

"WICKS OF DESIRE":
INTERSECTIONS OF SEXUALITY, LANGUAGE,
AND POLITICS
IN THE
WORKS OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

WILLOW LEANNE RECTOR

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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THE WORKS OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT**

BY

WILLOW LEANNE RECTOR

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree
of
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing of Gilbert Imlay's perplexity about the intensity of Mary Wollstonecraft's character, Virginia Woolf remarks that "tickling minnows he had hooked a dolphin, and the creature rushed him through the waters till he was dizzy."¹ Perhaps I am now able to share in his sensation. I have spent the past four years befriending a quixotic woman who, in the flash of an eye, could frustrate, engage, inspire, and challenge me in ways that I had never thought possible. The grace with which she lived through one of the most tumultuous times in history provided me not only with a model of how to live, but a paradigm of how to grow. Indeed, by studying her aesthetic and intellectual evolution, I have learned a lot about who I am, and how I write. There is no greater gift.

I would also like to extend my gratitude and appreciation to the many people who contributed to the development of this thesis by providing practical advice, scholarly feedback, emotional support, financial subsidies, encouragement, and all the coffee I could ever think of drinking. Many thanks to my supervisor, Pam Perkins, without whose encouragement I would have never engaged with Wollstonecraft. I would also like to express my appreciation to Dennis Cooley for his unwavering flexibility and patience. My gratitude to Keith Fulton stems from a conversation in February of 1996, without which this dissertation would have remained unactualized. From Keith, I have learned to love poetry and to treasure the ways it colors and contours my life.

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¹ Woolf, Virginia. “Four Figures.” *The Second Common Reader*. Ed. Andrew McNeillie. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986. 160.

Introduction

During the past three decades, critical and theoretical discourses concerning “women’s ways of knowing” and “women’s writing” have challenged literary scholarship with ideas like Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, Toril Moi’s *Sexual/ Textual Politics*, and more recent work in gender, subjectivity, and sexual identity. I would like to engage with these streams of conversation by exploring the ways in which a personal and political awareness of sexual identity and orientation influences women’s textual practice in an influential historical and cultural epoch. In her vision of what will transpire “When We Dead Awaken,” Adrienne Rich asserts that “to be a female human trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way *is* in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination” (*Lies* 43). This realization is not unique to Rich alone. Given that similar sentiments have been expressed by many of her political and literary foremothers, I would like to investigate how this contemporary statement of a fundamental conflict in feminist poetics “visits” with earlier conceptions of the issue enunciated by Wollstonecraft¹. It is my assertion that women’s theoretical and imaginative writing eludes conventional definitions of theory and literature. Political understandings of the body, sexuality, and gender blur the distinctions between what is typically conceived of as “the imaginative,” or “art,” and theory. Arguments linking the body and women’s art have been thoroughly explored by Cixous and Irigaray in French literary theory. With these studies in mind, I will examine the degree to which

¹ “The metaphor of visiting points to another feature of feminist readings of women’s writing, namely, the tendency to construe the text not as an object, but as the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author – the ‘voice’ of another woman.” Schweickart 538.

Wollstonecraft, writing from within the English tradition, also “[wrote] on the body,” and whose linguistic and literary relationships flowed between the lines of her texts, carving channels of desire.

This investigation will be moderated and facilitated by a large body of criticism from within a feminist, post-colonial perspective. When introducing her anthology of essays addressing the racist exclusion of women of color from theoretical discourse, Himani Bannerji argues that “writing itself, as a practice, is located at the intersection of subject and history” (Bannerji xvii). Consequently, it is important to examine how “subjectivity and agency link with the institutions and structures within which they arise and subsist” (xviii). She contends that, frequently, the theoretical writing of the disenfranchised “begins with...a ‘rift’ or a ‘fissure’ from a disjunction between what we know ourselves to be,” and how such voices are defined by their social and intellectual environments (xviii-xix). In order to prevent incarceration within essentializing, constrictive concepts of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, writers must first ground their work in “an experiencing and knowing historical self,” and then “move to a critique of the ideologically, dominant version of history and knowledge” (xix). In this way, “social forms of being and social relations of ruling known as ‘race,’ gender, and class are deeply implicated in creating forms of knowing” (xix).

Wollstonecraft was also keenly aware that cultural critique and revolution only becomes possible when we “begin from our actual lives” (xix). Like Bannerji, she understood that the acquisition of public and political representation for women demands

a “*re*-presentation of our realities” in a way which validates “the conscious unraveling and reworking of...the relations of domination and resistance” (xix-xx). In the late eighteenth century, however, there was no readily available literary or political discourse capable of signifying “the theorized experience of the most oppressed” (xix).

Consequently, from the publication of her first novel in 1788 to her death a mere ten years later, Wollstonecraft revolutionized the most popular and influential genres of her day to insure the emancipation of women’s minds, bodies, and pens.

Wollstonecraft began her career as a feminist, artist, and activist by exploring the potential of “Storytelling for Social Change.” As Sherene Razack argues, “in the context of social change, storytelling refers to an opposition to established knowledge, to the existence of the world that is not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms” (Razack 100). Within this paradigm, the writer’s “most basic task” is to “call into question” unreflectively accepted bodies of knowledge by illuminating women’s conflicted positions as “both the teller and the listener” (118). This will require the relocation of the rich storehouse of women’s varied experiences “out of the realm of abstraction and into political action” (118). In this way, radical reassessment of the conventions of storytelling is intimately connected with the recognition and validation of women’s multiple subjectivities.

In Chapter One, I explore the various ways in which Wollstonecraft “Step[s] Outside of the Frame” of conventional sentimental narrative in an attempt to remold linguistic and cultural signifiers into a viable lesbian presence. Fresh from her experience

of working for Lady Kingsborough, Wollstonecraft had witnessed, first hand, the disastrous effects of the confinement of young women's literary education to texts that tightened the circle of sexual oppression by reiterating patriarchal ideals. Consequently, her first novel records her attempt to expand the conventions of sentimental fiction to include the recognition and validation of women's multiple subjectivities and sexualities. From this perspective, *Mary, A Fiction* delineates the correlation between the emancipation of the discursive category 'woman,' and the reclamation of the sexual/political category of 'lesbian.'

This early attempt ultimately proves unsuccessful, however, as Wollstonecraft discovers that the very *language* of literary discourse is unsuited to her aims. Accordingly, she redirected the focus of her attention to political discourse, and produced the most influential book of her career to that date: *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In the hope that the liberal humanism fueling the French Revolution would be hot enough to "Forge Feminist Tools" of analysis, Wollstonecraft began to theorize about the co-dependent relationship between language, social structure, and cultural ideology. What she discovered, as the chaff of Enlightenment philosophy burned under her gaze, was that the discourse designated for the "politicized, intellectual critique of unreason" was predicated on the systemic oppression of women (Kelly 144). Thus, her strategy to relocate the body politic within the parameters of liberal humanist discourse proved to be limited.

This sense of limitation did not ultimately discourage Wollstonecraft, as she spent the last three years of her life revolutionizing her aesthetic and political practices. Though she revisits the genre of sentimental fiction and issues surrounding lesbian subjectivity, the outcome of *The Wrongs of Woman* is radically different from that of *Mary*. Rather than focussing her creative energies on external artistic or political structures, Wollstonecraft directed her gaze inwards. What resulted was a complete re-definition of Wollstonecraft as an artist and as a sexual agent. It is in this text that she ultimately succeeds in reconfiguring philosophical notions of female subjectivity in an aesthetic form, while simultaneously validating an emancipatory vision of female sexuality.

Even after intensive study, Wollstonecraft's complex aesthetic and ideological maturation can be difficult to map. In order to clarify the contours of her developmental process, the form of my investigation will follow the pattern elucidated by Charlotte Bunch, who pioneered academic course work in feminist theory in 1973. In her book entitled *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action*, Bunch recognizes that "theory doesn't necessarily progress in a linear fashion" (Bunch 243). Consequently, she develops an alternative theoretical model that incorporates traditional elements of description and analysis with revolutionary notions of vision and strategy. This model is particularly fruitful when discussing Wollstonecraft. With varying degrees of success, each of Wollstonecraft's texts assume revolutionary positions that inherently encode notions of critical investigation with the desire to effect aesthetic and political change.

The first arm of Bunch's theoretical model is description. She defines the process of description as "describing what exists" by becoming aware of the "choices we make about interpreting and naming reality" (244). She contends that these decisions, ultimately "provide the basis for the rest of [one's] theory" of social change (244). This stage is crucial because alerting the consciousness of a society to endemic oppression involves "changing people's perceptions of the world through new descriptions" of that world (244). As my analysis of the novel will suggest, this is largely what Wollstonecraft accomplishes in *Mary*. While she does not sculpt a place for a fully actualized lesbian subjectivity, she does highlight the discursive and political gap that prevents the inclusion of lesbian sexuality in eighteenth century discourses of desire.

Exposing gaps in dominant social and political ideologies is an important precursor to the second stage of Bunch's paradigm: analysis. She contends that analysis requires the determination of the origins of an oppressive reality followed by a dissemination of "the reasons for its perpetuation" (244). This is clearly Wollstonecraft's aim when writing *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The structure of the text itself is designed to examine the roots of the oppression of women, while exposing the contemporary social, political, and linguistic factors that perpetuate it. As I will argue, however, merely dissecting the body politic with liberal humanism does not free female sexuality from the tyrannical grasp of patriarchal oppression.

Indeed, the attainment of such liberty requires both revision and strategy. In the fragments of her final novel, we see the strategic fulfillment of the vision Wollstonecraft

conjured into being while describing her *Short Residence* in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. Bunch contends that theoretical strategy requires moving beyond hypothesis into “questions of changing reality” (245). In order to accomplish this goal, she argues that we must “draw out the consequences of our theory and suggest general directions for change” (245). As Wollstonecraft discovered while writing the *Wrongs of Woman*, it is at this moment that “the interaction between developing theory and actively experimenting with it becomes most clear” (245-6). By detonating the heterosexist, patriarchal privilege at the heart of sentimental fiction, Wollstonecraft clears discursive and aesthetic space for the development of a new romance, one that is capable of integrating and validating the diversity of female sexuality, agency, and narrative authority.

Thus, by employing and expanding conventional models of theoretical discourse, Wollstonecraft envisions and actualizes a new relationship between the body politic and the female body. In doing so, she “cut[s] away an old force that held her/ rooted to an old ground,” and “survives to speak a new language.²”

² Rich, Adrienne. “Transcendental Etude.” *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993. 89.

“Stepping Outside of the Frame”:
Wollstonecraft’s Struggle Towards Emancipation
and
The Reclamation of Same-Sex Desire in *Mary, A Fiction*

*“It appears to me that every creature has some notion – or rather relish,
of the sublime.”*

(Mary 31)

“The paradise that they ramble in must be of their own creating.”

(Mary 5)

Since the rise of individualism, men have been exhorted to “be themselves,” to be “natural,” to develop a vision of the world that is uniquely their own. However, as a woman and as a lesbian, the simple, homey wisdom of being oneself, of claiming an identity becomes troubling. What does it mean to “be” a woman, to “be” a lesbian when the culturally available modes of categorization and creation are both phallogentric and heterocentric? Are women who love women confined to the status of the double negative – the one who is *not* a man and who is *not* straight? Given the grammatical prohibitions concerning consecutive negations, how do we speak and write ourselves into being? Is it possible to adapt linguistic and cultural signifiers to create a lesbian presence, rather than a gap, a whisper, a lesbian shaped hole in the universe (Rushdie 550)?

While these are issues that weigh upon the minds of several contemporary theorists, Wollstonecraft was also concerned with creating ontological, discursive, and sexual space for women. Anyone who is familiar with the *Rights of Woman* will also be aware of Wollstonecraft's views on the damage to women's intellects inflicted by continuous exposure to sentimental novels. What is interesting about her strenuous and consistent objection to the exposure of women to sentimental fiction is that it points to her cognizance of the power of language and fiction to shape social reality. The values and issues used to construct fictional worlds often slide into historical "reality," and vice versa. Therefore, the fact that conventionally educated women were consistently exposed to material that reiterated patriarchal ideals only served to cement the conditions of their oppression. Consequently, for Wollstonecraft, a central and crucial mode of emancipation was the creation of a fictional world that not only exposed the barbarities of patriarchal rule, but also offered means of transition, transformation, and transportation out of the vortex of an entrenched system of oppression.

The desire for freedom is at once unconquerable, unthinkable, and ultimately alluring. Perhaps it is because Wollstonecraft struggled towards it all of her life that she knew its terrain so well. What she explores in *Mary* is the correlation between the emancipation of the discursive category "woman," and the reclamation of the category "lesbian." In order to follow her through this complex journey, it is necessary to take account of her theoretical and ideological milieu, as well as of our own. Lillian Faderman's historical assessment of eighteenth-century conceptions of romantic friendship and lesbianism can be partnered with Judith Butler's, Claudia Johnson's, and

Ashley Tauchert's deconstructionist perspectives on lesbian identity. By examining the text from multifocal viewpoints, I hope to find that the dissolution of patriarchal definition of gender is not symptomatic of silence and absence, but is a path to a radical lesbian presence.

While Janet Todd's examination of the dynamics of "Political Friendship" in Wollstonecraft's novels ultimately disappoints because of her homophobic pathologizing of lesbian desire, she makes one important observation: "the heroine of *Mary: A Fiction* will be the subject, not the object of the action; agent and lover, not victim and beloved" (Todd 193). Despite Todd's persistent misreading of Mary's "sexual dread," she draws attention to the importance of the narratological, sexual, and political emancipation of women to the structure of the novel as a whole. Indeed, *Mary* opens with the construction of the genealogy of its heroine using two widely recognized signifiers of oppression: the arranged marriage and the (mis)educated woman. While the first sentence of the novel places Mary firmly in the position of grammatical authority, the focus of the discourse and the reader's attention rapidly swerve onto the caricaturization of Eliza. Although Eliza arguably does not exercise enough agency or autonomy to render her a fully developed character, her caricature is crucial to the development of the novel, as it assists in creating a backdrop of oppression against which Mary will struggle to extricate herself.

While Todd attempts to defend Eliza on the grounds that her vacuity and vanity are artificially heightened by "flauntingly partisan" third-person narration, her complicity with and dependence on her own victimization doom her to failure from the start. While

the narrator conveys a certain amount of sarcasm when describing Eliza's conventional (mis)education, she explodes into ridicule when describing her wedding. At the behest of her father, Eliza "readily...promised to love, honor, and obey, (*a vicious fool*), as in duty bound" (*Mary* 7). What is interesting about this narrative outburst is that it is grammatically ambiguous. The phrase, "vicious fool," can be read as a parenthetical modifier of the subject, Eliza, provoked by her renunciation of her autonomy. On the other hand, it can also be interpreted as the object of a succession of matrimonial verbs. Whether the narrator is prematurely convicting Edward for acts of intolerance and tyranny that he commits later in the novel, or whether she is criticizing Eliza for her embrace of legalized slavery, one thing is clear: complicity with patriarchal institutions is both heinous and dangerously inane.

With such an auspicious description of their wedding vows, it is hardly surprising that Eliza and Edward's household becomes a repository of oppression and legalized abuse. After his legal, social, and sexual rights over his wife are secured, Edward flaunts his sexual autonomy by leaving Eliza's "sickly, die away languor" in order to bask in the "ruddy glow" of his "pretty tenants" (7). As Lillian Faderman notes in her groundbreaking study entitled *Surpassing the Love of Men*, marriage for a middle class woman "generally meant to take a master," whose intellectual, emotional, and sexual freedom was directly proportionate to the level of her oppression (Faderman 97). This may help to explain the fact that, when exposed to the brunt of Edward's patriarchal power, Eliza's "voice [becomes] but the shadow of a sound" and her sense of identity dissolves into "mere nothing" (*Mary* 7).

Todd contends that the resounding hollowness within Eliza points towards “the hunger of a sexual woman in a world where overt sexuality is male and brutal, where female desire must be covert and displaced” (Todd 194). In a society where gustatory gluttony is equated with permissive promiscuity, Eliza “can indulge neither in culinary, nor in adulterous pleasures” (194). Thus, the only socially acceptable vent for her thwarted sexuality lies in her addiction to sentimental novels. While the novels that Eliza devours are not discussed in detail, the narrator’s references to their “delicate struggles” and “pretty turns of thought” indicate that she is seduced by a very conventional, patriarchal, heterosexual view of desire (*Mary* 8). Such portrayals of women not participating actively in the discourse of desire, but passively waiting for sexual deliverance by “heart-rending accidents” of Fate, or a lover’s ingenuity, captivate Eliza precisely because they echo her belief system and validate the major decisions of her life (8).

