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Introduction

THERE IS SOME DEGREE OF contingency at play in what becomes the topic of one's writing. Chance or choice, the question as to why it is this subject or that author, as opposed to any other subject or author, surfaces from time to time. Necessity to earn a living led Mary Wollstonecraft to write reviews, and that she could do so at all was because she knew the editor of the *Analytical Review* (1788–1798), Joseph Johnson. The publication of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) provided an opportunity, which she took up with alacrity, responding to it with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). It prompted in turn her best-known work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The French Revolution itself gave her another reason to put pen to paper, when she sought to explain its causes in *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe* (1794). The growing market in books and the interest in education had already led her to write pedagogical works, and the popularity of fiction encouraged her to try her hand at novels. Circumstances as well as events shaped the substance and genre of much of her writings. Passion and the desperate desire to reverse the unrequited love of the father of her first daughter led her to travel to Scandinavia and compose her *Letters Written*

during a *Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), but its publication was driven by financial need. Like many of her contemporaries, she sought to understand the circumstances that led to the stupendous events defining her time, but more than most she weighed the ethical choices they forced on those witnessing them.

So why Wollstonecraft? To many commentators the answer is obvious: because she argued for the equality of men and women, because she was a feminist, and because of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. That is not my answer. Wollstonecraft did not rest her case against the condition of women as she saw it on a claim about the natural equality between the sexes. Rather, she grounded her critique on an impassioned exposition of the flabbergasting contradictions within society's expectations of women and in women's own desires and hopes. Whether that makes her a feminist is debatable, but assessing her in this way is not the motive for this book. As for her authorship of that rightly famous work, what follows seeks to give her other writings equal weight, but if it elevates any, it is her first overtly political text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Wollstonecraft should not be celebrated only for *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Hers was a philosophy of humanity. To do justice to any one of her views, especially those expressed in that now legendary work, they must be set within the context of a wider historical worldview.

My own answer to "Why Wollstonecraft?" is simple: the woman herself and her exceptional capacity to make us think about, and rethink, nature, artifice, relationships, society and its history, and the connections between the personal and the political. Progressing from what now is evidently a very limited knowledge of her, when I was asked to edit her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in the early 1990s, to a much deeper acquaintance has bred genuine admiration and an enduring sense of intrigue. The editors of the series, Quentin Skinner and Raymond Geuss, allowed themselves to be persuaded that her

earlier work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* as well as *Hints*, be added to the volume as they seemed essential to understanding her most famous text. Even though I requested it, it is only relatively recently that I have come to fully appreciate the importance of reading those works together. Over time, it became clear to me that thinking of her as “the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,” as William Godwin referred to her in the title of her *Posthumous Works*, distorted our perceptions of both Wollstonecraft and her famed work. It had to be read as part of a larger corpus and she had to be thought as the author of a number of diverse works written in various genres, at different times and in various places. While the trend has been changing in recent years, and each of her works is increasingly receiving the attention they deserve, the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* has cast a long shadow over the rest of her writing for much too long.

Wollstonecraft was an extraordinary person. This was in no small measure due to her exceptional capacity to face life’s vicissitudes, to will herself to do and be what she thought the moment called for. Yes, she did twice attempt suicide. It was, one could say, out of character, or possibly not, depending on one’s stance on suicide. Be that as it may, it was wrong by what we might assume to have been her own moral and religious beliefs, but it cannot easily be said to have been weak. If it be deemed weak, then these were the exceptions, albeit monumental, in a life that she forged in the face of much adversity.

The strength she possessed, or acquired, was a gift she very much wanted to share: she strove to make a case for endurance and wanted children to be made resilient. She despaired of the fact that women’s education prevented them from acquiring the physical and mental strength life and human flourishing required. This is not to say that she always fully succeeded in living up to her own expectations of herself or those others might have had of her. Hers was not an easy life, and she had more than her share of sorrows from an early age, but she demonstrated

