Mary Wollstonecraft and the Tensions in Feminist Philosophy

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The history of the reception and interpretation of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a complex and fascinating one. It was praised by many of her radical contemporaries, including Tom Paine and Mary’s husband, the radical anarchist philosopher and social theorist, William Godwin. It was condemned, sometimes vitriolically, by other contemporaries, including, notoriously, Horace Walpole, who called Mary a ‘hyene in petticoats’ and refused to have her book in his library. The *Historical Magazine* declared, in 1799, that her work should be read ‘with disgust by any female who has any pretensions to delicacy; with detestation by everyone attached to the interests of religion and morality…’. It was not only men who condemned it. Many women disliked it intensely, including Hannah More, who felt justified in condemning it without even having read it.

The fate of the *Vindication* cannot be separated from views of Mary’s personal life, nor from the fate of radical political ideas in the wave of repression and political reaction that dominated English politics in the years after the 1790s. Mary’s name and her work were tarred with the brush of French-style liberty, free thought, free love, irreligion, the undermining of family life, and all those things that were anathema both to conservative political orientations and to 19th-century evangelicalism. Apart from the memoir published after her death by her husband William Godwin, obituaries were mostly ambivalent or condoning, and no biography was published until 1884, nearly 100 years after her death. One gets the impression that few people in the 19th century can actually have read the *Vindication*, and that Wollstonecraft’s reputation was an embarrassment to the bourgeois, evangelical and philanthropic modes in which much Victorian feminism was cast. Some contemporary judgements are hardly less damning. Lundberg and Farnham, in their book *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1959) wrote:

Mary Wollstonecraft was an extreme neurotic of a compulsive type. Out of her illness arose the ideology of feminism, which was to express the feelings of so many women in years to come. Unconsciously... Mary and the feminists... wanted to turn on men and injure them... Underneath her aggressive writings, Mary was a masochist... as indeed all the leading feminist theorists were in fact. By behaving as she did Mary indicated... that she was unconsciously seeking to deprive the male of his power, to castrate him.

In the Pelican *History of England*, the historian J. H. Plumb writes about what he calls the ‘self-conscious intellectual bohemianism’ which deliberately set out to live in defiance of accepted moral codes.

Men and women had lived in sin frequently enough in the 18th century, but they had felt no compulsion to justify their acts on the highest ethical principles. The intellectual bohemians, Godwin, Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft and their circle, sinned for the sake of revolt rather than for enjoyment and then justified themselves by the principles of liberal philosophy. Squalid as their lives were, they had important consequences for English literary tradition.

This is perhaps one of the most egregiously ignorant and prejudiced judgements on Wollstonecraft that I have come across.

Most 19th-century critics, then, and some 20th-century ones, seem scarcely to have read the *Vindication*, and thus failed to notice that not even on the most casual reading could one find in it an apology or justification for loose living or sexual libertinism. It was Wollstonecraft’s life and reputation which largely determined how she was perceived. Ironically, however, if Wollstonecraft was often perceived by earlier critics as a radical and libertine, contemporary perceptions of her, often by feminist writers, have been very different. One of the most interesting recent essays on Wollstonecraft is by Cora Kaplan. Kaplan’s critique concentrates on the text of the *Vindication*, and from its pages emerges a very different Wollstonecraft. Kaplan argues that a central theme of the book is a deep ambivalence about sexuality, even a violent antagonism to the sexual; an exaggeration of the role of the sensual in the lives of women which recapitulates that of Rousseau, and a fear of the disruptive power of female sensuality. In the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft turned against feeling and sensibility, and they are seen as reactionary and regressive. As Kaplan puts it:

Sexuality and pleasure are narcotic inducements to a life of lubricious slavery. Reason is the only human attribute appropriate to the revolutionary character, and women are impeded by their early and corrupt initiation into the sensual from using theirs.

Wollstonecraft’s programme for women, far from being that of ‘free love’ or sexual libertinism, is that of a strenuous
programme of renouncing the sensual; her ideal is that of a life in which Reason is triumphant, but at the cost of the death of female pleasure and sexuality.