Claudia Johnson interprets this constant ridicule of Eliza’s reading material as indicative of Wollstonecraft’s desire to dissociate herself from the prone female bodies that populate and consume sentimental fiction (Johnson 51). However, it is also important to consider the political and aesthetic strategies behind her condemnation of women’s complicity with the very ideologies that oppress them. Eliza’s constant attempts to transfer the passive-aggressive power dynamics enshrined in sentimental fiction into her marriage repeatedly fail. After examining the narrator’s description of Eliza’s daily life, it becomes clear that she attempts to fashion herself after the role of sentimental heroine.

Ultimately, however, she is forced to realize that there is no one to play Aeneas to her Dido, when she becomes cognizant of the disparity between the heavily propagandized, fulfilling endings in her novels, and the despair and loneliness of her own existence. It is at this point that she begins to question why her husband does “not stay at home, . . . love her, sit by her side, squeeze her hand, and look unutterable things” (9). What she fails to realize is that she is looking to the wrong script for an analysis of Edward’s actions, as the sentimental conventions of adoration, pursuit, and devotion are alien to his understanding of his reality. The heroic figure that will attempt to scale the bastion of patriarchal oppression to secure freedom and liberate desire is not her husband, but her daughter.

Like Wollstonecraft herself, Mary learns early in life that inflections in the language of heterosexual desire are the product of a vocabulary of violence. The narrator records that, as Eliza becomes physically weaker, Edward becomes more prone to outbursts of violence. In these scenes, Eliza’s fictionalized, sentimentalized dream lover mutates into a temperamental, abusive, terrifying reality¹. During these harrowing scenes, Mary repeatedly tries to protect her mother by distracting her father and, when pushed aside, “watch[es] at [her mother’s] door, until the storm is over” (12). Rather than recognizing Mary as the embodiment of her sentimental hero, Eliza once again demonstrates her complicity with patriarchal authority by transferring her love and allegiance to her absent son, the heir of her husband’s money and power. In addition,

¹ Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, 12.

Eliza's fear of her daughter's budding sexual power compels her to sell Mary out whenever and wherever possible. When Mary once confided "her little secrets to her mother, they were laughed at" and ridiculed (12). Perhaps more significantly, Eliza's ambition to move to the assertive side of the continuum of heterosexual desire, and "figure away into the gay world" prompted her to sabotage even the most rudimentary education for Mary. In this way, she successfully prevented "a fine tall girl [from being] brought forward into notice as her daughter" (10).

Eliza's subscription to patriarchal ideals of desire, sexuality, and value persist until the end of her life. After her allegiance with her son is ruptured by his sudden death, Eliza's "decline was so imperceptible" that all were caught unaware of her "approaching dissolution" (19). As Eliza drifts towards the world of the phantom,² Mary's identity begins to solidify and become visible. Her personal value begins to accrue when her brother dies and she becomes "an heiress" (18). Her sudden acquisition of economic value prompts all proponents of patriarchal ideology, including her mother, "to think her of consequence" and to call her by name (18). In fact, Eliza's cessation of the appellation "the child" bears close examination. At first glance, it is tempting to perceive it as a positive development, as it indicates a level of status and importance. However, Judith Butler's argument that "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes," suggests that Mary's shift from a general, genderless category to one that is sexually specific may not be entirely positive (Butler 13). By cutting her off from the

² Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, 4.

freedom inherent in the sexually ambiguous category of “child,” Eliza subtly recognizes Mary’s newfound economic and social power, and tries to circumscribe it by invoking a distinctly feminine label. While “the child” had the freedom to observe the dynamics of patriarchal power and heterosexual desire from a detached, objective stance, “Mary,” as a daughter, as an unmarried woman, is suddenly thrust into the midst of a battle for her autonomy, her desire, and her life.

It is perhaps entirely predictable that arrangements for Mary’s nuptials are made in the paragraph following her naming. The prostitution of Mary’s sexuality in order to settle a property dispute speaks to the radical commodification of women’s bodies in eighteenth century European culture. As the disparity between Eliza’s treatment of her son and daughter suggests, “by the eighteenth century, men and women had long been considered different species” (Faderman 86). This radical segregation along gender lines is chillingly reflected by the “defloration mania” that swept through all levels of eighteenth century English and French society. While the virginites of poor or working class women were typically used to garner higher prices on the prostitution market, the chastities of middle and upper class women were appropriated by their fathers and brothers to guarantee a higher price on the marriage market. This radical equation between chastity and chattel generated a double-edged set of sexual mores. As Faderman observes, “a married woman proved her love and duty to her husband by allowing him to satisfy his appetite on her,” but any woman who revealed *herself* to be a sexual being would imperil “her total human value” (94). Thus, the enormity of the risk attached to heterosexual activity for women engendered a predatory dynamic that stunted the growth

of male/ female relations, and formally ensconced the sexes on opposite sides of a deadly trench warfare.

While in other literature of the period, women who were hunted for their virginity become faceless, nameless objects of prey in the eyes of their pursuers³, Wollstonecraft reverses the trend by disembodying Mary's future husband. Mary's husband, Charles, is only directly named once in the entire text⁴. This naming takes place before the marriage ceremony, and before he assumes legal and sexual jurisdiction over her. After the marriage is conducted, his complicity with the "regulatory regime" of the patriarchy is conveyed by his categorical shift to the generic role of the "husband."

Although Charles' role as the arbitrator of Mary's value within the confines of patriarchal culture is clarified by their marriage, Eliza's "childish eagerness" to raffle her daughter off to the neighbor is a bit more puzzling (*Mary* 19). While Todd suggests that Mary's unquestioning compliance with her mother's dying wish represents the exertion of Eliza's "power over her daughter's entire life," a more historically persuasive reading involves viewing the wedding scene, the apology, and Eliza's death as a contiguous whole (Todd 199). Rather than interpreting these episodes as penultimate examples of Mary's "benevolence" towards her mother and subservience towards her father, it may be possible to place her in an active and autonomous position. As Faderman notes, "in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when women had little hope of economic independence, marriage was actually the only way a girl could pass from the tyrannical

³ De Laclous, *Les liasons dangereuses*.

⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, 19.

control of her family into adulthood” (Faderman 101). While I would hesitate to say that marriage was “the only way” for women to achieve some level of social recognition and value, Faderman’s point may help to shed a different light on Eliza’s enthusiasm. Indeed, once married, an upper class woman “was, in effect, free to go her own way for the first time in her life” (101). Recognizing that her daughter is now an “heiress,” perhaps Eliza wishes to attempt to set her child free from the tyranny of her father, and thereby make amends for the past years of neglect and abuse.

This reading is consonant with the apology that immediately follows the marriage ceremony. Despite Todd’s belittling of the importance of this final encounter between mother and daughter on the grounds that it simply “reaffirms” Mary’s narcissistic desire to appear as a “benevolent,” forgiving character, it may be more fruitful to take a broader view of the scene’s significance (Todd 199). Wollstonecraft places the rhetorical emphasis of the scene squarely on Eliza herself by momentarily dispensing with the third person narration that permeates most of the novel. This strategy radically shortens the distance between the readers and the text, and momentarily dispels any narratological bias. However, Eliza’s first and only direct contact with the reader fails to transcend the bounds between caricature and character. If we examine Eliza’s final words in the context of the conventions of sentimental fiction, it becomes evident that her deathbed contrition is yet another carefully scripted sentimental discourse designed to elicit an equally caricatured response. Recognizing her mother’s rhetorical and political subserviency at this juncture, Mary takes the proffered opportunity to enter into sentimental discourse as an active agent, and assumes the caricature of the equanimous sentimental hero. In

choosing to follow Eliza's rhetorical clues, Mary is able to assert herself as a hero, rescue her mother from the sublime terror of guilt, and help her to exit the text in a role consistent with Eliza's ethical and aesthetic sentimentality.

Thus, while the oppressive spectre of an arranged, commercialized marriage looms over Mary's head, her behavior at Eliza's bedside signals an important shift in the political climate of the household. Although Todd claims that Mary and Eliza are "remarkably alike," they enter into married life in radically different positions. Todd herself hints at the reason for the disparity between them when she remarks that "both women are alone, and both are great readers" (Todd 195). The only partial accuracy of this statement underscores one of the most important conditions that separate Mary from her mother: she is **not** alone at the time of her marriage. In fact, Mary's relationship with Ann, which began in childhood, has already matured at the time of her marriage. In addition to preventing her from becoming isolated and silenced by patriarchal discourse, Mary's relationship with Ann provides her with the vehicle to transport herself, albeit briefly, outside of the confines of patriarchal oppression.

At the time Mary and Ann's relationship is first recorded, Eliza is "still vegetating" in a morass of passivity and despair (*Mary* 11). Consequently, it is Ann who first teaches Mary the art of writing and communication. Provocatively, it is the narrator who coyly minimizes the importance of this development by excusing it under the guise that "young people are mostly fond of *scribbling*" (13). This choice of words is particularly interesting, as "scribbling" is commonly understood as an unintelligible form

of script that is generally executed by children. Thus, by infantilizing the origin of Mary and Ann's relationship, the narrator masks the radical potential inherent in two women learning to script desire. It is also significant that Ann's tutelage preserves Mary's ability to write from any dependence on the patriarchy. The narrator records that Mary became "proficient" only by "copying [the] letters" of a woman "whose hand she admired" (13). While the term 'hand' is commonly synonymous with penmanship, it may be important to read for another, more physical meaning. Rather than succumbing to the notion that lesbian desire is entirely "indiscursible," it seems entirely appropriate for Mary to valorize her lover's hand, as the site of both discursive and enacted desire. Thus, to copy Ann's letters means simultaneously to learn the language of lesbian desire, and how to write upon the body⁵.

As Mary learns to supplement her understanding of desire with something more complex than the rubric of her father's violence, she succeeds in developing a discursive identity that transcends and confounds traditional codifications of gender and desire. As Judith Butler argues in her examination of "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," the very notion of categorization is based upon principles of inclusion and exclusion. By claiming identification through the inclusion of various characteristics, categories are implicitly and irrevocably defined by what they exclude. Thus, "it is important to recognize that oppression works not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly through the constitution of unvariable (un) subjects... who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law" (Butler 20). From this perspective,

⁵ Winterson, Jeanette. *Written on the Body*. London: Vintage, 1993.

“lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable” (20). Thus, in order to “render lesbianism visible,” the challenge for Butler, and for Wollstonecraft, is to confront the ontology and discourse from which lesbianism is categorically excluded (20).

Butler contends that drag is the fundamental means by which the exclusivity and rigidity of culturally endorsed “proper” gender roles are challenged. She asserts that drag dramatizes the process of appropriation, impersonation, and approximation “by which any gender is assumed” (21). By following this line of reasoning to its conclusion, Butler demonstrates that the categories of “man” and “woman” are inherently and permanently unstable.

While Butler herself does not reference Wollstonecraft’s novel when constructing her theoretical stance, both Claudia Johnson and Ashley Tauchert argue that the blurring of gender categories in *Mary* is a product of the indiscursibility of lesbian desire. Johnson and Tauchert agree that Mary’s character is “heavily coded as masculine” during her relationship with Ann, and support their position by drawing attention to Mary’s atypical reading preferences, cognitive abilities, and aesthetic views (Tauchert 6). What they fail to notice, however, is that this “liminal” behavior originates when she is learning how to *write*. As the narrator observes:

In conversation and in writing, when Mary
 Felt, she was pathetic, tender, and persuasive;
 And she expressed contempt with such energy
 That few could stand the flash of her eyes.

(*Mary* 12)

The grammatical structure of this passage is significant, as it points to the erosion of gender and aesthetic categories within Mary's conception of self by reflecting them in her communicative powers. In the first portion of the conjunctive construction, the main verb is an auxiliary that conveys no action, but merely creates a silent discursive link between the subject (Mary) and its objects, which are qualities representative of the hyperfeminized characters of Eliza, Ann, and Henry. In the portion of the sentence following the conjunction, the verb "expressed" denotes action and the agency required to make value judgements. Thus, in her early efforts to communicate, Mary encapsulates the passivity of the feminized discourse consonant with her physiology, and the proactive, emancipatory ability to convey both emotion and the "flash of her eyes."

What is perhaps most interesting is that the either/ or dichotomy of gendered behaviors and attributes is temporarily suspended as Mary's relationship with Ann comes into fruition. The narrator reveals that "as [Mary] grew more *intimate* with Ann, her manners were softened, and she acquired a degree of *equality* in her behavior" (13). As this passage indicates, Mary's simultaneous introduction into the worlds of literacy and love enables her to temporarily cast off her masculine drag and blossom into a

womanhood where “softness” is akin to equality, rather than to physical weakness and intellectual depravity.

The significance of Wollstonecraft’s feminist triumph in creating a female embodied character capable of sustaining, for even a brief moment, a correlation between femininity and equality within context of gynocentric desire must not be underrated. What is unfortunate, and perhaps difficult to watch, is Mary’s constant struggle to revisit that golden moment once it has passed. While most critics agree that the novel is a “failure” on some level for varying reasons, none have recognized that Wollstonecraft achieves her goal, somewhat prematurely in Chapter III. Once this success is acknowledged, it becomes possible to perceive the remainder of the text as a test of her correlation between the emancipation of women’s minds and desires to withstand the oppressive atmosphere of patriarchal culture. From this perspective, it is not that “*Mary*, its heroine, and its plot fall exhausted before the categories of sex and gender,” but merely that Wollstonecraft exhausts the resources available to her within patriarchal aesthetic discourse (Johnson 58).

What becomes puzzling, at this juncture, is why the “equality” of Mary’s intimate life with Ann did not prove to be enduring. Perhaps an indication lies within the construction of Ann’s character. Wollstonecraft takes care to emphasize that Ann’s life was ruined before it began by her father’s lack of virtue and responsibility. His libertine pursuits “destroyed his constitution,” dissipated his fortune, and “left his wife and five small children to live on a very scanty pittance” (*Mary* 13). Like Eliza, Ann’s mother

“was brought up in affluence” only to be victimized and abandoned by her husband (13). Just as Eliza’s (mis)education prevents her from assuming an active, parental role, the implied privilege of Ann’s mother’s early life renders her incapable of providing her family with the necessities of food and shelter. Despite her direct experience of the desperation and destitution that result from a pedagogy of dependence, Ann’s education also takes the form of that was bestowed upon women of means, and does not equip her to become independent. Under the direction of a distant male relative, Ann’s intellectual energy is squandered by flirting with a young, wealthy man in the hopes of deliverance from poverty through matrimony, rather than through her own work and effort. So, by acquiring the conventional “lady’s education,” Ann learns to play, sing, and draw in order to gratify the tastes and desire of her prospective male lover. In this way, she does not really learn to do anything, but perform amusing, pretty tricks for a master whose economic, social, and sexual superiority holds the key to her survival.

In this light, it can be argued that Ann is not a presence, but a radical absence constructed solely by a series of dependencies. Her genealogical claim to social class and position is nullified by her father’s libertine indulgences, and, consequently, Ann is cast into a nominal, marginal state of dependency during her residence with the Clergyman. There, her education and opinions are entirely crafted by men who wished to “cultivate her taste” and regulate her desire (13). For as long as she is able to exist in a context where she can react to their demands and gratify their desire, she is momentarily conjured into a being with a “bright” future and “gay expectations” (13). However, when her benefactor dies, the sudden absence of the patriarchal attention that invested her with

social worth robs her of a sense of self, and she becomes a shadow of Mary's substance. By the time that her intimate relationship with Mary begins, she is a mere chimera: one who "appears similar" to Mary, but is of radically "different" essence (13).

What is the nature of this difference? Given that both women were conceived and raised in a climate of decadence and oppression, why can they not maintain "a degree of equality" in their relationship (13)? Perhaps the answer lies in an analysis of the differences in their educational backgrounds. Mary escaped the corrosive effects of narrowly conceived pedagogical practices, and appears capable of forming a relationship framed by equality, respect, and desire. Unfortunately, Ann shows herself to be fundamentally incapable of even enunciating the possibility of such a relationship because her palate has been molded by a language of servility and subordination.

Since Ann's character is only actualized and motivated by male attention and sanction, Mary's desire is largely perceived as an annoyance and inconvenience. On occasion when Mary "runs to her with delight," she is greeted with "the most chilling insensibility" from Ann (14). The emotional and ideological distance between Ann's "gratitude" and Mary's devotion ultimately results in a dramatic imbalance in their relationship (13). At this juncture, Mary is forced to realize that, while "her friend was all the world to her...she was not as necessary to [Ann's] happiness" (14).

