

Marks of Inferiority: REVIEW OF WOLLSTONECRAFT: PHILOSOPHY, PASSION AND POLITICS by Sylvana Tomaselli.

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Mary Wollstonecraft is in many ways ill-suited to the role of the earliest advocate of women's rights. The term 'feminism' and its tradition postdate her by at least half a century; she appears to have intensely disliked most women; and she celebrated qualities of mind that she tended to label 'masculine' or 'manly'. In the works for which she is best known, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she denounced her own sex as 'vain inconsiderate dolls' and satirised men who thought or wrote as if they were female. Edmund Burke, target of her first *Vindication*, is ridiculed as a bit of a girl – someone whose 'theatrical attitudes', 'sentimental exclamations' and 'pampered sensibility' in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) would find favour with 'the Ladies'. Her habit, in the second *Vindication*, of condemning female characteristics and behaviour as slavish, ignorant, mad, corrupt and infectious is even more startling. 'After surveying the history of women,' she concludes, 'I cannot help agreeing with the severest satirist, considering the sex as the weakest as well as the most oppressed half of the species. What does history disclose but marks of inferiority, and how few women have emancipated themselves from the galling yoke of sovereign man?'

As Wollstonecraft also observed, the silliness of 'silly females' was often due to failures in their upbringing. How could we expect creatures misguided from infancy to grow into anything other than weak, foolish and irrational adults? Her first book, a slim and cheerless collection of *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), begins by slamming mothers. From the moment girls are born, she tells us, lazy and thoughtless women, governed by whims, proceed to neglect them.

At this point, Wollstonecraft had no daughters of her own. But she knew what it felt like to be an abused child. Bitter experience lay behind her remarks in the book that 'the marriage state is too often a state of discord; it does not always happen that both parents are rational' and that 'half the miseries of life' derive from 'a tyrannical domineering temper'. Elizabeth Wollstonecraft was shackled to a mercurial, violent husband who bullied his family and drank away his modest fortune; silently enduring his rage, she showed neither affection nor gratitude to the daughter who tried in vain to protect her. Mary developed a rescuer's complex, proving unable throughout her adult life to resist the desire to solve other people's problems – even when her interventions were unwelcome. (She confessed to a friend in 1785 that 'I love most people best when they are in adversity – for pity is one of my prevailing passions.') Faced with a parental tyrant, she began to nurse her own sense of superiority and to hone her skills in verbal defiance. These early and thankless battles, as Wollstonecraft's husband, William Godwin, recalled after her death, 'instead of humbling her roused her indignation'. Her 'numerous projects of activity and usefulness', like her craving for love and attention, sprang from the early experience of being overlooked and disliked by both parents.

Energetic, bossy, manipulative and sometimes dictatorial, Wollstonecraft exerted herself to save her sisters from poverty and reliance on others, whether they liked it or not. Janet Todd, a sympathetic analyst of the relationships between this scattered clan of hurt and testy individuals, concluded in her *Life of Wollstonecraft* that the two younger girls, Everina and Eliza, often came in for brutal treatment at the hands of their clever sibling and would-be mother (after the death of their own in her early fifties). Mary compelled Eliza, sunk in postnatal depression, to leave her husband, Meredith Bishop, a man portrayed in Wollstonecraft's letters as unfeeling and cruel, although all the evidence suggests that he did want to look after his wife. Left motherless and poorly cared for, their baby died before her first birthday.

Wollstonecraft picked up her own education as best she could – apart from a few years at a day school in Yorkshire, where she learned to read and write, she was entirely self-taught. The usual choices available to a late 18th-century woman without any financial provision were few and seemed to her unpleasant: paid companion, schoolteacher, or governess. In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, she voiced a hearty distaste for all three:

Few are the modes of earning a subsistence, and those very humiliating. Perhaps to be an humble companion to some rich old cousin, or what is still worse, to live with strangers, who are so intolerably tyrannical, that none of their own relations can bear to live with them ... A teacher at a school is only a kind of upper servant, who has more work than the menial ones ... A governess to young ladies is equally disagreeable.

Rather than strive any longer to tolerate the intolerable, she became a writer for whom the economic insecurity and social standing of women were always matters of vehement concern. As a professional female writer determined to challenge male authority, she claimed to be ‘the first of a new genus’, but in truth she was embarking on a well-trodden track. In her *DNB* entry on Wollstonecraft, Barbara Taylor points out that ‘women writers were common in her world’ and that one especially enabling precedent was the radical feminist historian Catharine Macaulay, to whom Wollstonecraft sent a copy of the second edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* accompanied by a fan letter: ‘You are the only female writer who I coincide in opinion with respecting the rank our sex ought to endeavour to attain in the world.’ Six years before Wollstonecraft was born, Samuel Johnson had remarked, at once facetiously and in earnest, on the rise of ‘a generation of Amazons of the pen, who ... have set masculine tyranny at defiance, asserted their claim to the regions of science, and seem resolved to contest the usurpations of virility’.