courage and resourcefulness through the course of it. Her family drifted from social and economic comfort to hardship, of which she and her sister bore the brunt. Her education was uneven, though it was to widen and reach considerable depth through fortuitous encounters as well as being asked by her publisher and supporter, the Dissenter Joseph Johnson (1738–1809), to contribute extensively to the *Analytical Review*. She mostly lived from her writing, determined to pay off her debts, started a school, was a governess to Lord and Lady Kingsborough in Ireland and traveled to Portugal to assist a dear friend, Fanny, in childbirth. In Paris under the Terror, she passed as the wife of American entrepreneur and sometime novelist Gilbert Imlay (1754–1828) and undertook for his sake a perilous journey in Scandinavia with their infant daughter, Fanny (1794–1816). Her resilience to heartbreak, though repeatedly tested, faltered once prior to her northern expedition, and a second time, when it became clear that Imlay had left her, never to return. She recovered, published the *Letters*, married, but died of septicaemia at the age of thirty-eight in 1797, following the birth of her second daughter, Mary (1797–1851), the future author of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Wollstonecraft had married Mary's father, William Godwin (1756–1836), in March of that year. Largely self-taught and as independent financially as any writer in her situation might be, Wollstonecraft had been an active participant in the cultural and political life of her age, battling, among others, with both Edmund Burke and the leaders of the Revolution in France.¹

If her personality makes up part of any answer to “Why Wollstonecraft?,” it is the manner in which it translated into her

1. For a detailed intellectual biography, see Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*. See also Lyndall Gordon, *Vindication: A Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), and Charlotte Gordon, *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley* (New York: Random House, 2015). For Wollstonecraft's engagement with French writers, see Tomaselli, “*French Philosophes*,” pp. 139–145.

writing that constitutes the essence of a reply. It is impressive in its variety, originality, and indeed volume, given her tumultuous existence and its difficult circumstances, not to mention her life's brevity, all of which makes her such an enthralling figure. Produced during a single decade, her literary output stretches to six or seven average-size volumes, consisting of five important texts in pedagogy and social and political thought, two novels, three translations, and many reviews and letters. Her first publication, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life*, appeared in 1787. Just nine years later, the last work to be published in her lifetime, *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, came out eighteen months before her untimely death. The unfinished novel she was writing toward the end of her life, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria*, was published posthumously by Godwin in 1798.

To be sure, in a century rich in very remarkable intellectuals, Wollstonecraft could not be said to be unique. The playwright Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793), who denounced slavery and called for the rights of women and a variety of social reforms, did not have an easy life either and was to die by the guillotine.² Both Gouges and Wollstonecraft followed in a long line of authors on education. Mary Astell (1666–1731) and Damaris Masham (1659–1708) were just two who long preceded them in this respect in England. Neither were Gouges nor Wollstonecraft alone in tackling what might be called “the woman question” or misogyny more generally in the eighteenth century. Other women traveled the world, and several English writers reported on France during the Revolution. Wollstonecraft herself reviewed the reports of one of them: Helen Maria Williams’s (1761?–1827) *Letters written in France, in the Summer, 1790, to*

2. Scott, “French Feminists and the Rights of ‘Man,’” 1–21. Sandrine Bergès, “Olympe de Gouges versus Rousseau: Happiness, Primitive Societies, and the Theater,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4, no. 4 (2018): 433–451.

a Friend in England; containing various Anecdotes relative to the French revolution; and the Memoirs of Mons and Madame du F. Nor, obviously, was novel-writing uncommon: Williams produced one as well as poetry, and a number of her contemporaries, most notably Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), were distinguished translators as well. In 1790, Wollstonecraft herself published a translation or version of Maria Geertruida de Cambon's epistolary *De Kleine Grandison* from the Dutch. Living, or eking out a living, by the pen was not unusual in the eighteenth century, not even for a woman, nor was entering the political fray and pamphleteering. Moreover, Wollstonecraft's was not the only reply to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790): Catherine Macaulay (1731–1791) produced one of the many, often anonymous, responses the work elicited.