What is essential to Ann's "happiness" is the protection and validation afforded by participation in a culturally sanctioned discourse of heterocentric desire. So, in the

same fashion that she willingly participated in sentimental discourse in order to validate her mother's role, Mary sets out to satisfy the ideological and aesthetic tastes of her beloved, in the hopes of rendering her desire recognizable. The first step in Mary's attempt to code her desire in a shape familiar to Ann is to acquire the economic independence necessary to shield her from poverty. Immediately after learning of Ann's grave economic situation, Mary is confronted by her father's desire to see her married. Without accident, it is at this moment that the sublime first ruptures the aesthetic and ideological discourse of the text.

In his "Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful," Edmund Burke defines the sublime as "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror" (Burke 39). On the grounds that "ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure," Burke argues that the sublime "is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (39). Since the sublime can only be experienced at an ideological and emotional distance, it is intricately connected to notions of astonishment and sympathy.

Burke begins his discussion of the experience of astonishment by noting that it "is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree" (57). He argues that, when one encounters the sublime, "the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence, reason about that object which employs it" (57). Accordingly,

one experiences astonishment, or “that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (57). When Edward informs Mary that she has been “given in with an estate,” she becomes “overwhelmed” (*Mary* 34,19). As the narrator records, “Mary rolled her eyes about, then with a vacant stare, fixed them on her father’s face; but they were no longer a sense [and] conveyed no ideas to the brain” (19-20).

Rather than following Todd’s interpretation of this scene as indicative of the highly conventional “feminine penchant for sleeping through crises,” it may be more useful to examine how Mary locates the aesthetically avowed power of the sublime and enables herself to seize ideological and political power (Todd 199). She resurfaces from her experience of the sublime with the ability to forestall the grief that seems immanent upon a threat of the permanent loss of the object of her desire. Accordingly, she vows not to lose herself or her desire in the patriarchal institution of marriage, but to hijack the power of cultural avowal in order to “snatch [Ann] from the jaws of destruction” and demonstrate that “she loved [her] better than anyone in the world” (*Mary* 20). In a demonstration of the power of the sublime as emancipatory rather than “masculine,” Mary attempts to bring Ann into a position of aesthetic and political empowerment. In the period after her marriage, Mary and Ann live in seclusion and “fill up the time” with music, drawing, and reading. While these activities were widely considered to be virtuous, innocuous occupations for middle and upper class women, the pulse of this seemingly serene pastoral scene ticks like a time bomb.

As Burke notes, sympathy is the means by which an experience of the sublime can be transferred from one individual to another. When he remarks that sympathy is the principle by which “poetry, painting, and other affecting arts transmute their passions from one breast to another,” it is important to remember that the aesthetics and ideologies that comprise those works of art are transferred along with any visual or auditory experience (Burke 44). From this perspective, the time Mary and Ann spend together while Mary models sublime intellectual and aesthetic practices can be read as her attempt to immerse Ann in an emancipatory atmosphere capable of avowing same-sex desire.

The fact that Ann chooses not to engage with the sublime, and refuses to recognize Mary’s deliberate attempt to translate her desire into masculine codes has serious implications for their relationship and the novel as a whole. While Mary rejects the label of “romantic friendship” for her relationship with Ann and avails herself of opportunities to have bodily contact with her, the status of their relationship ultimately remains ambiguous. The unsuitability of the category of romantic friendship can be understood from both historical and textual perspectives. While Faderman extensively documents the conditions surrounding the widespread cultural acceptance of romantic friendship in the eighteenth century, Claudia Johnson cautions against its use to classify the relationship between Ann and Mary. Johnson criticizes the construct of romantic friendship on the grounds that it is a patriarchal strategy designed to “grant homoerotic relations between women visibility only to divest them of alternative import” (Johnson 53). Indeed, the fact that “romantic intimacies between women” were dismissed as “harmless” obliterated the vocabulary of sexual desire between women in love from the

public lexicon (Faderman 94). Wollstonecraft's awareness of the danger of assimilation lurking behind the appeal of romantic friendship is reflected by Mary's refusal to own the term.⁶ In response to her letter detailing her passion for Ann, it is Charles, the enforcer of heterosexual privilege and patriarchal presumption, who attempts to "neutralize and contain" the relationship within a "permissible category" (Johnson 53).

If Mary and Ann's relationship resists, discursively and ideologically, categorization as romantic friendship, "to what category ought their passion be assigned" (53)? While Johnson acknowledges the physicality of their relationship, she contends that "it does not exist in the discursive space now called 'lesbian'" (54). She asserts that Mary's reliance upon "sentimental conventions which encode her as masculine" ultimately transforms her into "a man of feeling" (54). Thus, any physical or sexual expression between Mary and Ann becomes nominally heterosexualized and excluded from the domain of lesbianism, despite Mary's female embodiment.

Maintenance of a conscious distinction between emancipatory action and masculine modeling is essential to my exploration of the final question of the nature of Mary and Ann's relationship. Scholarship which details the ontology of lesbian discourse only to argue that the expression of desire is finally always heterosexual and "masculine" seems to be missing the point. Indeed, it is ironic that Tauchert criticizes Wardle and others for serving homophobic and misogynist impulses by silencing representations and records of Wollstonecraft's lesbian identity for the sake of 'posterity.' Tauchert's

⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, 25.

unapologetic assertion that the “insistent heterosexual cross-narrative” between Mary and Henry is not only “parallel” to that between Mary and Ann, but also necessary to its decoding employs the very homophobic dynamic she ridicules (Tauchert 4-5).

By placing the locus of discursible desire in Mary’s relationship with Henry, both Johnson and Tauchert replicate the contours of colonization that obstruct Mary’s access to the discursive terrain of lesbianism. While Tauchert and Johnson seem to be convinced that the concept of lesbianism is unique to the twentieth century, Faderman discusses representations of lesbian desire dating from as early as the eighteenth century. Indeed, it is interesting that the very misogynist and homophobic impulses that sought to assimilate, nullify, and silence the undercurrents of desire running through same-sex romantic friendships also sought to write it into being as a form of insult or threat. Rather than being completely indiscursible and invisible, Faderman notes that there is an extensive body of largely pornographic writing, describing sexual acts between women as imagined by heterosexual, male authors. While it strains the limits of credibility to think that straight male authors could have a viable perspective on lesbian desire, their writings remain important for what they reveal about the authors themselves, and their cultural perspectives. Faderman contends that “eighteenth century literature in which lesbianism was treated explicitly seems to have often had a dual purpose” (Faderman 45). Frequent combinations of “bizarre male depictions of lesbianism” and sadomasochism were largely designed to arouse a male audience (45). Secondly, and most importantly, this pornographic exploitation of women’s bodies and appropriation of female sexual contact was also meant as a warning. As Faderman notes, the “lesbian” caricatures in eighteenth

century pornographic literature were usually thinly veiled caricatures of actual women who “had stepped out of line,” and transgressed “the conventional eighteenth century ideal of femininity” (45). Thus, the label of “lesbian” was used as a device to “shame” women by implicating them in an “aggressive sexuality” as a metaphor for economic, legal, or social transgressions (46).

What is clear from this analysis is that physical, sexual contact between women was appropriated and colonized by the patriarchy in an attempt to rob lesbians of their radical power to write the patriarch out of the discourse of desire and out of their lives. In sexual and social scenarios where men can have no place, the dynamics of patriarchal oppression enable them to be ensconced as voyeurs.

Wollstonecraft’s cognizance of this dynamic is reflected in her careful construction of Mary’s relationship with Henry. Henry’s identity as a voyeur is revealed when Mary’s sexual identity is questioned by the three female invalids in the hospice in Lisbon. Mary, panicked about the sudden deterioration of Ann’s health, declares that “[she] cannot live without her” (*Mary* 32). The three women immediately attempt to correct and redirect the explosion of Mary’s passion by reminding her of her legal, social, and sexual obligations. Mary’s response to this intrusion of patriarchal sexual right is one of fear, anger, and shame, as “[she] shrunk back, and was alternately pale and red” (32). The silent, but ever present observer of this display of sexual allegiance is Henry, whose “eyes followed [Mary]” as she left the room and returned to her lover (32).

Henry's line of vision once again interrupts the flow of lesbian desire two chapters later. Henry, "with more apparent warmth than usual," informs Mary that he "would give the world for [her] picture with the expression [he] has seen in [her] face, when [she] has been supporting [her] friend" (34). Tauchert contends that, in the light of the "erotic stress" inherent in the metaphor of women "supporting" each other, the scene "encapsulates...the parallelism and doubling characteristic" of the "open secret" of lesbian desire (Tauchert 4). From her perspective, "Henry's warm longing for Mary's 'picture' is both an appropriate approval of Mary's compassion towards her *friend*, but indicates at the same time his as yet undisclosed desire for that compassion (and the intimacies it allows) to take him as its object" (4). If, however, Tauchert's assertion that Mary's "support" of Ann is a metaphor for their sexual expression, can it be said that Henry is demonstrating approval of their romantic *friendship*? Given Faderman's demonstration that patriarchal authorities were typically involved in divesting the sexual from constructs of same-sex friendship, is it possible that what Henry desires is to view an intimate image of two lesbians? If so, his desire to commission a portrait of lesbian desire may not be "appropriate" or innocuous. By seeking to possess such an image, he is masking, in a "delicate compliment," a stern warning (*Mary* 34). His tacit acknowledgment of the sexual component of Mary's relationship with Ann encodes his ability both to appropriate it by distorting it into a pornographic image to satisfy heterosexual desire, and to threaten Mary with a label that would strip her of her hard-won social and aesthetic power.

Given that Henry is presented as “a man of learning [who] had also studied mankind...[and] the intricacies of the human heart,” why would he want to destroy a woman he begs to call “friend” (33,40)? Perhaps the reason lies in Faderman’s observation that women who threatened patriarchal authority in any area of social, political, legal, or economic discourse were branded as lesbian in an attempt to sabotage their power. What is significant is that, in the period immediately preceding Henry’s request for Mary’s picture, Mary and Henry spend time “discussing very important subjects” and acquainting each other with their respective ideological and aesthetic tastes (33). Since both characters are invested in the emancipatory power of the sublime, a subtle battle for aesthetic and political control ensues.

The event that tips the balance of aesthetic and ideological power in their relationship, and in the novel as a whole, is Ann’s sudden death. While Mary remains in the “impenetrable gloom” of sublime grief as she watches over Ann’s body, her later encounter with Henry provokes an “outburst of tears” (40). It is at the point when Mary’s “conversation [becomes] incoherent” that Henry’s “feminine” compassion strips away to betray wolfish patriarchal desire. He begins to infantilize Mary by referring to her as “girl” and “creature,” and tells her that she should “rely on him as if he was her father,” as “the tenderest father could not more anxiously interest himself in the fate of a darling child than he did in hers” (40,41). Shortly thereafter, Mary’s incessant tears drain her empowerment and flood her with feminine affectivity. For the first time, the narrator describes her mind as “sick,” and in need of the “balm” of patriarchal protection. Thus, Henry’s own explicit equation between himself and a patriarch “necessarily reinscribes

Mary” into patriarchal discourse and catalyzes her abrupt dissolution into the hyperfemininity she strove to escape (Johnson 57). In this light, Mary’s call to the “soul of her I love [to] tell [her] wither [she] fled” is not merely a lament for the death of her partner, but an expression of her radical loss of sexual, political, and aesthetic agency (*Mary* 49).

Does this disappointing end to a struggle for political, social, and sexual emancipation mean that Wollstonecraft herself shrinks before the prospect of encoding a radical lesbian presence, or does it hint at another, broader deficiency? What I have attempted to demonstrate is that *Mary* was never meant to succeed, as the novel is largely concerned with exploring the *process* by which love between women is written out of the discourse of desire in a phallogocentric, heterocentric society. Thus, those that look for a fully actualized, successfully negotiated lesbian “product” will be disappointed. Mary’s continual reliance on “the master’s tools”⁷ to betray their owner ultimately undoes her, and signals the need for a new discourse, the social enactment of “a dream of a common language.”⁸

⁷ Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *Sister Outsider*. Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1984. 110-113.

⁸ Rich, Adrienne. *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.

“Forging Feminist Tools”:
Reconfiguring the Body Politic
in
The Vindication of The Rights of Woman

*“Language produces the ideas,
with all their inherent ideological assumptions,
of what is collectively taken to be reality.”*

Louise Forsyth
(“Errant and Airborn in the City” 11)

*“How can the woman who uses words daily
use a language which, right from the start, being phallogentric,
works against her?”*

Nicole Brossard
(*The Aerial Letter* 12)

In the four years that separate the publications of *Mary, A Fiction* and the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,¹ Wollstonecraft’s artistic and political talents flourished in an atmosphere infused with the dreams and rhetoric of Revolution. As Godwin points out, Wollstonecraft entered the 1790s as a relatively obscure writer whose artistic talent and sharp intellect were “insensibly advancing towards a vigorous maturity” (*Memoirs* 229). Wollstonecraft’s “uninterrupted habit of composition,” acquired while fulfilling a number of commitments to her publisher, Joseph Johnson, “gave a freedom and firmness to the expression of her sentiments” that would prove invaluable during the composition of the *Rights of Woman*. The stunning maturation of Wollstonecraft’s aesthetic style was accompanied by her deepening involvement with the

¹ Hereafter referred to as *Rights of Woman*.

French Revolution. As Godwin reflects, the French Revolution “gave a fundamental shock to the human intellect through every region of the globe, [and] did not fail to produce a conspicuous effect in the progress of Mary’s reflections” (229). Indeed, “the prejudices of her early years suffered a violent concussion,” and she began to reflect on the co-dependent relationship between language, social structure, and cultural ideology (229). The successful reception of her *Answer to Burke’s Reflections* in 1791 filled her with confidence in her own abilities as a philosopher, writer, and activist, and she began to enlarge the scope of her “ardent desire” for the revolution of British society to include the emancipation of women. Immediately, however, she was confronted by a potentially debilitating paradox. She rapidly discovered that the traditional philosophic discourse suited to arguments of emancipation and equality for men was predicated on the “vulgarity,” inferiority, and servitude of women.

In the hopes of rescuing her treatise and her life from foregone failure, Wollstonecraft sought to vaporize the linguistic and social barriers of eighteenth-century English culture in the fiery light of the French Revolution. However, after some investigation, it appears that her proponent of liberal humanism, as defined and developed within a patriarchal context, undermines her desire to obtain equality for women. Specifically, her strict focus on the importance of Reason and intellectual capability excludes and represses a comprehensive awareness of women’s physicality, sexuality, and desire. Indeed, throughout the text, Wollstonecraft continuously aligns herself with patriarchal authorities by defining the feminine body as a site mined with risks, not only for women, but for society as a whole. Although Wollstonecraft’s

movement towards linguistic and political emancipation was ultimately detonated by the gender biases buried within liberal humanism, it remains important to speculate about what might have happened had she successfully negotiated the thorny path between the nominal equality permitted within humanistic discourse and the substantive equality she craved. In short, is it possible to achieve a vindication of women's rights without a corresponding vilification of their bodies within a linguistic system still predicated upon patriarchal principles of value and exclusion?

Wollstonecraft's vitriolic renunciation of femininity inspires Susan Gubar's chronicle of the "heritage of misogyny" willed to twentieth century feminists by the *Rights of Woman* (Gubar 454). While Gubar briefly acknowledges the positive effects of Wollstonecraft's "commitment to rationality," she asserts that her stringent analysis of patriarchal notions of femininity also simultaneously operate as the site of her "feminist misogyny" (454-5). The tension between Wollstonecraft's "breakthrough analysis of the social construction of gender" and her "derogation of the feminine" runs rampant through the entire text (457). In her analysis of the "Pernicious Effects from the Unnatural Distinctions in Society," Wollstonecraft condemns women for demonstrations of "spaniel-like affection," when they are called upon to exercise a "strength of natural affection which would make them good wives and mothers" (*Rights* 258). While this insult foreshadows the tone of many of Wollstonecraft's subsequent remarks on women's nature, in this instance, she is quick to contextualize it within a criticism of hierarchical, patriarchal social systems. She astutely observes that the "specious slavery" that fuels her vitriolic attacks against the female sex is a product of a social system in which "there are

some loop holes out of which a man may creep, and dare to think and act for himself,” but which condemns the same activity for women as an “Herculean task, because she has difficulties peculiar to her sex to overcome, which require almost superhuman powers” (*Rights of Woman* 261-2). In this instance, and several others, Wollstonecraft pinpoints the source of women’s social oppression in the emphasis placed upon women’s bodies by the ideologies of the aristocracy. In her “comprehensive” discussion of “Modesty,” Wollstonecraft asserts that “girls ought to be taught to wash and dress alone, without any distinction of rank; and if custom should make them require some little assistance, let them not require it until that part of the business is over which ought never to be done before a fellow creature, because it is an insult to the majesty of human nature” (239). Later, Wollstonecraft claims that the focus on dress, seduction, and fashion has made women “slaves to their persons” (262). She subsequently qualifies this connection between women’s oppression and slavery by explaining that when she “calls women slaves, [she] means in a political and civil sense; for indirectly they obtain too much power, and are debased by their exertions to obtain illicit sway” (292).