She was not, then, the first of her kind, but she was strikingly experimental and wide-ranging in her style. The dour early voice in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* reappears in subsequent denunciations of prejudice and unfairness, but she could also be playful, sarcastic, melodramatic, confessional and elegiac. Her manner is best described by one of her own favourite adjectives: ‘voluptuous’. The speed at which she wrote – compelled to publish for money, and keen to beat her competitors into print, she handed sheets of her work to the press as she went along – ruled out the possibility of correction and revision, and made her anxious and frustrated. She churned out the three hundred pages of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in the course of three months. She sometimes described her associative, digressive style as ‘desultory’ and ascribed it partly to the gaps in her education. Systematic argument remained a challenge, and – in view of her continued insistence on the need for reason and logic – its absence left her vulnerable to mockery from opponents.

Following the success of the *Vindications*, she moved late in 1792 to Paris, where she fell in love with a disreputable American, Gilbert Imlay, and gave birth to a daughter, Fanny. Her most popular work, the *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), documents a four-month business trip intended to help her recover from a suicide attempt made after she discovered Imlay’s infidelity. Combining astute commentary on the manners, morals and institutions of the countries she visited with anguished personal reflections on love and abandonment, the *Letters* are by turns calmly observant and emotionally fervid, swerving abruptly from shrewd description of childrearing, hygiene, language and religious observance to invective against Imlay. The book, presented as a travelogue and as the ‘history of my own heart’, not only holds together but expands to accommodate moments of lyrical observation in which the solitary author’s rhapsodic feelings harmonise with and shade into her surroundings:

the spiral tops of the pines are loaded with ripening seed, and the sun gives a glow to their light green tinge, which is changing into purple, one tree more or less advanced, contrasting with another. The

profusion with which nature has decked them, with pendant honours, prevents all surprise at seeing, in every crevice, some sapling struggling for existence. Vast masses of stone are thus encircled; and roots, torn up by the storms, become a shelter for a young generation.

What might be construed in another context as inequalities or hallmarks of damage – evidence of beings or processes that are ‘more or less advanced’; the uneven distribution of ‘honours’; the struggle of a younger generation for existence; the tearing up of roots – are here seen as sublime phenomena. That doesn’t mean that the injustices against which Wollstonecraft inveighed in other writings are rendered acceptable because they have counterparts in nature. Rather, the description reveals her tendency to see the natural world as both sympathetic and alien, as a gloomy reflection of her own plight (and that of all struggling human beings), and as one of the few possible consolations for it.

The *Letters Written during a Short Residence*, Godwin thought, were ‘calculated to make a man in love with its author’. After Wollstonecraft’s return to London in 1795, their sparring friendship developed into love. They married in St Pancras Church in March 1797, to legitimise the child she was carrying. The couple lived together, but maintained separate and highly productive working lives, with Godwin renting a study nearby. They had only been married for five months when Wollstonecraft died from puerperal fever eleven days after the birth of their daughter, the future Mary Shelley. Wollstonecraft was described by David Bromwich as ‘the first modern theorist of an idea of individuality’. She strove to effect change not only in the structures of male domination, suggesting, for example, that women should be represented in Parliament, but in the social and psychological processes whereby identity comes to be defined. The immediate prompt to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was Talleyrand’s report to the National Assembly in 1791, in which he advised that female education should be restricted and women barred from public life. This was especially galling to Wollstonecraft, who was hoping to bear witness to the emergence in France of ‘the first constitution founded on reason’ – one in which women would not continue to be ‘excluded, without having a voice, from a participation of the natural rights of mankind’. But the way out of present inequalities was, it seemed, neither clear nor straightforward: women would necessarily continue to depend on men in order to achieve any improvement in their state. It might even be the case that men would be their superiors for ever, since from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue. I speak collectively of the whole sex; but I see not the shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues should differ in respect to their nature. In fact, how can they, if virtue has only one eternal standard? I must therefore, if I reason consequentially, as strenuously maintain that they have the same simple direction, as that there is a God.