So, why Wollstonecraft? Why not Williams or Carter or the great Anglo-Saxon scholar, Elizabeth Elstob (1683–1756)? The many European authors and scientists? Or the celebrated Mrs. Macaulay, renowned for her history of England at home and abroad, an impressive pedagogical and political writer and pamphleteer, who merits no less attention? Wollstonecraft admired her, was influenced by her, and there are many similarities between the two authors, not least their joint concern for the status of women. Both were also to acquire much notoriety: Macaulay in her lifetime for, among other things, her marriage to a much younger man, Wollstonecraft posthumously for having been the unmarried mother of Fanny.³

Notwithstanding all of the above, the answer to “why write on Wollstonecraft?” lies in her disarming frankness about what she perceived to be the human condition and her effort to be

3. For a comparison of their views, see Gunther-Canada, “Cultivating Virtue”; and “The Politics of Sense and Sensibility”; Bridget Hill, “The Links between Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay: New Evidence,” *Women's History Review* 4, no. 2 (1995): 177–192. See also Coffee, “Catherine Macaulay,” 198–210; Elizabeth Frazer, “Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay on Education,” *Oxford Review of Education* 37 (2011): 603–617.

honest with herself in the light of changing circumstances. How many can write “that an unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and that the neglected wife is, in general, the best mother”?⁴ One might be shocked or simply disagree, but it is at the very least thought-provoking. So are Wollstonecraft’s reflections on raising her daughter Fanny:

You know that as a female I am particularly attached to her—I feel more than a mother’s fondness and anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex. I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. With trembling hand I shall cultivate sensibility, and cherish delicacy of sentiment, lest, whilst I lend fresh blushes to the rose, I sharpen the thorns that will wound the breast I would fain regard—I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit—Hapless woman! What a fate is thine! ⁵

Few writers are as candid as she is here about what she perceived to be the tensions between love and moral principles: should one raise one’s children to thrive in the world as it is, or raise them as they ought to be, in anticipation of a world that may not be realized in their lifetime? Few were as daring as she was in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in speaking of the rivalry between mothers and daughters. Few non-fiction writers

4. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, and Hints*, edited by Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 100. See also *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in *ibid.*, p. 54. All future references to both Wollstonecraft’s *Vindications* and *Hints* are to this edition. Hereafter shortened to *VM*, *VW*, and *Hints*.

5. *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, assistant editor, Emma Rees-Mogg, 7 vols. (London: William Pickering, 1989), Vol. 6, p. 269. (Hereafter all of Wollstonecraft’s works, except for her *Vindications* and *Hints*, will be taken from that edition, shortened to *Works*.)

are as honest as she about the distorting effects of property even on parental love. Few are as clear about the interconnectedness of the personal and the public.

And how she could write! Wollstonecraft's rhetorical skills were impressive; she wrote as though she were speaking and proved more than up to the task of engaging Burke (1730–1797) or Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778).

There is also the boldness of the solutions she offered to what she saw as the problems of her day. In 1792, she called on the leadership of the French Revolution to realize that nothing short of a revolution in morals would achieve their purported aims of liberty, equality, fraternity: constitutional and political changes, no matter how momentous these might be, would not suffice to make for a society of free, equal, and fraternal beings. A total transformation of the way in which men and women conceived of themselves and each other was required. She argued for the decentralization of power and was highly critical of commercial society and its luxury economy. Yet she was surprisingly undogmatic over the course of her life. Despite her passionate disputations, she proved ready to revise her views in the light of new experiences and changed conditions that provided or needed further understanding. This can make establishing her position on a number of important subjects difficult, but thinking through these with her is never dull. While none of these biographical and intellectual features is peculiar to Wollstonecraft, combined they make her a captivating thinker.

My near final answer, then, to “Why Wollstonecraft?” is that she tackled a considerable number of important questions rendered particularly poignant by her authenticity and her eloquence. As I hope the following pages show, and as the increasing interest in her seems to indicate, Wollstonecraft continues to be someone with whom to engage on a wide range of significant topics. The personal and intellectual portrait they sketch draws on her lesser known works, such as her reviews, and highlights some of her less well-known ideas, such as those on music or

humanity in its infancy, in the hope that our understanding of her best known work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, will thereby be enriched. That most important text needs to be re-situated and read within the context of the whole corpus of her work, both for its own sake and so that her thought as a whole may be better understood. It needs to be dethroned to allow for a clearer view of its author.