While I can recognize and appreciate the persuasive subtlety of Wollstonecraft’s class analysis in these passages, I am also troubled by the fact that she chooses to locate one of the sites of class oppression in the caretaking of women’s bodies. From these descriptions, it seems apparent that women’s bodies have been transformed into an instrument of oppression by those with social and political power. The lives of workers are ruled by the caprices of women’s fashion, and the continual bodily needs and desires of a feminine despotic body. From this perspective, it would appear that these citations

conform to Gubar's observations that Wollstonecraft "repeatedly and disconcertingly associates the feminine with weakness, childishness.... and despotism" (Gubar 456). Other consequences of Wollstonecraft's assessment of the female body are even more disturbing. While her critique of "sensibility" is based on patriarchy's division between women's minds and their bodies, her vilification of the body and exclusive focus upon the power of the intellect merely perpetuates the division engendered by patriarchal philosophical and cultural authorities. By conjuring a vision of femininity in which women's bodies "threaten - like a virus - to contaminate and destroy men and their culture," Wollstonecraft defines the body as "Other" and thereby maintains an essentially binary, hierarchical, and patriarchal social model. The negative value judgments attached to women's physicality and reflected in Wollstonecraft's rhetoric ultimately serve to alienate women from their bodies, and frustrate her attempts to generate a sense of female subjectivity that is not fissured or divided; in other words, a subjectivity that is *equal* to that of some men.

What accounts for these omissions in Wollstonecraft's analysis of the female body? Why does the vitriol that characterizes her discussion of the body infuse her explorations of female sexuality, sexual orientation, and sexual desire? Gubar suggests that Wollstonecraft's feminist misogyny is a reflection of "the powerful impact of culture on her subjectivity" and "the capacity of [her] psyche to internalize societal norms" (Gubar 457). She asserts that "although (or perhaps because) *Rights of Woman* sets out to liberate society from a hated subject constructed to be subservient and called 'woman,' it illuminates how such animosity can spill over into antipathy of those human beings most

constrained by that construction” (457). In order to support this argument, Gubar cites Cora Kaplan’s observation that “there is no feminism that can stand wholly outside femininity as it is posed in a given historical moment” (459). From this perspective, “all feminisms give some ideological hostage to femininities and are constructed through the gender sexuality of their day as well as standing in opposition to them” (459).

Rather than arguing that Wollstonecraft was blinded by her “inexorable entrapment within a patrilineal literary inheritance,” Claudia Johnson’s discussion of “The Distinction of the Sexes” in the *Rights of Woman* is based on her belief in Wollstonecraft’s critical cognizance of the misogynist link between sentimentality and femininity in eighteenth century England (462). Johnson contends that the “basic aim” of the *Rights of Woman* is to expose the “grievous consequence” of an obliteration of “proper sexual distinctions” within a highly sentimentalized society (Johnson 23). Consequently, she argues that “the feminist agenda of the *Rights of Woman* cannot be discussed apart from its larger republican agenda” (23). From this perspective, the *Rights of Woman* is centered on the fundamental assertion that the realization of a liberal democratic society in England will guarantee the emancipation of both sexes from hierarchical political and social constructs.

Johnson contends that Wollstonecraft first verbalizes her understanding of the connection between oppressive class and gender distinctions in the *Rights of Man*. Throughout this volume, she attempts to “impede the torrent of Burke’s eloquence” by “exposing the class bound character of the ‘liberty’ he claims all Englishmen proudly

cherish" (26). By formulating competing definitions of the sublime and the beautiful in terms devoid of sentimentality,² Wollstonecraft casts a shadow of doubt onto the veracity of Burke's *Reflections* and his "effort to beautify and feminize the state" (27).

Wollstonecraft's recognition that "the same sentimental categories used by men to circumscribe women are also used by monarchs to feminize men and consolidate their power" propels much of her gender and class analysis in the *Rights of Woman* (29). Indeed, in her discussion of the "Prevailing [Misogynist] Opinion of [Women's] Sexual Character," Wollstonecraft uses a critique of sentimentalized gender roles to dissolve the distinction between citizen and state. She asserts that, because of Burke's divorce of Reason and Beauty, women "have been stripped of the virtues that should clothe humanity" (*Rights* 122). Their claim to humanity is ultimately replaced with sentimental pretensions and "artificial graces that enable them to exercise a short lived tyranny" (122). Wollstonecraft continues her analogy between women and political despots a few pages later when she argues that the absence of Reason in both "kingdoms and families" results in the degradation of individual characters and the spread of "licentiousness...through the whole aggregate of society" (127). This metaphor, comparing the "lawless power" of an "absolute monarch" and the conditions that provoke "a number of women [to] become tyrants" within the "debasing...slavery of marriage," continues throughout Wollstonecraft's lengthy discussions of parental affection and filial duty.

² Wollstonecraft contends that truth is the "essence of the sublime" and "simplicity" is "the only criterion of beauty." *Vindication of the Rights of Man*, 35.

Unlike Gubar, Johnson asserts that these “virulently misogynist” descriptions of women are constructed consciously, not as an act of complicity, but as a means to “cross political boundaries” and expose “the mutually degrading tendencies of relations based on subordination” (Johnson 33). Thus, by revealing the insidious victim/ abuser dynamic inherent within sentimentalism, and symbolically encoding it as a feminized king, Wollstonecraft succeeds in “turning Burkean sentimentalism inside out” (37). The pervasive presence of a feminized despotic body throughout the text succinctly demonstrates the degree to which the rise of sentimentality “vitiates men’s characters and deformed women’s along with it” (24). However, Johnson concludes that the very analogy that successfully advocates the detonation of hierarchical political and social structures ultimately buries Wollstonecraft’s struggle for the emancipation of women in the rubble. By linking the recognition of women’s rights and equality to a conception of Reason that encodes ideals of male strength and virtue, much of the import of Wollstonecraft’s argument becomes directed towards men. Johnson contends that it is Wollstonecraft’s reliance on the gaze of male readers to validate her position by “claiming the liberties of their sex,” and chivalrously inviting “women to share in those liberties,” that strains her argument to the breaking point (31). Thus, Wollstonecraft’s decision to “pine” for an invitation to participate in a nominally equitable society tinged with “male rationalism” ultimately proves less viable than “enlarging or inventing a positive discourse of femininity” (25, 29, 24).

Johnson’s conclusion that the *Rights of Woman* fails simply because the men to whom Wollstonecraft was writing “were not listening” is frankly disappointing and

somewhat inconsistent with the spirit of Wollstonecraft's argument. It seems unlikely that a thinker capable of constructing a radical socio-political analysis, a provocative challenge for change, would so misjudge her audience as to be deemed incomprehensible. Perhaps another way to understand Wollstonecraft's decision to appeal to a markedly masculine rationality lies in an examination of her linguistic heritage and context. In her exploration of *The Politics of Language* from 1791 to 1819, Olivia Smith contends that social status and linguistic style were so tightly intertwined that "the act of learning grammar [was] an act of class warfare" (Smith 1).

Since instruction in grammar was provided only at universities and schools accessible to the upper class, members of the working class were systematically barred from linguistic instruction on an economic basis. Combined with the "presupposition that language revealed the mind," the exclusion of the poor and working classes from the language of the wealthy and powerful established a sharp dichotomy that "firmly distinguished those who were within the civilized world from those who were entirely outside it" (2,3). Within this milieu, "the baser forms of language were said to reveal the inability of the speaker to transcend the concerns of the present, an interest in material objects, and the dominance of the passions" (3). In contrast, the use of "refined" or "genuine" language signalled that the speaker was "rational, moral, civilized, and capable of abstract thinking" (3). As these definitions indicate, by the 1790s, "grammar, virtue, and class were so interconnected that rules were justified or explained, not in terms of how language was used, but in terms of reflecting a desired type of behavior, thought process, or social status" (9). The implicit bias against class and gender in linguistic

theory and pedagogy is reflected in many of the advertisements and introductions for grammars published as early as 1760. In contrast to the “refined” grammars written by Lowth and Murray, John Ash’s *Grammatical Institutes* is specifically crafted for “Ladies [and] for young Gentlemen designed merely for Trade” (11). In other words, Ash and others recognized and capitalized on the segregation of those “who will not be engaged in public life” (11).

Smith notes that this distinction between “those who learned to write ‘for Trade’ and those who learned to participate in public life” was enhanced by an intensely hierarchical, multi-tiered education system. Indeed, as Wollstonecraft herself lamented, “an extensive gap existed between the rudimentary forms of education” designed for women and the working class, and the “extensive,” classical learning reserved for males of the ruling class (13). Ironically, this schism is enunciated most clearly by a man who utilized the power of language to transcend the limitations of his working class origins, Samuel Johnson. Citing the Preface to Johnson’s *Dictionary*, Smith asserts that he deliberately associates “an ignorance of the classical languages with sexual immorality and the breaking down of class divisions” (13). He does so by drawing a clear line between “the language of books and the language of the living,” where the discourse of classical texts is exalted as “genuine” and the rest is damned as “corrupt” (14).

Despite the growing climate of political unrest in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Johnson’s hegemonic conception of language proved impossible to unseat. While his triumph was due in part to his enormous popular appeal, his views were deeply

rooted in earlier influential theories concerning the nature of language. Smith contends that James Harris' *Hermes* is significant in this regard as it renders the ideology behind Johnson's theory explicit. Harris asserted that the mind "performed two basic functions, that of reflection and sensation" (22). He argued that "a linguistic difference separates those who think from those who sense" (22). It is not difficult to see how this "linguistic" division corresponds to other dualities of the day, including Burke's sublime and the beautiful. What each of these dichotomous systems has in common is the valorization of male, upper class, heterosexual values at the expense of the rest of society. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that Harris' prioritization of the reflective and the rational was later mirrored by the works of other linguists, including his opponents. Thomas Reid, James Beattie, and George Campbell later attempted to infuse linguistic study with a "democratic air," but ultimately perpetuated the social and political dichotomy established by their predecessors. Under close analysis, their attempt to reassess the value of primitivism does not stray very far from its origins. The definition of "primitive" language as that which employs "concrete terms, emotional expressions, syntactical simplicity, an abundance of metaphors, and a paucity of terms" is easily traced back to Harris' denunciation of political language, on the grounds that its involvement with materiality renders it "a sloppy intellectual habit and a slightly immoral exercise" (27, 24). Thus, while conservatives and radicals were willing to debate the nature and value of linguistic abstraction, neither side was willing to challenge the hegemonic structure at its root.

Consequently, the proponents of hegemonic, oppressive linguistic ideologies survived the political inferno of the French Revolution by following the example of the phoenix. Smith asserts that, by the end of the eighteenth century, the self-referential, tautological equation between a theory of the mind and a theory of language placed radical thinkers in a linguistic straightjacket. Indeed, it became difficult to ignore the impossibility of “discrediting a theory which had appropriated language,” as “the means of expressing the refutation apparently disagreed with the content” (28). In light of this “double edge,” Smith concludes that “it [was] impossible to write in the vernacular without declaring the inadequacy of oneself and one’s audience” (29). Thus, “the ability to define simultaneously a class, its moral worth, and its language presented a formidable stumbling block to the possibility of discussion between the classes,” or any other form of revolution (30).

With this understanding of Wollstonecraft’s linguistic context in mind, a few elements of her strategy for social and political revolution begin to fall into place. By attempting to link a revolution of her material reality with the rationality typically reserved for “genuine,” abstract discourse, Wollstonecraft attempts to do what none of her radical contemporaries dared: to remove language from the arena of oppression by dissolving its hegemonic structure in the purifying waters of liberal humanism. Just as Harris, Johnson, and others sought to shield conservative monarchist ideology from revolution by cloaking it in circular, self-referential conceptions of discourse, Wollstonecraft attempts to create an irrefutable connection between rationality and revolution. For Wollstonecraft, movement away from despotic linguistic and social

constructs towards equality and rationality requires revolution. Simultaneously, revolution can only be politically effective when it is grounded by Reason, and not emotion.

Wollstonecraft's dissolution of class, gender, race, and linguistic boundaries could not, by definition, be expressed or relayed within the linguistic structures available to her. She was excluded from the realm of political power and intellectual veracity of "genuine" language by her sex, class, and political aims. However, to struggle within the confines of the "primitive" language afforded her guaranteed inaudibility and failure. Consequently, she appealed to the leveling power of liberal humanist discourse.

What Wollstonecraft found, however, is that, despite its stress on equality, liberal humanism is not value neutral, and is ultimately incapable of effecting radical political or social change. In her chapter on Wollstonecraft's "Feminist Embrace and Criticism of Liberalism," Zillah Eisenstein explores the volatile dynamics of Wollstonecraft's relationship with liberal political theory. She contends that "Wollstonecraft's radical claims on behalf of women are, in the end, limited by the liberal individualist constructs of eighteenth century thought" because "liberalism, as an ideology, is only able to define an area of public life in which woman would theoretically have unlimited opportunity without providing her access to it" (Eisenstein 90). From this perspective, it is clear that "liberal ideology provides [Wollstonecraft] with the necessary tools to claim women's potential for rationality, but not to dismantle the patriarchal relations that necessitate her sexual and economic dependence" (90).

Eisenstein's thesis places her in a position where she is able to recognize the positive, empowering aspects of Wollstonecraft's affinity with liberal thinkers, while also acknowledging the impact of the tensions generated between them. Wollstonecraft's uneasy partnership with her male contemporaries began smoothly enough, as she partook of Locke and Rousseau's celebration of "the importance of individual freedom and the equality of opportunity" by using "the idea of liberal individualism to criticize the privilege of rank inherent in station, unrelated to individual merit" (90). She also concurred that "there can be true happiness and virtue only among equals" (91). Wollstonecraft quickly shied away from these patriarchal primroses and began to blaze her own path when she extended the notions of liberal equality to women. Eisenstein recognizes that Wollstonecraft's application of the "demands of the bourgeois revolution of reason, personal independence, and individual freedom to women" voices a "challenge to the male bias" of liberalism, and couples the call for the end of rule by 'divine right' with one for the end of the rule of man (91).

This challenge, and its complementary plan for the unification of radical concepts of femininity and liberal ideology, stresses and unravels her relationship with patriarchal liberal theorists. Wollstonecraft endorses the connection between individuality and rationality propounded by Locke and Rousseau, but modifies it in order to redefine patriarchal notions of women's virtue divested of sexual connotations. Eisenstein observes, however, that this insistence upon the link between women's rationality and virtue "is directly at odds with Rousseau's vision of women and the liberal patriarchal

conception of citizen” (94). Indeed, Wollstonecraft attacks Rousseau’s perception of women as creatures entirely subject to sexual passion on the grounds that it “counters the development of women’s individuality and independence” (94). While this deviation can be construed as evidence of Wollstonecraft’s radical feminism, Eisenstein cautions that “the question remains as to how much Wollstonecraft understood the constraints of this patriarchal view” (94). In order to bolster this position, Eisenstein explores each of Wollstonecraft’s conceptions of independence and concludes that “woman’s independence from man is defined in the same way as one man must be independent of another man” (95). Consequently, “there is no recognition of the specific relations that exist between women and men other than the economic dependence of the market” (95). She observes that “this liberal conception of independent selves seems to be sex neutral” and does not take into account the disparity between nominal and substantive equality (95). While Eisenstein acknowledges that Wollstonecraft “knows” that “men and women have different starting places in the race of life,” she admits that Wollstonecraft “is unable to deal in the sexually specific way her own understanding demands,” because of the collusion of liberal and patriarchal ideological constraints (95).