The apparent recognition in this passage of men’s higher innate claim to physical strength and therefore to virtue is likely to be as difficult for modern feminists to stomach as Wollstonecraft’s attribution of all such claims and arguments to a divine being. She may have stopped attending church in her twenties, but she never lost her belief in God; her religion was, in Godwin’s words, ‘almost entirely of her own creation. But she was not on that account less attached to it, or the less scrupulous in discharging what she considered as its duties.’ Her own spiritual trajectory appears to be mirrored by that of the heroine in her first, autobiographical novel, *Mary, a Fiction* (1788), who is said to become ‘a Christian from conviction’ and who subsequently learns that ‘apparently good and solid arguments might take their rise from different points of view’. Faith is not destroyed by scepticism but comes to be tempered by reason, and by the judicious tolerance of opposing positions and ideas.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman has an incomplete sequel in the shape of Wollstonecraft's second novel, *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman*, published posthumously in 1798. It's a work born of her continued 'desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society'. Here, too, the wished-for consequences of such exhibitions remain murky. Maria, imprisoned by her husband in a lunatic asylum and denied contact with her child, falls in love with a fellow inmate and narrates her life story in a manuscript she intends to give to her daughter. In her notes, Wollstonecraft proposed several quite distinct endings: one of them involved the heroine's second pregnancy and miscarriage; another her divorce and suicide; yet another saw Maria resolve to stay alive and commit herself to her first child. The novel is founded on the triumph of 'those *human passions*, that too frequently cloud the reason, and lead *mortals* into dangerous errors': in other words, on precisely those elements of female irrationality that Wollstonecraft the polemicist was bent on overcoming. Such passions may have generated bestselling fiction, but that wasn't the only reason for her apparently contradictory insistence on them in *Maria*. Wollstonecraft refused on principle to acknowledge a firm distinction between reason and feeling. Rationally forceful arguments needed to be spurred on by equally strong emotions: 'We reason deeply, when we forcibly feel,' as she wrote from Denmark to Imlay. The head meant nothing without the co-operation of the heart, and she despised 'the frigid caution of cold-blooded moralists' in any sphere of life. Some of the loveliest moments in her writing occur when she describes her daughter Fanny, charting 'the emotions I feel, when she stops to smile upon me, or laughs outright on meeting me unexpectedly in the street or after a short absence'. False feeling, or the mere performance of sensibility, was the truly objectionable aspect of a stereotypically female character – not emotion itself.

In her essayistic intellectual biography, Sylvana Tomaselli avoids the stock portrayals of Wollstonecraft as a feminist or radical and gives prominence instead to the role of the passions across the full range of her subject's publications, lesser-known hackwork included. She offers a warmly appreciative introduction to Wollstonecraft's 'view of the world as it was and the world as it might be'. While there is little in this study to suggest the deeply paradoxical, self-thwarting aspects of Wollstonecraft's character – the contradictions tend either to be sidestepped or absorbed into a broader contextual view of the author and her period – it offers a useful thematic account of her interests in and contributions to politics, history, art and literature.

One barrier to the assimilation of Wollstonecraft into any variety of modern feminism is that so many of her arguments in support of female equality were based on its enabling a more successful fulfilment of duties at home: women needed to be better educated in order to be better wives and mothers. This wasn't just a strategic move, designed to get resistant male readers to take her arguments seriously. As Godwin observed, the abiding effect of Wollstonecraft's unhappy childhood was that 'domestic affections constituted the object upon which her heart was fixed.' She would no doubt have seconded the claim made by Johnson (whom she met and admired) that 'to be happy at home is the ultimate result of all ambition, the end to which every enterprise and labour tends, and of which every desire prompts the prosecution.'

Wollstonecraft rarely identifies herself as a woman speaking to other women, preferring to speak as a genderless 'philosopher' or 'moralist'. Susan Gubar pointed out in 1994 that one problem with a great deal of feminist or proto-feminist writing – Wollstonecraft's included – is that, in quoting or impersonating its adversaries, it ends up duplicating their arguments and perhaps even recuperating them. But how are you meant to define, understand or explain any cause if you do not first attempt to grasp your opponents' point of view?

Like many later feminists, Wollstonecraft longed to put gender roles to one side, or indeed to jettison them once and for all. I think she would have been appalled by the dominant 21st-century mutations of feminism because they are essentially a modern version of what she attacked throughout her career as 'the turgid bombast of artificial feelings'. The most recent elaborations of the feminist argument require the affirmation of difference by and between ever more specific marginalised groups, with the result that the intricately defined standpoint of the individual emerges as the most important aspect of anything that can be said (let alone done) about the condition of human beings. This recourse to personal identity as a means of vindicating any position inevitably runs into the problem of electing which of anyone's possible identities (gender? sexuality? race? nationality?) ought to be pushed to the fore. As David Simpson has suggested, the possibility that such a fragmented, self-involved approach will result in any real change – or in anything beyond its own articulation – is close to non-existent: 'The imperative to situate oneself is perceived as ethical even as (or perhaps because) it is usually devoid of critical content and without consequences beyond the moment of utterance.'

In this febrile yet curiously static environment of competing claims on our subjecthood and sympathy, we could all do with bearing in mind Wollstonecraft's distinction between real and affected sentiment. For her, tolerant curiosity about other people – including those who disagreed with her – was an index of progress. The protagonists of her fiction appear to be locked inside isolated narratives of suffering and self-destruction, but she herself was a practical, adaptable and resourceful thinker, guided by the spirit of inquiry and a pedagogue's desire to communicate the knowledge she had fought so hard to attain. She didn't believe that truth was located within the individual. In response to the modish question 'Where do you know from?' she might well have asked not only 'What are you talking about?' but also: 'Where are we going and what will we do when we get there?'