Rather similarly, Diana Coole's discussion of the Vindication stresses the way in which the book seems at times to require of women an almost ascetic dedication to duty, and a rejection of passion or self-indulgence. And both Kaplan, Coole, and other commentators suggest that Wollstonecraft's feminism could really only apply to middle-class women; the Vindication is, in essence, a liberal or bourgeois feminist tract which, while indeed calling attention forcefully to many aspects of sexual injustice and inequality, failed to address the lives of working-class women or even to challenge in any fundamental way the norms of bourgeois marriage and family life. Coole suggests that Wollstonecraft basically shared much of Rousseau's idealised vision of the patriarchal bourgeois family, away from the corruption and 'false manners' of the city. And Kaplan writes that in Wollstonecraft's text, with its stress on the potential virtues of those in the 'middle' class and on the importance of Reason, idealised humanity appears as a rational, plain-speaking bourgeois man.

In one sense, I do not think that these judgements are wrong; they represent the 'Wollstonecraft' who appears in the pages of the Vindication far more adequately than those judgements which have seen Wollstonecraft as a libertine. But if many earlier critiques of Wollstonecraft failed to pay any attention to the text of the Vindication at all, I think that some contemporary discussion, in focussing so closely and sometimes exclusively on the text of the book, has failed fully to see the ways in which Wollstonecraft's work resists easy classification.

The Vindication has often been criticised for being rushed, hasty and repetitive. There is some substance in these criticisms; it was written in six weeks, in the heat of a political situation. But it is not just that the text itself sometimes appears rushed; it should, I think, be read as provisional. In other words the 'Wollstonecraft' of the Vindication does not adequately represent, all by itself, Mary Wollstonecraft's thinking about the situation of women and the response she thought that they should make. Virginia Woolf wrote of Wollstonecraft:

"Every day ... something was born in her that thrust aside her theories and forced her to model them afresh."

The Vindication needs understanding not only in the context of Wollstonecraft's life, but in the context of her other writings and the ways in which these wrestled with the dilemmas thrown up by 18th-century politics, both radical and reactionary, and by contemporary views on literature and philosophy and on the nature of femininity. These dilemmas were of course cast in an 18th-century form, but they are ones which, in altered shape, feminism still continues to encounter. Wollstonecraft never had an answer to any of these dilemmas that could satisfy her for long; and it is perhaps the restless and provisional quality of her work that often makes it speak most strongly to those who, nearly 200 years later, often encounter similar dilemmas.

Her struggle was formed around a number of features of 18th-century thought and politics. Central, of course, were the radical political ideas of her time. Mary herself became part of the circle of radical London intellectuals, including Tom Paine, Thomas Holcroft, her publisher Joseph Johnson and her husband William Godwin, who believed passionately in the cluster of political ideas which centred around the critique of autocratic government and hereditary privilege, belief in the natural right of individuals to self-determination, and belief in the perfectibility of human nature and institutions if only corruption and privilege could be swept away.

Mary was also heir to a steady stream of writing in the 18th century about the nature and situation of women. She had almost certainly read feminist writers such as Catherine Macaulay; but there were men too, such as some radical teachers in Dissenting Academies, who had written about the social oppression of women. As Barbara Taylor points out, in her history of Owenite socialist feminism, it was not too hard to see an analogy between a critique of aristocratic government and a critique of the despotic power of men in families. Wollstonecraft herself drew such analogies frequently; she also compared the idle and corrupt state of the aristocracy to the state of degradation into which she thought women had fallen. Not all of the radical circle to which she belonged were by any means fully committed to feminist analysis or goals, but lip service at least was paid to questions about the oppression of women.