The tension between Wollstonecraft’s radical feminism and patriarchal liberalism comes to a head in her attempt to redefine the role of motherhood. Eisenstein asserts that “Wollstonecraft’s concern with defining a useful role for the new middle class woman pushes her to reconceptualize the relationship between the liberal values of independence, rationality, and motherhood itself” (99). In contrast to her male contemporaries, Wollstonecraft “wishes to extend these values to women in their activity as mothers,

rather than to differentiate between them as incompatible” (99). Accordingly, she “adopts the patriarchal definition of woman as the rearer of children, but wishes to redefine it to reflect the new relations of bourgeois freedom and liberal individualism” (100). While theoretically promising, this strategy ultimately fails to insure women’s substantive equality in a liberal society. This shortcoming is due in part to Wollstonecraft’s failure to employ the power of rhetoric. According to Eisenstein, she is reluctant to explicitly define motherhood as “the new work of women,” by addressing “the issue that, as mothers, married women are economically dependent upon their husbands because there is no direct payment for this work” (100).

Thus, while “Wollstonecraft wanted to remove the relation of dependence of woman on man in both marriage and motherhood,” Eisenstein argues that she did not fully recognize how the dynamics of motherhood serve to perpetuate this dependence (101). Wollstonecraft’s connection between motherhood and independence insures that she advocates “a liberal patriarchal version of independence” (101). This criticism enables Eisenstein to highlight the major limitations of Wollstonecraft’s theory. She asserts that “Wollstonecraft’s adoption of liberal individualism helps her focus on women’s exclusion, but cannot help her understand how the sex-class system structures the exclusion and opportunities of women differently than men” (101). Thus, while Wollstonecraft’s correctly asserts that “woman defined as a dependent and emotional being stands counter to the new needs of bourgeois society,” she ultimately fails to recognize that the restriction of women’s subjectivity to the roles of mother and wife is inherently patriarchal and “supports male bourgeois society” (102). This perplexing

observation undergirds Eisenstein's contention that Wollstonecraft's "liberal feminist position is at the same time radical in its claims for women and yet patriarchal," as she simultaneously "demands 'rights' for women as a sexual class," while unwittingly embracing "the basic political structuring of the status quo" (103). Therefore, Wollstonecraft does not succeed in exploding the patriarchal, aristocratic paradigms of femininity. Rather, Eisenstein concludes that she "has redefined the aristocratic, patriarchal definition of women, and replaced it with a liberal patriarchal view [of] the rational, independent mother and wife" (107). Accordingly, issues surrounding the centrality of "the sex-class nature of women's oppression to [their] exclusion from public life and to the maintenance of bourgeois society and liberal ideology" remain unanswered by the *Rights of Woman* (107). Eisenstein speculates that these questions remain unresolved largely because Wollstonecraft "articulated the separate but equal doctrine in terms of the division of public and private life, home and work, male and female" (107). This position enabled her to guarantee an equality of opportunity between men and women, but prevented her from comprehending the substantive limitations of such a view. Thus, Eisenstein concludes that "we are left with the question of whether it is possible to create equality of opportunity between men and women...without creating equality between men and women that is neither liberal nor patriarchal in formulation" (108).

I agree with Eisenstein's lament that, while "Wollstonecraft poses this problem for us, she is unable to answer it" (108). Does that mean that it represents an insurmountable difficulty? Is it possible to find a solution to this problem by stepping

outside of the ideological constraints imposed by both liberalism and patriarchy? In her journey “Towards a Feminist Politics of the Body,” Moira Gatens provides an insightful and incisive alternative to liberal, patriarchal theories of equality and femininity. She acknowledges that, since “there has been little critical work done on the conceptual relations between women’s bodies and the state,” feminists unconsciously employ “culturally dominant conceptions of the body to shape their theories” (Gatens 49). I would like to suggest that this observation proves to be particularly astute when viewed in the context of the *Rights of Woman*. Gatens opens her exploration with the contention that “cultural attitudes to both women and corporeality are often negative, and function conceptually as the underside to culturally valued terms such as reason, civilization, and progress” (50). Wollstonecraft’s judgmental polarization between notions of corporeality and reason is neatly summarized by her equation between sexual and gustatory excesses. In her discussion of the consequences of “Morality Undermined by Sexual Notions of a Good Reputation,” Wollstonecraft argues that excessive, libertine desires and appetites rot women’s morality. She notes that “luxury has introduced a refinement in eating, that destroys the constitution,” and that “the depravity of the appetite which brings the sexes together has had a still more fatal effect” (*Rights* 253). This “fatal effect” of unregulated desire has been to transform “a very considerable number” of women into “literally speaking, standing dishes to which every glutton may have access” (254). According to Wollstonecraft, corporeal and sexual desire can only be recuperated by combining them with their opposites: temperance and reason. She asserts that “Nature must ever be the standard of taste, the gauge of appetite” and its “imperious law” to “mix a little mind and affection with a sensual gust” must be continually obeyed (253).

Gatens' subsequent critique of the male bias inherent within humanist philosophies is equally applicable to Wollstonecraft's work. She observes that "many philosophers have tended to treat the soul or mind as, in essence, sexually neutral" and, accordingly, "apparent differences between minds are generally seen to be due to the influence of the passions of the body" (Gatens 50). Under this paradigm, "the most superior minds suffer least from intrusions of the body...women are most often understood to be less able to control the passions of the body, and this failure is located in the a priori disorder or anarchy of the female body itself" (50). This analysis leads her to the conclusion that the modern philosophical/ cultural definition of the rational is "articulated in direct opposition to qualities typical of the feminine" (50). At this juncture, Gatens delineates the consequences of this vilification of women's bodies on their political participation. She notes that "some feminists - especially the egalitarians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - argue that women are not necessarily irrational but are trained to be so" (50). Thus, when given "proper training...women would be capable of rational political participation" (50).

This description of philosophical trends fits Wollstonecraft perfectly. Indeed, throughout the *Rights of Woman*, she claims "that women at present are by ignorance rendered foolish or vicious is...not to be disputed" and argues that "the most salutary effects tending to improve mankind might be expected from a REVOLUTION in female manners" (*Rights* 325). Accordingly, she pleads with male philosophers to reserve their opinions of women's capability until "their faculties have room to unfold, and their

virtues to gain strength” (120). She recognizes, however, that this advancement will only occur through a drastic revision of the system of women’s education, and she concludes, “till women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge must receive continual checks” (127).

Problems with this position arise when it becomes clear that Wollstonecraft’s idea of a “rational education” is one that neutralizes women’s bodies, sexuality, and desire and replaces them with a vision of rationality that is grounded firmly in nominal, rather than substantive, equality. She begins her treatise with the questionable assertion that, while “women...may have different duties to fulfill, they are *human* duties and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them...must be the *same*” (141). Similarly, in her extensive discussion “On National Education,” Wollstonecraft argues that “the social compact [can be rendered] truly equitable,” if “both sexes...act from the *same* principle”: namely, that of rational knowledge (300). She asserts that women can attain this level of rationality *if* they are “educated by the *same* pursuits as men” (300). Wollstonecraft’s grammatical stress upon the conditional element of this sentence subtly, but powerfully, conveys her belief that alternative forms of knowledge already possessed and practiced by women are diametrically opposed to rationality and, therefore, must be condemned as irrational. This desire to adapt women to standards designed for some men confirms Gatens’ observation that “it is not so much that women are explicitly conceptualized as irrational, but rather that irrationality is defined against the ‘womanly’” (Gatens 50). In order to rectify this theoretical deficiency, Gatens suggests that “it is not so much that

women are biologically unsuited to political participation, as that political participation has been structured and defined in such a way that it excludes women's bodies" (50).

Gatens supports this contention by locating the genesis of modern political and cultural theories of the body in the seventeenth century. She notes that the seventeenth century spawned the notion of subjectivity, where the human subject "is subject to an internal relation of domination, where mind or reason should dominate the body and passion," and the notion of the body politic (50). Accordingly, she argues that "this contiguity...suggests that, in order to understand modern conceptions of the human subject, including its corporeality, one needs to understand its reflexive relation to the modern body politic" (51). The modern body politic is a product of the social contract which was designed to be "entered into by men only [and]...to secure the needs of male bodies and desires" (51). At this point, Gatens encourages feminists to consider "woman's relation to this artificial man," as defined by the social contract, and recognize that our relations to contract theory are grounded in patriarchal concepts of the female body (51). She asserts that the most significant consequence of this relationship between women and contract theory is that "women never make the transition from the mythical 'state of nature' to the body politic," but rather "become nature" (51). This categorization of women fosters a series of binary divisions and is ultimately "reflected in the distinction between the private and public spheres, the family and the state" (51).

In an argument that echoes Bakhtin's theory of the "overpopulation" of language,³ Gatens contends that "discourses on the body and discourses on the body politic each borrow terms from the other" (53). She notes that "a philosophically common metaphor for the appropriate relation between the mind and the body is to posit it as a political relation, where one (the mind) should dominate, subjugate, or govern the other (the body)" (53). Upon reflection, it seems to me that this metaphor provides the premise for Wollstonecraft's entire pattern of argument. In each chapter, in a number of different political and social venues, she argues for the control and suppression of the body by the power of the intellect. This is not unique to Wollstonecraft alone, as both Locke and Rousseau make similar claims; what is unique about her work, however, is that she makes a conflicted and paradoxical claim for women's emancipation based on the suppression and despotic control of their bodies. While it is true that she strongly advocates the development of women's physical strength and endurance, such claims are carefully couched within the doctrine of utilitarianism. She asserts that "strength of mind in most cases [has] been accompanied by superior strength of body" (*Rights* 124). Furthermore, she claims that physical weakness has dire consequences for women. She asserts that "dependence of body naturally produces dependence of mind," and questions how a woman "can be a good wife or mother [when] the greater part of [her] time is employed to guard against or endure sickness" (131). This view strikes me as profoundly utilitarian, because she is clearly viewing the body as a means to an end. For Wollstonecraft, the body is a tool that, when operating properly, will facilitate the acquisition of Reason. This perception flows from a long-standing patriarchal tradition

³ M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Micheal Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Micheal Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 293-94.

that objectifies woman's bodies and places them at odds with, or in subservience to, the mind and its rational powers. Consequently, I agree with Gatens' conclusion that "a radical re-thinking of the connections between reason, the body, and politico-ethical relations" is required and that the development of "a theoretical space that is not dominated by the isomorphism between male bodies and political bodies" is essential to any ongoing feminist analysis (Gatens 55).

Rather than leaving us stranded, Gatens provides an alternative theoretical model for a feminist construction of the body. She proposes that "Spinoza's philosophy is capable of suggesting an account of the body and its relation to social life, politics, and ethics that does not depend on the dualism that has dominated traditional modern philosophy" (56). From this perspective, she argues that his theories of difference and the body are suitable to feminist explorations that are in search of alternative "ontologies which would be developed hand in hand with a politico-ethical stance that accommodates multiple, not simply dichotomously sexed bodies" (56). Gatens argues that the deployment of theories of polyvalence is crucial for feminist analysis, as it will insure that "feminists who are in a position of (relative) social power do not use this power to further entrench polarities that function negatively in relation to other social groups" (56). Thus, it is important for women to recognize differences beyond those of gender and acknowledge differences of race, class, sexual orientation, age, and ability. This realization is predicated on the fact that an embrace of "Spinozist metaphysics would require the reconsideration of several dominant feminist principles" (56). Gatens admits that, while "the polarization between men and women is part of our sociopolitical

histories which cannot be ignored,” it is also important to recognize that an uncritical “acceptance of this dualism is merely perpetuating relations whose construction” is directly related to the dynamics of oppression (56).

Within this framework, Gatens proposes an alternative vision of political practice. She asserts that “the kind of political practice envisaged here is one where difference could not be decided a priori, but rather recognized in the unfolding of shared (or conflicting) aims and objectives of groups of bodies” (56). She argues that Spinoza does not “neutralize difference,” but “rather allows a conceptualization of difference which is neither dichotomized or polarized” (56). This facet of Spinoza’s philosophy “offers the possibility of resolving some of the current difficulties in the much debated relation between feminist theory and dominant theory”(56). This ‘resolution’ is facilitated by a perspective that will enable us to “abandon the dualist ontology of mind versus body, nature versus culture,” and “circumvent the either/ or impasse of current feminist theory between affirming an essential mental equality, which the progress of civilization can be entrusted to expose, and affirming an essential bodily difference” (57). Gatens contends that Spinoza’s view of the body provides a viable model for feminists, because it “does not lend itself to an understanding of sexual difference in terms of a consciousness/ body or sex/ gender distinction” (57). Nor is Spinoza’s view of the body one of a “part of passive nature ruled over by an active mind”; rather, “the body is the ground of human action,” and the “mind is constituted by the affirmation of the actual existence of the body” (57). From this perspective, “reason is active and embodied precisely because it is the affirmation of a particular bodily existence” (57). Accordingly, “the Spinozist account

of the body is of a productive and creative body which cannot be definitely known, since it is not identical with itself across time" (57). This conception of the body transcends the constraints of universalism and essentialism in that "it does not have a 'truth' or 'true' nature", but is rather "a process [whose] meanings and capacities will vary according to its contexts" (57). This account problematizes essentialist accounts of the "female form and its capacities" by enabling "one to question the traditional alignments between the female body and the private sphere, and the male body and the public sphere without disavowing the historical facts that support these alignments"(58). Since "the most pressing difficulties in relation to affirming the presence of woman are the theoretical exclusions implicit within the discourses" that frame our political and philosophical inquires, Gatens concludes that "creating other modes of conceptualizing human culture that do not involve the passivity or invisibility of women is obviously of the greatest importance" (58).

I find Gatens' account of Spinoza's philosophy to be particularly invigorating, because it enables me to view parts of Wollstonecraft's political theory in a different light, and recuperate some of the damage done by her adherence to patriarchal liberalism. Wollstonecraft herself abandons the dualist ontology inherent within liberalism when she argues for the healing of the split between the public and private realms of society and hints at the implications for such a union on cultural perceptions of the female body. In her exposure of "The Pernicious Effects from the Unnatural Distinctions in Society," Wollstonecraft provides a thorough criticism of the disabling impact of women's imprisonment within the private realm. She questions "what have women to do in

society,” as it is currently composed, and reflects that they are currently condemned to “suckle fools and chronicle small beer” (*Rights* 256). She then goes on to propose a number of careers that women could profitably enter, but checks herself when she remembers that, in patriarchal society, “the few employments open to women, so far, from being liberal are menial” (267). She concludes by criticizing the “defective” government for remaining ignorant of the fact that the rendering of women’s “private virtue [into] a public benefit” requires the integration of women into the public realm and the acquisition of a “civil existence in the State” for women (267). Thus, for Wollstonecraft, the development of society depends, not upon fostering liberal, patriarchal dualisms between home and state, woman and man, but on the resolution of those divisions and the destruction of dualism.

This sentiment is reinforced by Wollstonecraft’s “indisputable” assertion that “the two sexes mutually corrupt and improve each other” (256). This erasure of gender divisions is accompanied by the contention that “public spirit must be nurtured by private virtue, or it will resemble the factitious sentiment, which makes women careful to preserve their reputation, and men their honor” (256). This link, between issues of gender and issues of state, is particularly illuminating for me. It destroys patriarchal binaries by enacting the Spinozist account of the body, without falling prey to the dangers of equivocation. Wollstonecraft’s destruction of gender categories fits into Gatens’ account of a conception of the body that defies the constraints of universalism and essentialism. If there are no divisions between men and women on the grounds of gender, and women are not displaced from the public realm, then it becomes impossible to constrain the body

within rigid genderized categories. In this social and political environment, conceptions of the body can become fluid and creative by participating in the reconciliation between family and state, the public and the private. This image of political and social fluidity characterizes the metaphors Wollstonecraft uses in her subsequent pleas for the abandonment of patriarchal dualism. Drawing upon contemporary social theory, Wollstonecraft argues that just as “a man has been termed a microcosm,” so too can “a family ...be called a state” (305). This connection between the public and the private undergirds her observation that “morality, polluted in the national *reservoir*, sends off *streams* of vice to corrupt the constituent parts of the body politic” (306). This “gangrene” can be stopped only when the principles of public duty “become the rules of private conduct” (306). Aquatic images of reservoirs and streams that, when frustrated, are transformed into images of disease enable Wollstonecraft subtly to empower rhetoric to erode the firm divisions established by patriarchal, liberal ideology. It is this revolution of language and metaphor that ultimately enables me to applaud Wollstonecraft as a feminist. I am still aware of the degree to which she was confined by the “feminist misogyny” which was aggravated by the patriarchal ideology inherent within liberalism. However, contextualizing her theory in light of Spinoza has shown me that she does more than simply reinforce the patriarchal status quo. By employing and validating images of fluidity that are commonly associated with the feminine, Wollstonecraft not only erodes dualistic social divisions, but moves towards a redefinition of the female body and the relocation of the body politic.

