and imperfection. According to Mellor, female writers in the romantic period specifically condemned Burke’s and Wordsworth’s representations of the sublime as a moment of masculine empowerment over female nature.” They believed, instead, that “a commitment to the welfare of others and an ethic of care necessarily involves accepting limitations upon the powers and gratifications of the individual self” (105).

Throughout the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft emphasizes that the male imagination is an unreliable faculty, resting as it does on the insubstantiality and impermanence of male passion. The sublimity of erotic imagination cannot sustain the material condition of women. As Wollstonecraft says of Rousseau, “his imagination constantly prepared inflammable fuel for his inflammable senses. . .” (42). While Rousseau can imagine, in the *Reveries*, an alternative to social dependence, Wollstonecraft recognizes that women do not have this option. They are not only bound by the demands of family but they also lack the material resources and economic conditions for such self-reflection. As she reminds her readers, “solitude and reflection are necessary to give to wishes the force of passions, and to enable the imagination to enlarge the object, and make it the most desirable” (*Vindication* 58). Lacking both the means and opportunity to achieve this transcendence, women must seek elsewhere for their emotional and imaginative satisfaction. While passionate identification with another is one possibility,

Wollstonecraft recognizes as Mellor puts it, that “the spontaneous overflow of passionate feeling in a female who has *not* thought long and deeply can be disastrous for the welfare of women” (60).

Thus opposed to this goal of romantic appropriation of a sublime other, Wollstonecraft proposes a redefinition of the beautiful, one that can incorporate heroic qualities but within a social setting. If men have become more effeminate themselves in proportion as they have created weak women, then it is up to women to acquire those qualities which will allow them to appropriate masculine strength. In contrast to Wollstonecraft’s example of the Fine Lady who remains bound, emotionally and economically, to men and who has become, as a result, a superficial wife and poor mother in order to conform to male sexual expectations, Wollstonecraft proposes the ideal of the virtuous woman—a woman of independent thought and reflection whose life retains its worth beyond her sexual value to men and whose beauty is based on virtue not appearances:

Raised to heroism by misfortunes, she represses the first faint dawning of a natural inclination, before it ripens into love, and in the bloom of life forgets her sex—forgets the pleasure of an awakening passion, which might again have been inspired and returned. She no longer thinks of pleasing, and conscious dignity prevents her from priding herself on account of the praise which her conduct demands. Her children have her love, and her brightest hopes are beyond the grave, where her imagination often strays. (*Vindication* 50-51)

Wollstonecraft recognizes the cost. However, the denial of sexual desire frees women from the vagaries of male affection. This new image of woman, centered as it is on the family and parental duties, shifts the scene of woman’s triumph from the drawing room and imagined landscapes of amorous intrigue to hearth and home:

I think I see her surrounded by her children, reaping the reward of her care. The intelligent eye meets hers, whilst health and innocence smile on their chubby cheeks, and as they grow up the cares of life are lessened by their grateful attention. she lives to see the virtues which she endeavoured to plant on principles, fixed into habits, to see her children attain a strength of character sufficient to enable them to endure adversity without forgetting their mother’s example. (*Vindication* 51)

In this imagined scene, the gaze of the male has been replaced by the accepting gaze of children. If throughout the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft criticizes men for their childish demands that women remain “the toy of man, his rattle,” here ironically, it is the child, uncorrupted by the male romantic script, who fully appreciates the value of the female. Instead of hothouse virtues, the woman now gains satisfaction from having *planted* principles and cultivated souls. No longer needing to ‘efface’ herself, she can appear for what she is. This image of effacement returns in Chapter IV where Wollstonecraft points out the ways in which women are never allowed to possess their own identities, but always forced to take things on “face value”:

the soul of woman is not allowed to have this distinction, and man, ever placed between her and reason, she is always represented as only created to see through a gross medium and to take things on trust. (*Vindication* 53)

Always mediated by others, woman needs the unmediated relation to knowledge denied her by male society. For Wollstonecraft, that can only be achieved through an education that allows women to control their self-interpretations.

The *Vindication* can thus be seen as attempting to define a new role for women through a discourse which reconstructs the female within male-approved categories. The resulting revolution in female manners, as Mellors points out, would “dramatically change both women and men”:

It would produce women who were sincerely modest, chaste, virtuous, Christian; who acted with reason and prudence and generosity. It would produce men who were kind, responsible, sensible and just. And it would produce egalitarian marriages based on compatibility, mutual affection and respect . . . [a feminism] committed to a model of equality rather than difference. (37-38)

Wollstonecraft must persuade both her male and female readers alike that the shift from passion to reason, from unreliable romantic love to enduring friendship, is both desirable and necessary for women. It is a new model of relationship founded “not on the male psyche’s narcissistic absorption of his female anti-type or soul mate . . . but on the recognition both of difference and compatibility” (Mellor 102). While it is fair, then, to characterize Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, in the way Mitzi Myers does, as a “republicanized adaptation of the female role normative in late eighteenth-century bourgeois notions of family” (212), that formulation must be seen within the context of Wollstonecraft’s larger rhetorical purpose. If Wollstonecraft does finally seem to see her revolution in terms of making women better mothers and wives, it is to secure for them a mode of power that is not based on the tyranny of the weak or dependence on the will of the stronger. Virtue and modesty are not negative terms in Wollstonecraft’s political and social vocabulary. Where Burke had equated modesty with mere manners—confusing a breakdown of the one with the elimination of the other—Wollstonecraft wishes to rehabilitate these terms based on enduring principles rather than social conventions. As positive, assertions of individual integrity, modesty moves women from the realm of appearances and deception (“Women are always to *seem* to be this and that. . . .” [*Vindication* 99]), to that of being—to one of truth and integrity: a transparency of inner virtue with outer appearance. Instead of Burke’s “pleasing illusion” and “decent drapery” of modesty, Wollstonecraft tailors a republican garb of virtue—one which reveals the common soul of men and women while it protects women from the predatory gaze of the libertine. And she does so through a discourse which finds a place for passion within a well-regulated and self-determined personality. From the “shadowy reveries” (*Vindication* 74) of male imagination, she wants women to achieve the type of embodiment that “makes us respect the human body as a majestic pile fit to receive a noble inhabitant. . . .” (*Vindication* 171). ■

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