The 18th century saw, in fact, a growing interest in questions about femininity and female consciousness. This was importantly related to changes in the social situation of women. The precise nature of changes in 18th-century family patterns remain a matter of historical dispute; but what is at least clear is that, increasingly, for middle-class women, the home was no longer also the workplace, and married women were not generally seen as independent economic actors or helpmates. The home of the nouveau-riche bourgeois was often becoming a display case for affluence, and his wife's role was being reduced to that of a decorative accessory in this display. The only route to security (of a sort) for a woman was a marriage in which she was wholly dependent, and for the woman who was not married, the prospects were bleak indeed: the often humiliating and penurious 'careers' of governess or ladies companion (both of which Wollstonecraft experienced), or a dependence on the charity of some male relative.

This total dependence of women on and within marriage was a central target of nearly all feminist critique in the period. But the 18th century also saw the beginnings of an idealisation of family life and the married state that remained influential throughout the 19th century. The 18th century moved away from the cynical and overtly sexually exploitative views of women which had tended to characterise the Restoration period; but moved away, also, from those religious views which had seen woman simply as Eve the temptress, the occasion of man's sin. Women became, as Janet Todd puts it, 'the fair sex', the Protestant virgin. And there are two related aspects of 18th-century thought about women which are central to understanding Wollstonecraft: the idea
that virtue is *gendered*, that it is *different* for women and for men, and that it is female 'sensibilities', women's particular psychological characteristics, which fit women for a specifically female type of virtue (but also disqualify them from that type thought appropriate to the male, and render them weaker and potentially easily corruptible). The overt disparagement of women displayed, for example, by Lord Chesterfield in his letters to his son, was displaced by the musings of writers such as Addison and Steele, in new journals such as the Tatler and the Spectator, on the virtues of the 'fair sex'; a sentimental vision of the gentle, feeling, but subordinate wife and mother.

But it is above all the philosophy and other writings of Rousseau which form a backdrop to Wollstonecraft's work; and central to this is Rousseau's account, in *Emile*, of female nature, his prescriptions for female upbringing and female virtue. *Emile* is Rousseau's account of the sort of upbringing that would help to form the model citizen and enable him to develop the qualities of autonomy and self-determination; and the book portrays, too, Rousseau's vision of the rural family and simplicity of life which alone would enable the citizen to remain uncorrupted by the evil manners of the city. Emile's virtues are to be those of self-sufficiency, hardness and independence of mind. Above all, he is to learn to make his own judgements based on his own experience, and to be beholden to no-one else for his opinions; Rousseau even suggests that Emile should not learn to read whilst still a boy.

But when we turn to the education of the girl Sophie, who is to be Emile's companion, it is a different story. Just as Emile is to be truly a man, so Sophie is to be truly a woman. 'But for her sex,' Rousseau writes, 'a woman is a man.'

Yet where sex is concerned man and woman are unlike; each is the complement of the other; the difficulty in comparing them lies in our inability to decide, in either case, what is a matter of sex, and what is not.11

Rousseau's own conclusions were that almost everything was a matter of sex; and he paints a broad picture of female psychology, female sensibility and female virtue which underly his prescriptions for Sophie's education. Resemblances and differences, he argues, must have an influence on the moral nature. The female is a female always, the male only a man from time to time, and the characteristics of woman will always inflect our conception of her virtue.

What then are her characteristics? Woman, Rousseau believes, has a power over men, the power of charming and captivating them and of inflaming their senses. Women 'so easily stir a man's senses and fan the ashes of a dying passion' that were they not to be carefully contained and controlled, 'the men, tyrannised over by the women, would at last become their victims, and would be dragged to their death without the least chance of escape'.12 It is in their beauty, their wit and their wiles that women exercise their influence over men; attempt equality with men, and they will simply lose that power - they will become inferior.

Women have their own skills, characteristic of the sex. Observe a woman, Rousseau says, and see how she exercises her skills of sympathy and sensibility, see how acute her observations of other people are, see how she knows how to charm and even get her own way by her wiles. She is not capable of abstract reasoning or of general principles; but her skills will complement those of men. Undermine these by the wrong education, and she will not become equal with men, she will simply become an inferior woman. Remove her from male control and conceive of her as independent, and she will lose those very qualities which make her estimable and desirable.