“How Do You Solve A Problem Like *Maria?*”:
The Revolutionary Aesthetics of Lesbian Sexuality
in
The Wrongs of Woman

“How does the feminine body and/ or lesbian skin proceed to write fiction?”

Nicole Brossard
(*The Aerial Letter* 91)

“The lesbian is a threatening reality for reality.
She is the impossible reality which reincarnates all fiction,
chanting and enchanting what we are or
would like to be.”

Nicole Brossard
(*The Aerial Letter* 121)

Wollstonecraft ends the *Rights of Woman* by tantalizing her audience with an allusion to a second volume that would elaborate on the nature of social reform resulting from “an improvement in female manners” (*Rights of Woman* 327). Marilyn Butler laments that this promise was unfulfilled and asserts that “Part II of the *Rights of Woman*...remains one of history’s great unwritten books” (*Works* 16). Butler suggests that Wollstonecraft hesitated to return to the *Rights of Woman* because of the “defeat in England of moderate demands for an extension of male suffrage” in 1793 and 1794 (16). She contends that, because the intended audience of *Rights of Woman* was composed of “male reformers,” any debate that continued to foreground female suffrage would alienate “the very audience she meant to persuade” (16). Within this political climate, Wollstonecraft shrewdly recognized that “the best route to women’s advancement was

through men,” and, according to Butler, redirected her energies towards “a movement for general reform” (16). Although this hypothesis may help to explain the appearance of *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* in 1794, it does not address the radical swerve in Wollstonecraft’s aesthetic practice during the last three years of her life. While I do not dispute Butler’s claim that the *Rights of Woman* largely targeted male reformers, I do not agree that setbacks to the male suffragist movement derailed Wollstonecraft’s quest for the emancipation of women. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, the liberal humanist discourse that Wollstonecraft uses to frame and define her program of social reform ultimately undermines her goal of substantive equality for women. In light of the failure of this project, it seems illogical that Wollstonecraft would elect to continue her discussion of women’s rights in the same forum or language. Rather than abandoning her cause, however, she begins to test “the acid and alkali of language” in search of a form capable of sustaining her weight (Winterson 172). What she discovers is that the development of an ideological structure capable of enabling the redefinition of female subjectivity and the relocation of the body politic would demand a reassessment of her audience and a radical overhaul of her linguistic and aesthetic strategies. In 1795, Wollstonecraft begins to undergo a gradual metamorphosis of style and a revolution of imagination. Rather than remaining confined within a liberal humanist discourse that limited her aesthetic strategies to those of emulation and reaction, she starts to explore the dynamics of re-vision and invention. In her *Short Residence*, she graphically demonstrates that “style makes nonsense of conventional boundaries between fiction and fact,” and explodes the conventional generic boundaries of the travel narrative in the process (187). The immediate success and public

acclaim of this volume provided some of the energy and impetus needed for the next stage in her imaginative, artistic, and aesthetic development.

While much has been made of the obvious parallels between the episodes of Wollstonecraft's life and the plots of her early fiction, *Wrongs of Woman* seems to be sculpted from terrain that is at once alien and familiar. Indeed, Wollstonecraft discovers that the distinctive fusion of aesthetic sensibility and technique "frees the writer from the weight of her own personality, [and] gives to her an incandescence of personality so that what she can express is more than, other than, what she is" (187). In this way, she is "not restricted to what she has experienced or what she knows, [but] is let loose outside of her own dimensions" (187). What she found when her imagination enabled her to transcend the purely temporal prompted her to begin work on a novel that would stand at the epicenter of literary, social, and sexual reform. Many critics are quick to dismiss *Wrongs of Woman* as a "failed" novel because of Wollstonecraft's seemingly shameless embrace of the sentimental novel, and her heroine's apparent inability to escape from a vicious cycle of objectification and patriarchal oppression. These judgements are slightly premature, however, as they neglect to take into consideration the political implications of the developments in Wollstonecraft's writing process. Consequently, rather than attempting to discover why the novel "failed," it may be more useful to explore the trouble with *Maria* and uncover why Wollstonecraft's writing process changed during the composition of her final novel. How does Wollstonecraft's manipulation of generic conventions enable her to redefine philosophical notions of female subjectivity in an

aesthetic form? Is she ultimately able to recuperate the female sexual body while relocating the body politic?

Shortly after Wollstonecraft's untimely death in September 1797, William Godwin began work on a *Memoir of the Author of the Rights of Woman*. While his expressed intention was to "give the public some account of a person of eminent merit," the appearance of the *Memoir*, in conjunction with Wollstonecraft's *Letters to Imlay*, "tarnished [her] reputation for the remainder of the eighteenth century" (Moore 248). As her "personal notoriety" continued to eclipse her work into the nineteenth century, her writings were commonly "paraded as a warning against the twin evils of revolutionary politics and women's independence" (248). Consequently, much of what Godwin had to say about Wollstonecraft was lost in the fracas. Ironically, one of the most revealing insights that he made public had nothing to do with Wollstonecraft's tumultuous emotional life or sexual entanglements. Rather, it concerned her writing process. When speaking of the events of 1797, Godwin reflects on the composition of the *Wrongs of Woman*. He begins by revealing that Wollstonecraft had been working on the novel for a full year before her death. He notes that this deliberate pace contrasted sharply with the rapidity with which she completed her earlier publications.¹ He contends that this sudden shift was produced by her "consciousness of her talents," and her desire "that they should effect what they were capable of effecting" (Godwin 264). He claims that "she was sensible how arduous a task it is to produce a truly excellent novel, and she roused her faculties to grapple with it" by writing slowly and with "mature considerations" (264).

¹ In his *Memoirs of Wollstonecraft*, William Godwin reveals that *The Rights of Woman* "was begun, carried on, and finished in the state in which it now appears, in a period of no more than six weeks" (232).

Consequently, she developed a number of different outlines “which she successively rejected after they were considerably advanced” (264). Godwin observed that, quite uncharacteristically, she “wrote many parts of the work again and again,” and, when the first part of the novel was finally completed, “she felt herself more urgently stimulated to revise and improve what she had written than to proceed ...with the parts that were to follow” (264).

While Godwin’s prophecy that Wollstonecraft’s work “will be read as long as the English language endures” is well on its way to being fulfilled, it is not yet clear that we have developed strategies capable of *hearing* her (232). In his analysis of “Class, Caste, and Canon,” Paul Lauter probes the ways in which issues of caste and class operate to shape the literary canon, and how that process is “related to or a function of critical technique” (Lauter 228). In the course of this exploration, he considers the degree to which the social construction of literary criticism “effectively screens from our appreciation [and] our scrutiny other worlds of creativity and art” (228). Thus, there may quite possibly be “other worlds of art out there whose nature, dynamics, values we fail to appreciate because we ask the wrong questions, or don’t know the questions to ask” (228). In the process of writing a *Short Residence* and planning *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft became aware of the degree to which the forms of literary discourse available to her were products of a “male, white, bourgeois cultural tradition” (228). In this light, it seems possible that the alterations to her writing process reflect her attempt,

not merely to rewrite *Mary* as Janet Todd has suggested², but to fuse the two most popular and influential genres of her time: the sentimental novel and the gothic.

Wollstonecraft embraces this challenge with the goal of forging a new voice capable of articulating the rhetoric of freedom.

Was Wollstonecraft able to attain this objective before her untimely death in September 1797? After assessing “The Gender of Genres in Eighteenth Century England,” Mary Poovey’s response is overwhelmingly negative. While she begins with the acknowledgement that the creative impetus behind the composition of *Wrongs of Woman* was Wollstonecraft’s desire to “reformulate the insights of *The Rights of Woman* in a genre she felt certain could articulate her own emotion and attract a female audience,” her perspective on Wollstonecraft’s achievement quickly becomes clear (Poovey 111). Poovey immediately draws her reader’s attention to the “writer’s block” Wollstonecraft experienced in 1797, and contends that “the hesitation which afflicted *Maria*’s composition haunts its prose” through disjointed syntax and an “inconsistent...relationship between the narrative consciousness and that of the heroine” (111). While she initially declines to attribute these difficulties to a personal failing on Wollstonecraft’s behalf, the language that Poovey chooses to describe the alterations in Wollstonecraft’s writing process is itself quite revealing. That she classifies Wollstonecraft’s experience as “writer’s **block**” arguably foreshadows her final verdict on the novel and on Wollstonecraft’s creative courage. Rather than recognizing the time

² In “Political Friendship,” Todd contends that, when the narrative of *Mary* is temporarily suspended with the question “why was I not born a man, or why was I born at all?” hanging in the air, *Maria* “enacts her legal interruption in marriage” and “echoes the deathly ending of *Mary, A Fiction*.” (214).

she spent on the novel as emblematic of a shift in her creative process, Poovey evaluates her by quietly invoking New Critical standards where narrative disjunction, inconsistency, and fragmentation are marks of deficiency and failure.

Since, like most critics, Poovey does not advertise her critical assumptions on her sleeve, she begins her criticism of *The Wrongs of Woman* by painting a portrait of a social and literary context in which Wollstonecraft's project was bound to fail. She issues a gloomy warning of an inevitable clash between the "intended purpose" of the novel and its genre (112). She argues that "Wollstonecraft's political insights and the sentimental structure" that she had chosen to relay her message "were dangerously at odds" (112). Poovey goes on to predict friction between the function of the novel and its form on the grounds that Wollstonecraft's expression of "those 'finer sensations' - and the sentimental genre in which they were characteristically enshrined - were deeply implicated in the very values of bourgeois society which [she] wanted to criticize" (112).

While Poovey was correct in identifying a certain tension in the novel, her assessment of that tension may prove to be somewhat misleading. In his discussion of "Female Philosophy in the Bedroom: Mary Wollstonecraft and Female Sexuality," Gary Kelly qualifies the simple adversarial relationship between Wollstonecraft and the bourgeois culture painted by Poovey. While he shares Poovey's initial assumption that Wollstonecraft's writings articulate the centrality of "the construction and emancipation [of female sexuality] to both courtly and revolutionary regimes," Kelly attempts to clarify Wollstonecraft's perspective on sensibility and sexuality by drawing a detailed picture of

her cultural context (Kelly 144). Working to demonstrate that “the personal is political was a common understanding in the age of Mary Wollstonecraft,” Kelly addresses the intimate connection between Wollstonecraft’s sexual and political practices. He contends that, “before the Revolution, writers of sensibility reformulated the relation of the personal and political as a comprehensive oppositional culture constructed in the interests and image of the self-idealized middle class” (147). He asserts that, “according to the politics of Sensibility, the illegitimate personality politics of court government were to be supplanted by a politics of merit, or the disciplined moral and intellectual subject that was the idealized image of the professional man at the time” (147). However, since the *ancien regime* was typically personified as the father, “sensibility, as an oppositional culture, tended to figure its idealized self as female and feminine after a bourgeois rather than courtly model of woman” (147). This metaphorical association between femininity and sensibility granted Wollstonecraft a modicum of political power that remains unrecognized by Poovey. Furthermore, the common recognition of the direct relationship between professional success and access to philosophical discourse provided Wollstonecraft with the opportunity to redeem the appellation of ‘female philosopher’ from its status as an oxymoron. It was from this position of political and philosophical empowerment that Wollstonecraft began to “theorize her own experience of sexuality” (147).

Candace Ward also agrees that Wollstonecraft was not silenced by her “insights about the fictions that buttressed eighteenth century British society” (Ward 409). As Kelly suggests, Wollstonecraft drew upon her understanding of a pre-Revolutionary

“benevolent, and community oriented notion of sensibility” in order to “effectively rewrite...the novel of sensibility” by ejecting the notions of “false refinement” that invalidated and censored expressions of female sexuality (410-1). Citing some of Wollstonecraft’s reviews of the novels of her contemporaries, Ward notes that she was especially critical of the pervasive equation of sensibility with “passivity and powerlessness” that undergirded post-Revolutionary fiction. In gothic and sentimental novels alike, “the heightened awareness and responsiveness that distinguished the heroine...also caused her dilemma” (412). In most cases, “the novel turned on the heroine’s reaction to her often threatening circumstances” (412). In this way, “sensibility was both incorporated and implicated by the novel’s plot” (412). Ward claims that Wollstonecraft exposes this “correlation between *fiction* and women’s oppression” by devising a heroine who is capable of proaction rather than reaction (413). Thus, while the setting described in the opening pages of *The Wrongs of Woman* invokes a number of familiar gothic conventions, Maria’s immediate quest for a plan of “employment in her dreary cell” explodes the conventional relationship between reader and text, and signals the advent of a new kind of heroine (*Wrongs* 86). Citing the work of Michelle Masse, Ward notes that “the typical gothic heroine...has not only learned to turn active drives inward, but to ‘see her trials as unique to herself and thereby avoid systemic inquiry about the source of her suffering’” (Ward 415). Consequently, “she carefully monitors herself, finds virtue in renunciation, and teaches other women to do so as well” (415). In sharp contrast to this paradigm, “Maria finds no virtue in renunciation...[but] derives her virtue from a determination to *act*” (415).

This journey towards the attainment of virtue through action, or an “active sensibility,” carries profound implications for the construction of female sexuality within gothic and sentimental texts. Ward contends that “Maria’s willingness to act – her energy – creates much of the novel’s tension, largely because this energy is allied with her sexuality” (417). She notes that Wollstonecraft works against the gothic convention of the virginal heroine by imbuing Maria with sexual agency and experience. While this “sexual knowledge does not protect her from the harsh realities of the world any more than virginity” shields other gothic heroines, it does free her from the dominant cultural and literary association between virginity and honor (417). By validating and claiming her sexual agency, Maria becomes able to “formulate a definition of honor and chastity contrary to [that of] society, one that does not allow her to violate ‘the purity of her own feelings’” (417). In this way, Wollstonecraft is able to reconfigure sentimental and gothic characterizations of the heroine.

There is, however, one other consequence of Maria’s sexual empowerment that Ward neglects to take into consideration. Since Ward glosses over the significance of Jemima’s role by suggesting that her narrative function is merely to provide “a foil for Maria’s sensibility,” she never stops to consider the impact of Jemima’s sexual identity on Wollstonecraft’s construction of female sexuality. Indeed, an understanding of Jemima’s role is central to an analysis of Wollstonecraft’s reconfiguration of women’s roles as philosophers, artists, activists, and sexual agents. Gary Kelly argues that, while Wollstonecraft was aware of the pressing need to integrate the concept of the female philosopher with female sexuality in order to demonstrate the viability of the

Revolutionary project, she found herself caught in a double bind. As early as the 1780s, Wollstonecraft was cognizant that “both conventional marriage and unconventional sexual conduct would...vitate her project of self-construction as a ‘female philosopher’” (Kelly 148). Kelly contends that “in the face of this impasse, Wollstonecraft struggled to find an acceptable practice of sexuality,” and found it in an “intense female friendship” with Fanny Blood (148). While he admits that Wollstonecraft’s intense feelings about her relationship with Blood “may be taken to indicate a lesbian or potentially lesbian relationship,” he argues that “Blood’s death put an end to [her] experiment in female sexuality” (148).

While Kelly is right to draw our attention to the ways in which Wollstonecraft’s relationship with Blood enabled her to integrate sexuality and theory, mind and body, I believe that he unnecessarily minimizes her experience by limiting its potency to the short duration of Blood’s life. From this distance, it is impossible to determine if Wollstonecraft was presented with the opportunity to have another same-sex relationship after Blood’s death, and, in some ways, such a search is a product of sensationalism rather than scholarship. What is important, and well within our grasp, is an understanding of the ways in which Wollstonecraft integrates lesbian sexuality into her art and political theory.

Wollstonecraft’s depiction of Jemima demonstrates her perception that lesbian relationships follow different contours than heterosexual ones and, as such, represent a way of escaping patriarchal constraints on women’s intellectual, artistic, and sexual

fertility. While Ward spends a great deal of energy portraying Maria as a new kind of heroine, Poovey assigns that role to Jemima. By pointing out the sharp juxtaposition between the narratives of the two women, she underscores that it is Jemima, not Maria, who has transcended her role as victim by acquiring and utilizing transformative “levels of intellectual resolution and emotional resilience” (Poovey 118). In Jemima’s hands, the frustrated heterosexual desire that bubbles beneath the surface of sentimentalism erupts into “a more radical expression of feminine feeling” that is evidenced by her “capacity to love women” (118). From this perspective Jemima’s “genuinely radical, indeed, feminist story has the potential to call into question both the organizational principles of bourgeois society and the sentimentalism that perpetuates romantic idealism” (119).