The scholarship on Wollstonecraft is rich and growing exponentially.⁶ What follows seeks to contribute to it by highlighting the extent to which she conceived of most subjects within a historical framework and that the history of society provided the backdrop for much of her thinking. Although she did not write a stadial history of society, that is, a sequential history of humanity's stages from a state of nature to her own time, and specifically said that she would "not go back to the remote annals of antiquity to trace the history of woman,"⁷ almost everything upon which she reflected was set against a shared Enlightenment understanding of the development of civilization from a primitive social condition to the present commercial age. This understanding admitted of variations between eighteenth-century authors and was not universally read as marking the progress of mankind, nor was it uniformly conceived as being in accordance with God's plan for humanity. Wollstonecraft pondered the question of the merit of this development and its relation to divine intention. However, she did not only think about the present in terms of the past or the past in terms of the present, but also thought much about futures—the future as it was likely to be, given the present, and the future as it could be.

I seek to track one of her predominant concerns, namely, finding the proper balance between the natural, the humanly created, and the divine; between what made for progress, and

6. See Tomaselli, "Mary Wollstonecraft," in *Oxford Bibliographies in Philosophy*, 2016. <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396577/obo-9780195396577-0306.xml>.

7. *VW*, p. 129.

what for corruption; between enhancement and distortion, and thus the processes that underpinned each, as well as alternative futures. I also aim to stress the importance of time in her conception of individual development as well as that of humankind. Wollstonecraft did not only reflect on the nature of the progress of humanity as a whole. She was a teacher and pedagogue and thought of the mind's and the body's growth over time and at different stages of life. She thought about time, its divisions, and how it was used. She closed one of her reviews by asserting "as an irrefragable maxim, that those who cannot employ time must kill it."⁸

This book follows very loosely a format Wollstonecraft herself adopted in her first published work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in The More Important Duties of Life* (1787), that is, bringing together her reflections on a number of subjects under eponymous headings. Her first heading was "The Nursery," followed by "Moral Discipline"; the others included "Artificial Manners," "The Observance of Sunday", "Card-Playing", and the last was entitled "Public Places." Her thoughts are gathered here under specific headings, not only for the sake of clarity, but in order to highlight some of her lesser known views. This seemingly piecemeal approach facilitates a reconstruction of her philosophy of mind and history as well as her reflections on human nature, society, and Providence. It also allows for the tracing of continuities between the various objects of her reflections over an all too brief life.

Having spent much ink, as many other commentators have, on all that she censured, denigrated, and loathed, of which there was plenty, it is essential to consider all that she liked and loved. Wollstonecraft was a severe critic, a harsh reviewer, and unrestrained in her denunciations of individuals as well as institutions. It is all too easy to gain and give the impression that she

8. *Analytical Review*, Vol. 6 (1790), *Works*, Vol. 7, p. 224.

was an arch and bitter derider. She was not. She took pleasure in many things and was eager to share her joys. It is the aim of the opening chapter to highlight these.

Wollstonecraft thought of herself as a philosopher and a moralist: “As a philosopher, I read with indignation the plausible epithets which men use to soften their insults; and, as a moralist, I ask what is meant by such heterogeneous associations, as fair defects, amiable weaknesses, &c.?”⁹ Everything she wrote, whatever the genre, she wrote as a philosopher and moralist. She had much to say on a wide variety of topics. This book cannot do justice to all of her reflections. Nor can it be written from every point of view or disciplinary approach. As I came and now still come to Wollstonecraft primarily from political philosophy, her fictional works, which have received much valuable attention, while by no means ignored, are not treated here as they would have been had I been a literary scholar.¹⁰ I should also acknowledge from the start that I have endeavored to avoid “isms” as much as possible in this book, leaving readers to attribute any should they so wish. For my part, I find that labels often obscure more than they reveal or need to be qualified to the point of becoming meaningless. Moreover, the labels one might be tempted to apply to Wollstonecraft or her writings are likely to be anachronistic. Although she engaged with the works of others, she thought for herself and thought of herself as doing so. It is hoped that something of her personality as a whole and her understanding of the past and present, as well as her aspirations for the future, might emerge through what follows. Had she lived longer, we would likely have a more complete picture of the realistic utopia that she was gradually sketching out.

9. *VW*, p. 104.

10. Most significantly, Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*; Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984); and Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*.

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