Woman not only possesses a different nature from man; she is also bound, by the constraints of her life, to different principles of virtue from those which apply to men. Above all, she has a responsibility to her husband, and to her children, to ensure that her reputation is above reproach (Rousseau, like many others, regarded doubt about the paternity of one's children as the ultimate indignity and shame for a man). Hence, he writes:

You must follow Nature's guidance if you would walk aright. The native characters of sex should be respected as nature's handiwork. You are always saying, 'Women have such and such faults, from which we are free.' You are misled by your vanity; what would be faults in you are virtues in them; and things would go worse if they were without these so-called faults. Take care that they do not degenerate into evil, but beware of destroying them.13

Thus, for women, unlike men:

Worth alone will not suffice, a woman must be thought worthy; nor beauty, she must be admired; nor virtue, she must be respected. A woman's honour does not depend on her conduct alone, but on her reputation...

'What will people think' is the grave of a man's virtue and the throne of a woman's.14

Women must therefore, above all, learn to be obedient, dutiful, modest and chaste; accustomed to pleasing men and submitting to their will. But Rousseau does not wish women *just* to be servile slaves of men, or dutiful drudges. He is wholly enamoured with a romantic vision of idyllic marriage based on idealised complementarity of the sexes. And he is afraid that women's sensibility and desire to please can easily be corrupted and turn into infidelity, coquetry and false refinement of manners. His prescriptions for female education are largely a response to these worries. Little girls, he writes, should be allowed to romp and play; 'Everything which cramps and confines Nature is in bad taste.'15 They should develop what Rousseau really sees as 'natural graces', unspoil by the artificialities, deceitful pleasures and corruption of fashionable city manners. But while they are developing this 'natural' grace and charm, they should also be closely confined and taught from an early age to please, to be docile and to obey, to submit to injustice without complaint. And, he writes, 'the genuine mother of a family is no woman of the world, she is almost as much of a recluse as the nun in her convent.'16 The charms of a (rural) family life are enough for her; she may, under certain circumstances, be shown the
corrupt pleasures of the city, but only so that she will come to despise them and that they will not have for her the fatal attraction of the totally unknown.

In the *Vindication*, it was perhaps above all the idea that virtue was gendered, that it should be different for women and men, that Wollstonecraft attacked. 'The first object of laudable ambition,' she writes, 'is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex.'

In the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft does not in fact always draw a simple opposition between a life of reason and one of feeling and pleasure. Rather, like Rousseau, she often contrasts 'natural' emotions of the heart, or simple or 'reasonable' pleasures, with those which are degraded or corrupt. But whereas Rousseau sees the dependence and confinement of women as a remedy for this corruption, Wollstonecraft sees these as its cause. And if at times in the *Vindication* she appears to recommend what Cora Kaplan calls 'a little death' — the death of female pleasure and sexuality, this is somewhat out of line with much of the rest of her work (as well as with her own struggle with the sexual and emotional aspect of her life, which is vividly portrayed in her letters).

Despite the strenuous assertion in the *Vindication* that virtue in a female should be the same as in the male, Wollstonecraft remained attracted to the idea that women did have special qualities, which, were not in themselves virtues, could lead to virtue. In 1787, whilst a governess in Ireland, she wrote a partly autobiographical novel, *Mary, A Fiction*. It is written in the style of 18th-century 'sentimental' fiction, with a repertoire of rhetorical devices which aim to convey pathos and to arouse emotion in the reader, and a central theme is that of 'sensibility', a capacity for exquisitely intense and refined feeling, and for compassion with the sufferings of others. Yet in the novel, Wollstonecraft is ambivalent about sensibility. Her heroine writes about it as follows:

"Sensibility is the most exquisite feeling of which the human soul is capable; when it pervades us, we feel happy; and could it last unmixed, we might form some conjecture of the bliss of those paradisiacal days, when the obedient passions were under the domination of reason, and the impulses of the heart did not need correction. Soothed by tenderness, the soul is disposed to be virtuous... Sensibility is indeed the foundation of all our happiness; but these raptures are unknown to the depraved sensualist, who is only moved by what strikes his gross senses."