Despite this brief acknowledgement of the power of Jemima’s narrative “to explode the assumptions which tie female sexuality to romance” and patriarchal authority, she concludes that Wollstonecraft fails to marshal the revolutionary power of that narrative to reconfigure the relationship between women’s sexuality and sentimentalism (119). Since the flow of Jemima’s narrative is interrupted by an “indistinct noise,” and she assumes the role of a paid servant rather than one of an “equal partner,” Poovey insists that her radicalism is successfully absorbed into Maria’s sentimentalism. To Poovey, this subsummation suggests that Wollstonecraft “is not willing to seriously consider such a radical alternative to women’s enslavement” (119).

A careful analysis of Jemima’s ideological and structural roles in the narrative not only circumvents this attempt to minimize and dismiss her contribution to Wollstonecraft’s revolutionary project, but also sheds a different light on the success of

the novel as a whole. In order to illuminate Jemima's ideological function in the text, it may be useful to consider her within the context of Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and the carnival. In her discussion of "Gender in Bakhtin's Carnival," Dale Bauer suggests that Bakhtinian analysis is a powerful tool with which to examine "the opposition between the surveillant gaze and the disruptive (excessive or insistent) voice" (Bauer 672). According to Bauer, this form of narrative disruption occurs when women embrace dialogic polemics by "stepping out of their traditional function as sign; by refusing the imposition of the gaze; [and] by exchanging their sign status for that of a manipulator of signs" (672). She contends that, "at that moment of refusal [women] become threatening to the disciplinary culture which appears naturalized" and validated by the patriarchy (673). This notion of disruption is also integral to Bakhtin's concept of the carnival. Bauer defines the carnival as "the realm of desire unmasked, taken out of the law of culture, and involved in an economy of difference" (679). Thus, "while authoritative discourse demands conformity, the carnivalized discourse renders invalid any codes, conventions, or laws which govern or reduce the individual to an object of control" (679).

As demonstrated in my first chapter, both working class and middle class women in the eighteenth century were subject to an infinite number of controls and restrictions that involved not only their bodies, but their wallets. The issues that intertwined the economic and sexual oppression of women come to a head in Jemima's narrative. In her analysis of "Women Writers of the 1790s and the Eighteenth Century Prostitution Narrative," Vivien Jones argues that, through Jemima's character, Wollstonecraft "exposes a causal link between prostitution and the system of heterosexual relations in

which women...are always taught to look up to a man for maintenance, and to consider their persons as the proper return for his exertions to support them” (Jones 202).

In order to support this claim, Jones conducts a detailed examination of the social and political contours of prostitution in the 1790s. She begins by noting that this decade witnessed a renewed politicization of prostitution, “both as polemical metaphor and as social fact” (203). Citing studies by Gary Kelly and Donna Andrews, Jones contends that “the 1790s saw a significant shift in the representations of the prostitute in the literature of social reform” (203). Indeed, the common depiction of the prostitute as the “innocent victim of sentimental narrative” dissolved, and was quickly replaced by the portrait of the prostitute as a “source of contagion which must be locked away from public sight or contact in penitentiaries” (203). In order to evaluate Wollstonecraft’s position along the political spectrum covered by these debates, Jones examines her “use of an inherited plot paradigm: the classic sentimental narrative of the seduced woman” (203). Thus, “when Jemima, the ex-prostitute and prison warder, is moved to tell her story...she speaks out of a long tradition of similar narratives” (203).

Who do we see, and what do we hear when Jemima tells her life story? When she shatters the “powerful spell” cast by Darnford’s invocation of the conventions of sentimental romance with a single tear, we are suddenly confronted with “a disturbingly liminal figure” (*Wrongs* 106; Jones 204). The narrator’s report that this tear originated from Jemima’s feeling that, “for once in her life, [she was being] treated like a fellow creature” foreshadows the construction of a character whose very essence is defined by

her marginality (*Wrongs* 106). As her report of her mother's nightmarish confinement in her employer's garret suggests, Jemima begins her life as an object of hatred and a product of shame. By the very conditions of her conception, Jemima was exiled outside of the limits of social acceptability and respectability. Certainly her mother was aware of this fact, as she had "incessantly importuned" Jemima's father "to screen her from reproach by marrying her" before Jemima's birth (107). When he refuses to exercise his patriarchal privilege to confer respectability on her or to place her safely within the conventions of sentimental romance, Jemima's mother attempts to prove herself to be "a creature of sensibility, and truly feminine after all" by "having the decency to die" (Jones 205). Having been bequeathed the middle class virtues of "honesty and a regard for her reputation," Jemima's mother's response to her "ruin" was logically to express remorse through an admission of "shame," and thereby reclaim "her actual or honorary middle class status" (*Wrongs* 107; Jones 205).

The expression of remorse through untimely death was a key component of mid-eighteenth century humanitarian narratives of prostitution. Jones notes that one important consequence of the fictional deaths of fallen [sic] women was to facilitate the appropriation of their subjectivities by the reader of the text in which they appeared. From this perspective, the reader only granted compassion to these women after they acquired a "sense of property" or control over them (204). While Jemima's mother was not technically classified as a prostitute, she is portrayed as "a victim of seduction" and, consequently, attempts to manipulate the "sentimental fictional contract" and its humanitarian ideologies to inspire compassion in her readers and fellow characters, while

escaping narrative and moral liminality (204-5). Unfortunately, just as she was initially deceived by her lover, Jemima's mother misplaces her trust in the conventions of the sentimental seduction narrative. Rather than being recuperated after her death as an object of pity and reclaimed respectability, her memory is fashioned in a curse that blights her daughter's existence.

Indeed, what Jemima "inherits" from her mother is not her "wicked disposition," but her status as a fallen woman, beyond the pale of any moral or narrative authority (*Wrongs* 109). In the spirit of Bakhtin's carnival hero, Jemima "seeks to resist the essentializing framework of other people's words about [her] that finalize and deaden" her character (Bauer 679). Unlike her mother before her, Jemima refuses to renounce her subjectivity by embracing death, and instead "learns to curse existence" (*Wrongs* 107). What this existence entails, however, are countless incidents of abuse, neglect, and rape which would seem to guarantee her role in the "comforting cultural myth" of the "penitent, suffering, and redeemable prostitute" (Jones 204). For this story to remain "comforting" to emissaries of patriarchal authority, Jones notes that the woman at its core must become "the object of pity and charity" (204). Otherwise, the "disruptive sexual energies, class antagonisms, and commercial guilt" she represents will explode and radically alter the structure of the narrative (204).

At this point, it is important to note that Jemima was never once treated with pity or charity. From the moment she was "left in the dirt [without] a bosom to nestle in," to the night she was raped, impregnated, and deserted by her employer, she is consistently

denied compassion on the grounds of her illegitimacy (*Wrongs* 107). Ironically, this refusal to grant moral or narrative compassion, when combined with Jemima's stubborn protection of her own subjectivity, places her in a position of ideological power. When she begins her life as a paid prostitute, she initially occupies space within "the carefully policed, but largely spurious, ideological boundaries between the public world of commerce and the private sphere of sexuality and domesticity, between the economic and the erotic" (Jones 204). As she solidifies her status as an "independent sexual tradeswoman," however, she begins to problematize both sentimental and humanitarian ideologies of female sexuality, and becomes a "site of multiple cultural anxieties" (204). Thus, while Jemima remained "a slave, a bastard, a property" during her time on the street, she acquired economic agency by "pick[ing] the pockets of the drunkards who abused her" (*Wrongs* 112). This "independence," while limited, did enable her to obtain control, for the first time, over her body, her place of residence, and her sexuality (112).

Despite "detesting [her] nightly occupation," Jemima recognized the "value" of her sexual and economic autonomy and, for that reason, delayed her entrance into a "house of ill-fame" until she "had been hunted almost into a fever" by the police (112). Her status as an "outlaw of society" functions on at least two levels. At this point in the narrative, Wollstonecraft interjects a political commentary on the common police practice of extorting a "tithe of prostitution" in order to expose the extent to which the figureheads of patriarchal power and authority are invested in maintaining control over women's productive and reproductive powers (113). Perhaps, more importantly, Wollstonecraft demonstrates that women like Jemima were accurately perceived as threats to both the

values and structure of mainstream middle class culture. We first get a glimpse of this power at a moment when, ironically, Jemima appears completely prone and powerless. When she first communicates the fact of her pregnancy to her employer, his immediate response is one of fear. Jemima reports that he was “equally alarmed” by her pregnancy as “he feared his wife and public censure at the [religious] meeting” (111). This initial response and his later attempts to use money to buy Jemima’s silence³ demonstrate the power of the literal embodiment of female sexuality to disrupt and decimate patriarchal authority in both the private and public spheres. In this way, Jemima’s pregnancy lays the foundation for her further erosion of the boundaries between public and private, commercial and sexual, agent and victim. By embracing the liminal power of the prostitute, she dissolves the paradigm of sexual and economic dependence encoded in the genre of sentimental romance in the crucible of her own experience⁴, and clears the space necessary for a new voice imbued with a revolutionary narrative authority.

In order to examine the range and resonance of this new voice, Susan Lanser developed a “Feminist Poetics of the Narrative Voice.” Lanser bases her full length study of *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* on the argument that “the narrative voice and narrated world are mutually constitutive,” and that “the narrator occupies a liminal position that is at once contingent and privileged” (Lanser 4). By

³ Jemima’s employer attempts to bribe her to protect his identity on two separate occasions. A few hours after he cast her from his home, he sent an errand boy with a half-a-guinea to prevent her from “repeating her tale to every enquirer” (111). The next morning when Jemima confronts him, he again offers financial assistance on the condition that she does “not make free with his name” (112).

⁴ After the “worn out votary of voluptuousness” with whom she had been living dies unexpectedly, Jemima refuses to surrender to the paralysis of sentimental grief and “obtained the arrears of her wages” from his executor (114). In addition, she refuses to be bribed by Maria in exchange for her release from the asylum. As she points out, the very fact of Maria’s legal subordination to Venables renders her incapable of providing assured funds for such a proposition (91).

integrating feminist and narratological perspectives, Lanser contends that it becomes possible to recognize the ways in which “narrative voice, situated at the juncture of ‘social position and literary practice,’ embodies the social, economic and literary conditions under which it has been produced” (5). For this reason, “both narrative structures and women’s writing are determined, not by essential properties or isolated aesthetic imperatives, but by complex and changing conventions that are...produced by the relations of power that implicate writer, reader, and text” (5).

Within this theoretical context, Lanser contrasts the “female voice” with the traditional alignment of literary authority within “white, privileged-class, male terms” (6). She contends that the female voice “is a site of ideological tension made visible in textual practice” (6). By “linking social identity and narrative form,” Lanser details the ways in which “the authority of a given voice or text is produced from a conjunction of social and rhetorical properties” (6). To the degree that “discursive authority is produced interactively,” it is “defined in terms characteristic of its receiving community” (6). However, since “Western literary systems” have largely been constructed by “white, educated men of hegemonic ideology,” Lanser argues that “one of the major constituents of narrative authority is the extent to which a narrator’s status conforms to this dominant social power” (6). In the case of many women writers and narrators who are radically disempowered, narrative authority evolves through the subversion of socially acceptable textual practices.

In their “quest for discursive authority,” Lanser asserts that female narrators embrace the Herculean task of “writing themselves into Literature without leaving Literature the same” (8). Consequently, they “often call into question the very authority they endorse or, conversely, endorse the authority they seem to be questioning” (8). This bifurcated approach enables “these narrators [to] expose the *fictions* of authority” which undergird many of the canonical texts in the Western literary tradition (8). Rather than arguing for the existence of an essential or authentic female voice, Lanser proposes that “different communities of women have had different degrees of access to particular narrative forms” (8). Since many eighteenth-century women were prohibited from exercising a public voice, Lanser focuses her attention on the ways that these writers succeeded in frustrating patriarchal constraints and claiming public authority. Citing an anonymous letter that was first published in *Atkinson’s Casket* in 1832, Lanser contends that “the ‘feminine style’ of the surface text, that ‘powerless,’ non-authoritative form called ‘women’s language’ here becomes a powerfully subversive mask for telling secrets to a woman under the watchful eyes of a man⁵” (11). By deliberately employing and exposing “the mechanism of its own abjection,” Lanser argues that the surface text of the letter ultimately succeeds in subverting patriarchal narratological and editorial authority (11). In this way, “the female voice conforms in order to ‘con’ form,” to provide “a calculated response to alienation and censorship,” and to successfully “evade material threat” (11).

In her specific analysis of Wollstonecraft’s transformation of the narrative voice in *Wrongs of Woman*, Lanser asserts that Wollstonecraft’s first task is to claim a form of

⁵ Please see Appendix A.

narrative authority for two “women who stand visibly outside the bounds of propriety and law” (232). She contends that this feat is accomplished by devising two distinct narrative techniques. The first component of Wollstonecraft’s narrative strategy is to employ “free, indirect discourse to validate the feelings, thoughts, and perspectives of her characters” (232). This is closely followed by a deliberate alternation of narrative perspective in order to engender the sense of a reliable “microcosmic, cross-class community” (232). Both of these efforts are made to locate Maria and Jemima firmly within a traditional authorial mode of narration. Lanser defines the authorial voice as one which occurs in “narrative situations that are heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential” (15). She asserts that, within this mode of narrative, “readers are invited to equate the narrator with the author, and the narratee with themselves” (16). This identification “gives the authorial voice a privileged status among narrative forms” (16). Within the broad category of authorial narrative, Lanser distinguishes between narrators who are limited to representational discourse, and those who are “extrarepresentational.” She contends that these extrarepresentational acts are significant because they “expand the sphere of fictional authority to ‘nonfictional’ referents, and allow the writer to engage from within the fiction in a culture’s literary, social, and intellectual debates” (17).

This is an important concept to keep in mind when reading Wollstonecraft, as she constantly attempts to establish a relationship between her text and political/ social reality. While Maria’s memoir is ostensibly addressed to her daughter, it draws heavily upon the popular genre of the advice manual or conduct book. While such texts were theoretically private documents exchanged between parents and their children, such

privacy was often a pretense for what was a very public document. Indeed, in the fifth chapter of the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft takes aim against several of the most influential conduct books of her age, including James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, and *The Character and Conduct of the Female Sex*. While Fordyce was largely concerned with employing "sentimental rant [to] detail his opinions respecting the female character," Wollstonecraft subverts the sexist, patriarchal ideology at its core by fashioning an explicitly political, public message within the framework of a private document (*Rights* 195). While Fordyce dwells at length on the "virtue" of sexual subservience in women "taught always to be pleasing," Wollstonecraft uses Maria's memoir as a conduct book designed to expose the intellectual atrophy that results from the sexual subordination coded in marriage contracts founded in sentimental ideology (197). Thus, Maria's sexual encounter with her husband does not reverberate with "lullaby strains of...endearment," but prompts a wish that "the earth open and swallow her." (*Wrongs* 145). Maria's repugnance at Venable's "pimpled face, blood-shot eyes...gross manners, and loveless familiarity" is immediately followed by an extensive exposure of the inequities of eighteenth-century matrimonial law (145). Maria herself signals the authorial nature of this "interruption in [her] narrative" by apologizing for it in highly sentimental discourse, which subtly draws the reader's attention back to the structure of the fiction itself. In this way, Wollstonecraft is able to integrate fictional and political discourse, private revelation and public exhortation.

While Lanser asserts that the authorial mode typically "has allowed women access to 'male' authority by separating the narrating 'I' from the female body,"

Wollstonecraft circumvents this erasure of gender identity by transforming Maria's body into the site at which the struggle for narrative authority occurs (Lanser 18). In order to bring this tension to a climax, Wollstonecraft moves the narrative out of the traditional authorial mode and into the personal. Unlike the authorial voice, the personal voice is fraught with danger for the woman writer and narrator, as it is incapable of providing a "gender-neutral...refuge" (19). Thus, while the personal voice is typically employed by those who are "self-consciously telling their own stories," Lanser argues that the authority of a female narrator is jeopardized "if the act of telling, the story she tells, or the self she constructs through telling transgresses the limits of the acceptably feminine" (19).

As one who is entirely outside of the patriarchal conceptions of femininity, how does Jemima negotiate this danger and validate a new form of sexual and narrative agency? While Lanser contends that Jemima's temporary assumption of the authorial voice inoculates her personal narrative sufficiently against the adverse effects of Darnford's narrative privilege, her confidence does not seem to accurately reflect the dynamics of the text (232). From the moment Darnford's character is introduced, Wollstonecraft carefully underscores the sexual, literary, and ideological threat that he poses. As early as the third chapter, Jemima is keenly aware of his desire to co-opt Maria's newfound sexual and narratological agency. This is reflected by her response when she witnesses Darnford's first attempt to communicate directly with Maria. As Maria was "turning over the leaves of one of the volumes" Darnford lent to her, "a slip of paper dropped out" which Jemima "snatched" with all the alacrity of one who fears

betrayal (*Wrongs* 98). Despite Maria's "impatient" demand to see the letter, Jemima "withdrew with the paper in hand," replying that "[she] must consider" its contents (98). This sharp contrast between Maria's "undu[ly] force[ful]" protestation of the letter's seizure, and Jemima's detached, logical, "consideration" subtly foreshadows the contours of the generic and sexual conflicts to come (98). Maria's highly dramatized response fits perfectly within the vocabulary of the wronged sentimental heroine, and matches the tone of Darnford's communiqué. Perhaps it is because, by Darnford's own admission, "the privilege of man is denied [him]," that Jemima retains narrative authority at this point in the text. The maintenance of this control, however, quickly becomes both more difficult and more consequential.

Indeed the ominous closure of Darnford's note symbolizes the ideological force behind his narrative voice⁶. Interestingly, it is not this open threat of patriarchal narrative power that sways Jemima's judgement; rather, it is Maria's request that she cannot refuse. Immediately after Jemima weakens to her "desire to please her charge," the narrator reports that Maria and Darnford become engaged in "an exchange of sentiments" (98). Rather than devising proactive plans for escape and the rescue of her child, Maria becomes engrossed with Darnford. Indeed, "to write these letters [to Darnford] were the business of the day, and to receive them the moment of sunshine" (98). Despite Jemima's attempts to refocus Maria's energy on her own need to obtain freedom by researching the fate of her child, Maria delves deeper into the world of sentimental romance, and is "frequently rendered insensible" to her own environment (99). As Maria becomes more

⁶ Darnford ends his note to Maria with the vow that he "will have an answer" concerning her mysterious detachment from her husband and her detainment in the asylum (98).

enervated by her participation in sentimental discourse, Darnford becomes empowered to the point where he engineers a personal meeting between them. In order to quench a desire that “became a torrent which bore down all opposition,” Darnford “bribed *his* principle keeper” in order to obtain access to Maria (99).

It seems significant that Darnford neglected to bribe Jemima, but such a choice is unlikely to be accidental on Wollstonecraft’s part. As Wollstonecraft’s readers learn earlier, Jemima’s narrative authority is not for sale. When Darnford strides into the room, he presents “an animation of countenance formed to captivate an enthusiast” of sentimental romance (100). As his personal narrative fleshes out his character, Maria, Jemima, and the reader are confronted by a libertine rake posing as a virtuous sentimental hero. As she was seduced by Venables, Maria succumbs to the sexual potency that backs Darnford’s narrative authority. Consequently, their furtive correspondence blossoms into a fully ripened sentimental seduction narrative that projects “fairy landscapes” on Maria’s blank, “gloomy walls,” and transports her “on the seraph wings of hope” to a state of rapture (105).

While Maria appears to attribute the advent of this rapture to being “beloved,” Jemima is not so easily fooled (105). Indeed, the narrator scrupulously reports the frequency with which Jemima “obliged [Maria and Darnford] to part in the midst of an interesting conversation” (105). Yet, one gets the sense that these “alarms” are not entirely “false,” for the one time that she leaves them unsupervised, Darnford “ventures...to approach [Maria’s] lips with a declaration of love” (105). While his

teasing, tantalizing dissolution of Maria's sexual agency smacks of libertine seduction narratives, he waits until Jemima re-enters the room in order to make physical contact with her and signal his sexual and narrative primacy. At this point, it seems that Darnford and the sentimental narrative he represents have triumphed. When Maria attempts to "open her whole heart" and deliver her personal narrative, she literally loses her voice and become subsumed by conventional physical signifiers of sentimental virtue and sexuality. More importantly, Maria's regression into the language of blushes derails her narratological and sexual allegiance with Jemima. Thus, while Jemima stood "at [Maria's] elbow, the restraint of her presence" did not prevent Maria's abduction to "Armida's garden" or the concomitant silencing of her narrative authority and sexual agency (106).

Jemima refuses to surrender, however, and she astutely decoys her disruption of Darnford's sentimental narrative by employing one of its most common conventions: the tear. The appearance of this tear enables Jemima to break into the narrative flow of the novel, and subvert Darnford's sexual and narratological appropriation of Maria much in the same manner as the author of the anonymous letter subverts her husband's authority. Darnford's gullibility and susceptibility to this Trojan Horse strategy provides Maria with the opportunity to return from Elysium and reclaim her sexual agency and personal narrative authority. Indeed, it is significant that, after her exposure to Jemima's narrative, Maria is able to shift her energies from her heart back to her mind, reconsider the "oppressed state of woman," and circumvent that circle of oppression by redoubling her efforts to find her daughter (120).

Maria's apprehension that her child died because she, "for an instant, ceased to regret her loss" opened the floodgates of her personal narrative, and prompted her to release her memoir to Darnford. Darnford attempts to minimize the radical implications of her memoir by fashioning a soothing, "affectionate" response in which he presents "impartial" criticisms of "the absurdity of the laws respecting matrimony" in order to regain "an interest in her heart" and access to her body (172). While Darnford expresses a desire to "restore [Maria] to liberty and love," his actions swiftly belie those intentions (172). He wolfishly seizes the opportunity to make love to her and earn the appellation of 'husband,' a title which, in the context of this novel, signifies neither love or liberty, but conquest.

Ironically, it is Jemima who, in the final chapters of the novel, is elected to restore Maria to liberty and love. When the moment comes to escape the patriarchal authority and oppression signified by the asylum, it is Jemima to whom Maria cries out "save me!" and is rescued (175). When Darnford later deserts her to the fury of "the dogs of law," echoes of the narrator's query about his capacity for "villainy" reverberate loudly and inform the pretexts of the majority of Wollstonecraft's fragmented conclusions (178, 106). Significantly, the most complete conclusion relays the reunion of Maria and her child as a consequence of Jemima's love and initiative. By restoring the child, Jemima effectively quells both Venables' and Darnford's control over Maria's reproductive, sexual, and economic power, and outlines the dimensions of a new form of romance

narrative: one based on dedication, loyalty, and love, rather than the folly of sexualized sentiment.

Conclusion

The conclusion of *Wrongs of Woman* with the pledge of an “affective duty” between Maria and Jemima lays the groundwork for a “feminized solidarity” that revolutionized conceptions of love and sexual partnership (Johnson 68). Indeed, Claudia Johnson contends that “the outlines discernable beneath the rubble of sentimental heterosexuality...invite us to conclude that the emancipated, sturdy, purposive, mutually respecting, and rationally loving couple Wollstonecraft spent her career imagining is, finally, a female couple” (69). While Johnson goes on to diminish the significance of this accomplishment on the grounds that it is nullified by “a world dominated by male vice,” I do not think that such a qualification is necessary. What Johnson fails to take into consideration is that *Wrongs of Woman* does not stand alone as the penultimate achievement of Wollstonecraft’s literary or political career. As I discussed earlier, each of Wollstonecraft’s works is part of a larger theoretical and political experiment. Indeed, to fully appreciate or understand the aesthetic and political strategy embedded in *Wrongs of Woman*, it is important to examine it in relation to the vision from which it sprung.

As I noted in the Introduction to this study, one of the key elements in Charlotte Bunch’s model of feminist theory is the concept of vision. She suggests that “determining what should exist requires establishing principles (or values) and setting goals” (Bunch 244). She contends that “in taking action to bring about change, we operate consciously or unconsciously out of certain assumptions about what is right or what we value, and out of our sense of what society ought to be” (244). Bunch proposes that this stage in the

theoretical process is unique, because it demands that we make “a conscious choice about those principles in order to make our visions and goals concrete” (245). It is at this moment that “we must look at our basic assumptions” that shape how we experience the world, and bring them to the forefront of our consciousness, “so that we do not operate out of the old theoretical framework by default” (245).

It is this shift, this desire for personal and political revolution, that marks the oft-commented distinction between Wollstonecraft’s *Short Residence* and the *Letters to Imlay* on which it is based. It is difficult to ignore the radical difference between the reception of the two texts. Richard Holmes observes that *Short Residence* “was the most popular book Wollstonecraft ever wrote, and...it represented a personal triumph over her circumstances” (Holmes 36). He argues that Wollstonecraft “regained her self respect” as a professional writer, and “found a new readership” in the winter of 1796 (36). The publication history of the text easily supports these contentions. As Holmes notes, its “reviews were widespread and favorable,” and “the book was swiftly translated into German, Dutch, Swedish, and Portuguese” (62). It was also issued in America at an unspecified date, and was put into a second edition in London by J. Johnson in 1802.

The popularity of the *Short Residence* seems to be due, at least in part, to the fact that it showed a different side to the author of *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Indeed, Amelia Anderson (later Opie) composed a “fan letter” to Wollstonecraft which, according to Holmes, “expressed the feelings of many of her younger contemporaries” (37). Anderson admitted that initially her “desire of seeing [Wollstonecraft] was

repressed by fear – but as soon as [she] read [her] letters from Norway, the cold awe which the philosopher has excited, was lost in the tender sympathy called forth by the woman,” who revealed herself to be “nothing but an interesting creature of feeling and imagination” (37). This sentiment was echoed loudly throughout Europe, even by those who had previously opposed Wollstonecraft on political grounds. The review printed in the *British Critic* applauded the narrator’s sensibility, and Wollstonecraft’s presentation of a “heart exquisitely alive to the beauties of nature, and keenly susceptible of every soft impression, every tender emotion” (602). Perhaps the most momentous assessment of the text was issued by William Godwin, who simply claimed that it was a book “calculated to make a man fall in love with its author” (Godwin 249).

This verdict becomes ironic, however, when one remembers that the original *Letters to Imlay* were written to inspire and enflame a man’s passion, and failed. One month before the publication of the *Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft “parted in peace” from Gilbert Imlay, after navigating an emotionally tempestuous relationship that lasted slightly over three years (*Letters* 438). While Godwin published Wollstonecraft’s correspondence with Imlay in good faith, perhaps it is fortunate that she did not live to witness its tumultuous reception. Unfortunately, no one except Godwin perceived the *Letters* as the work of “a female Werter” and, because they appeared in conjunction with Godwin’s *Memoir*, even Wollstonecraft’s supporters “wrote with hypocritical disapproval” of her life and work (Holmes 44).

I would like to suggest that *Short Residence* and the *Letters to Imlay* experienced such divergent critical receptions because of their difference in vision. In *Letters to Imlay*, Wollstonecraft constructs a purely private document that barely contains the clash between a highly conventional, sentimentalized discourse and radical political notions of the family unit and equal parenting. As one reads Wollstonecraft's letters to her lover, the tension between her language and political idealism ominously thickens the atmosphere of the room. While Imlay abandons Wollstonecraft to pursue business concerns as early as 29 December 1793¹, she continues to cast him in the role of the sentimental lover and, after Fanny is born, into the republican conception of fatherhood she detailed in *Rights of Woman*². Wollstonecraft's desire for Imlay to return and function as a sexual, intellectual, and emotional partner³ ultimately ruptures both the fabric of the text and their relationship. As she begins to perceive herself abandoned, Wollstonecraft enacts the role of the wronged sentimental heroine by alternatively entreating and threatening Imlay to return⁴. These narrative strategies ultimately undo Wollstonecraft as they cement her position in a subservient, submissive role, and rob her of both narrative and sexual authority.

¹ Imlay's absence is clearly referenced in Letter VII approximately one month after she confided her pregnancy to him.

² Wollstonecraft overflows with affection for Imlay after receiving some over-due letters. She admits that "I have only to tell you, what is sufficiently obvious, that the earnest desire I have shown to keep my place, or gain more ground in your heart, is a sure proof of how necessary your affection is to my happiness" (Letter XXI). While she acknowledges her dependence upon him for her emotional well being, she paradoxically believes in equitable parenting relationships. Concluding another mild chastisement for his absence she tells Imlay that Fanny "wants [him] to bear [his] part in the nursing business" (Letter XXIX).

³ In an early attempt to convince Imlay to give up the business interests that kept him away from home, Wollstonecraft assures him that if his schemes go sour "we will struggle cheerfully together – drawn closer by the pinching blasts of poverty" (Letter VX).

⁴ While there are too many examples to list of Wollstonecraft begging for Imlay's return, one of the most extensive is contained in Letter LX. Conversely, her threats to Imlay seem to assume two forms: her renunciation of his economic power, and her suicide. Please see Letter XXXVI for examples of both.

In the *Short Residence*, however, she combines her belief in the emotional equality of sexual partnerships with her aesthetic sense of the ideal cadence of the discourse of love. In her descriptions of the landscape and the people she encounters, Wollstonecraft balances the sublime and the picturesque, the sentimental and the rational, in order to create a revolutionary vocabulary that transgresses the boundaries of public/private, fictional/factual so completely that even the most accomplished readers of her age could not detect the seam linking her politics with her art.

It is this flawless enactment of her theoretical vision that fuels Wollstonecraft's strategic desire to map a new terrain where politics and art "spin and weave in the same action,"⁵ encircling "two women, eye to eye/ measuring each other's spirit, each other's limitless desire:

A whole new poetry beginning here."⁶

⁵ Rich, Adrienne. "Integrity." *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993. 92.

⁶ Rich, Adrienne. "Transcendental Etude." *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993. 90.

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APPENDIX A

The following letter originally appeared in *Atkinson's Casket* in April 1832. It was reprinted by Susan S. Lanser in her discussion of "The Feminist Poetics of Narrative Voice." *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. 9-10.

FEMALE INGENUITY

Secret Correspondence. – A young Lady, newly married, being obliged to show her husband, all the letters she wrote, sent the following to an intimate friend.

I cannot be satisfied my Dearest Friend!
blest as I am in the matrimonial state,
unless I pour into your friendly bosom,
which has ever been in unison with mine,
the various deep sensations which swell
with the liveliest emotions of pleasure
my almost bursting heart. I tell you my dear
husband is one of the most amiable of men,
I have been married seven weeks, and
have never found the least reason to
repent the day that joined us, my husband is
in person and manners far from resembling
ugly, crass, old, disagreeable, and jealous
monsters, who think by confining to secure;
a wife, it is his maxim to treat as a
bosom friend and confidante, and not as a
play thing or menial slave, the woman
chosen to be his companion. Neither party
he says ought to obey implicitly; -
but each yields to the other by turns -
An ancient maiden aunt, near seventy,
a cheerful, venerable, and pleasant old lady,
lives in the house with us - she is the de-
light of both young and old - she is ci-
vil to all the neighborhood round,
generous and charitable to the poor -
I know my husband loves nothing more
than he does me; he flatters me more
than the glass, and his intoxication
(for so I must call the excess of his love,)

APPENDIX A

FEMALE INGENUITY *continued...*

often makes me blush for the unworthiness of its object, and I wish I could be more deserving of the man whose name I bear. To say all in one word, my dear, _____, and to crown the whole, my former gallant lover is now my indulgent husband, my fondness is returned, and I might have had a Prince, without the felicity I find with him. Adieu! May you be as blest as I am unable to wish that I could be more happy.

As noted at the time of the letter's original publication, the key to deciphering it is to "read the first and every alternate line." The "hidden" text is as follows:

I cannot be satisfied, my dearest Friend!
 unless I pour into your friendly bosom,
 the various deep sensations which swell
 my almost bursting heart. I tell you my dear
 I have been married seven weeks, and
 repent the day that joined us, my husband is
 ugly, crass, old, disagreeable and jealous;
 a wife, it is his maxim to treat as a
 play thing or menial slave, the woman
 he says ought to obey implicitly; -
 An ancient maiden aunt, near seventy,
 lives in the house with us – she is the de-
 vil to all the neighborhood round,
 I know my husband loves nothing more
 than the glass, and his intoxication
 often makes me blush for the unworthiness
 of the man whose name I bear. To
 crown the whole, my former gallant lover
 is returned, and I might have had
 him. Adieu! May you be as blest as I am un-
 happy.