Here, again, Wollstonecraft is drawing a distinction between true sensibility, which leads to virtue, and depraved sensualism. 'The passions are seldom properly managed,' she writes; 'they are either so languid as not to serve as a spur, or else so violent as to overbalance all bounds.'

Wollstonecraft wrestled throughout her work with the problem of whether and how women could achieve sensual and emotional happiness in a way that was compatible with their independence and recognition as rational beings, and with the problem of how they could express and use qualities of feeling and sensibility, which she often implicitly sees as particularly theirs, without becoming mere coquettes or creatures of sensual impulse alone. Her heroine, in *Mary*, cries out:

"Every cause in nature produces an effect; and am I an exception to the general rule? have I desires implanted in me only to make me miserable? will they never be gratified? shall I never be happy? My feelings do not accord with the notion of solitary happiness. In a state..."
of bliss, it will be the society of beings we can love ... that will constitute great part of our happiness. 20

In Mary, there is no resolution of this dilemma. 'I cannot live without loving,' the heroine says, 'but love leads to madness'; 21 and the novel ends with a recommendation of resigna-
tion, fortitude and the suggestion that death would be a de-
sired end. In common with other critics of her time, Mary
often sees the sentimental novel itself as helping to trap
women into illusive reveries of romance. In Mary, the heroine
'read all the sentimental novels, dwelt on the love scenes, and
had she thought while she read, her mind would have been
contaminated'. In the Vindication, Mary is highly critical of
novel-reading. In her unfinished novel, Maria, or the Wrongs
of Woman, it is the reading of Rousseau's sentimental (and
best-selling) novel Julie which enlivens the captivity of the
heroine and gives her hope, yet also serves to trap her further
back in inertia and illusion.

In her own life, Mary seems to have achieved some meas-
ure of reconciliation between the need for love and happiness
and the need to be independent in her relationship with Wil-
liam Godwin. In her fiction, she may adhere at times to the
model of the chaste heroine, common in the 18th-century sen-
timental novel, and in the Vindication, she appears at times to
see sexuality as a dangerous and diversionary force, to be
overcome as quickly as possible by the power of reason. The
heroine in Mary, married young against her will to a husband
from whom she then lives apart, displays nothing but fear and
disgust at the idea of sexual relations with her husband. But
again, despite these strands in Wollstonecraft's work, the
picture of relationships between women and men which
emerges in her life and work is not one which excludes or
marginalises sexuality. Sexuality is a problem for women
because it is so often seen to define their very being, and
because it is so often associated simply with pleasing men and
with the denial of female integrity or independence. Yet Mary
was not really happy with any idea of a sexless, companio-
nate marriage (like that of John Stuart Mill); there is certainly
evidence from her letters that in her own life sexual desire and
satisfaction were both known and welcomed, and there is not
a hint in the letters of anything like Mill's relegation of
sexuality to a 'lower' or merely 'animal' pleasure. The prob-
lem Mary wrestled with and never found a solution to was
how to conceptualise and to satisfy female desire and pleasure
in a world in which women were indeed, to use her own
phrase, often regarded merely as 'insignificant objects of
desire', and in which sexual pleasure could often only be had
at the expense of the sacrifice of independence or reputation.

Wollstonecraft's dilemmas were of course cast in 18th-
century form. Her thoughts on the situation of women were
expressed in the language of 18th-century political theories
which stressed Reason and Autonomy. Her writings were
shaped and coloured not only by her perceptions of the op-
pression of women, but also by the sentimentalisation and
idealisation of women, and some of Mary's own writings
were deeply influenced by the style and rhetoric of 18th-
century sentimental fiction. Yet the dilemmas she encoun-
tered continue to be important in feminist thinking and writ-
ing, albeit in a changed shape.

Mary, as I have said, developed a stringent and polemical
critique of female socialisation. Women, she argued, are
taught merely to please, to be flattered and to obey. This both
undermines their capacity for leading useful or rational lives
and channels their desires and pleasures into vain and trivial
objects and modes such as fashion and fiction. She often
pictures women as sunk into a state of degradation for which
there is nothing good to be said.

A similar picture of women's socialisation has been quite
common in feminist writing. An influential book by Elena
Belotti, for example, written in 1976, entitled Little Girls,
draws a depressing picture of female socialisation which is
strikingly similar to that of Wollstonecraft. 22 Belotti sees the
'natural' lively and active 'self' of the little girl as crushed by
the overwhelming weight of a training in dependence, passiv-
ity and triviality. And she, like Wollstonecraft, sees women
as trapped in passive and illusive dreams by such things as
romantic fiction, and as constrained in their very selves by the
importance laid on female appearance.

An even more striking picture of the 'degradation' to
which women have sunk is offered by Mary Daly. In Daly's
work, almost everything that women learn to desire is 'wrong'
in the sense that it undermines female creativity and auton-
omy, and almost every facet of female socialisation helps to
channel female desire into these 'wrong objects'. Women
often appear in her work simply as passively shaped or molded
by the malign forces which conspire to trap them, and their
supposed passivity is emphasised by some of the language
Daly uses to describe 'unregenerate' women; words such as
'puppet' or even 'fembot'. 23

Yet other feminist critics have seen something skewed or
distorted about this sort of picture of women's lives and of
female desire. What sense can we make, for one thing, of the
idea of a 'natural' or 'regenerate' female self if this is seen as
something wholly distinct from the real historical lives and
desires of women? Doesn't the picture of women as simply
passive victims of a malign and misogynistic culture misrep-
resent the relationship women have to cultural forms such as
fashion or fiction? Is it not the case that women have, despite
their frequent oppression and enforced dependence, devel-
oped particular strengths and capacities and priorities which
might be built on rather than just rejected?

A central problem in feminist critique has been that of how
to conceptualise the oppression of women in ways that do in-
deed recognise how that oppression may be internalised and
may limit or constrain women's aspirations for themselves,
whilst at the same time not lapsing into either a puritanical
critique of all female desire, or a derogatory view of women's
lives which sees them as having little that is of value in them.
At times, especially in the Vindication, Wollstonecraft can
seem to lapse into both. Yet there are other strands in her work
which move in a different direction.

The picture of the 'regenerate' woman which dominates the
Vindication stresses above all the importance of independ-
ence. Rousseau argued that if women were independent they would lose their power over men. That, writes Wollstonecraft, is her very point. 'I do not wish them to have power over men, but over themselves.' But the 'independence' of the *Vindication* often seems to be a matter of a lone and strenuous mental struggle to cultivate Reason and fortitude and reject desire. In Wollstonecraft's fiction, however, embryonically and tentatively, other themes emerge. Central to both her novels was the theme of female friendship. In *Mary: A Fiction*, the friendship between the heroine and another woman ends in death and disillusionment. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, how-

ever, the relationship between women is portrayed rather differently. The heroine of the novel, Maria, has been incarcerated in an asylum by her husband, and a central theme of the novel is the relationship between Maria and her jailor Jemima. Jemima has led a life of brutal poverty, squalor and oppression.

An insulated being ... she loved not her fellow creatures, because she had never been loved.... Thus degraded, was she let loose on the world, and virtue, never nurtured by affection, assumed the stern aspect of selfish independence.

Jemima's energy has all been devoted to survival; her role in the novel is often to temper the feverish excesses of sensibility to which Maria is prone. Yet 'independence', in conditions of brutality and squalor, can only be achieved at the price of the death of human love and affections. And if Jemima's reason tempers Maria's sensibility, it is Maria's female qualities of compassion, empathy and tenderness which allow Jemima for the first time to experience joy in human intercourse and pleasure in a relationship with another human being.

Wollstonecraft's work, then, taken as a whole, does not simply imprison feminist thinking in a puritanical denial of female pleasure, nor does it simply consign ideas of female virtues and strength to the flames. It wrestles, rather, often in uncomfortable and problematic ways, with the problem of how women can achieve sexual and emotional happiness in ways that do not require them to sacrifice their independence or integrity; and with the problem of how female 'sensibility' can be detached from its destructive forms whilst still continuing to inform human relationships.

The other main strand of contemporary critique of Wollstonecraft is that which sees her, despite her impassioned plea for the equality and independence of women, as speaking only to middle-class women, and recommending only a form of 'equality' which accepts uncritically both class divisions, the institution of marriage and norms of rationality which are closely related to bourgeois ideals of masculinity.

Again, there are aspects of the *Vindication* which give substance to these criticisms. In it, Wollstonecraft sees the urgency of her critique of femininity as lying largely in the fact that it undermines the seriousness with which women undertake the task of motherhood. She does not question the responsibility of women for motherhood, nor, apparently, the institution of marriage; and she makes few suggestions as to what else might be needed to change the situation of women other than strenuous efforts at achieving a mental independence.

Yet this sort of judgement on Wollstonecraft's work as a whole is inadequate. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, for example, Maria is led, by her devastating experience of marriage, to reflect on its nature, and, whilst claiming that, with proper restrictions and safeguards for women, she would revere the institution, she declares that, as presently constituted, it simply leads to immorality. Relationships between men and women should be based on fidelity, and mutual affection, but not on the arbitrary power and caprice of the man. The view of marriage in *The Wrongs of Woman* begins to shade into that characteristic of many Owenite socialist feminists, both men and women, who commonly maintained that marriage was a central site of female oppression and that relationships between women and men should be voluntary and based on love, and on a simple and easily retractable agreement to live together.

Nor was Wollstonecraft unaware, of course, of the sufferings of poor women; she may have sometimes assumed that the middle-class women would have servants, but, as in her own life, this was often not much more than a pragmatic response to necessity, and she was well aware of the destitution and poverty which afflicted many women. Jemima, in *The Wrongs of Woman*, was one of her vehicles for vividly depicting these.

Wollstonecraft's work, whilst remaining in many ways within a framework bounded by bourgeois liberal political ideas and by conceptions of femininity and women's nature which were characteristic of her time, nevertheless constantly tends to undermine or run up against the limits of these. She lacked any profound or adequate analysis of the social and economic situation of women; yet hers was not a narrow or blinkered view which conceived of emancipation only for a bourgeois female elite. Many of her aspirations were broad and radical, and closer to Owenite socialist feminism than to bourgeois reformism; the tensions and uncertainties in her work often arise from what Barbara Taylor has called the 'dialogue between reformist premises and utopian aspirations' which characterised much of what she wrote. She is very critical of the oppression of women in marriage, yet committed also to an ideal of emotional fulfilment in a sexual relationship, and her writings experiment with views of this relationship, none of which finally satisfy her. She is bitterly critical of male behaviour, and of the power which enables men to tyrannise over women, yet also, in the *Vindication*, describes the virtues to which women should aspire as 'manly', and wishes that women could become more 'masculine'. It is tensions and problems such as these which have characterised a great deal of feminist philosophy. Feminist perspectives both use and commonly at the same time challenge those moral and political perspectives which form the background to their birth. Mary Wollstonecraft was neither simply 'reformist' nor 'radical', she was both, and it is the tension between these which makes her work still so poignant, readable and relevant.
Notes
1. Pelican, 1975 (referred to as The Vindication throughout).
2. Godwin's memoir, and his motives for writing it, have been the subject of considerable discussion. The memoir stressed Mary's personal life rather than the achievements of her writing, and it is arguable that Godwin bears some responsibility for the ways in which Mary's work has often been denigrated, or eclipsed by discussion of such things as her liaison with Imlay. See, for example, Alison Ravetz, 'The Trivialisation of Mary Wollstonecraft: A Personal and Professional Career Re-Vindicated', Women's Studies International Forum, Vol. 6, No. 5, 1983.
17. Mary Wollstonecraft, op. cit., p. 82.
18. Mary Wollstonecraft, op. cit., p. 103.
20. Mary Wollstonecraft, ibid., p. 40.
22. Elena Belotti, Little Girls.