

'Vindication': Mary Wollstonecraft's Sense and Sensibility

By TONI BENTLEY

IN 1915 Virginia Woolf predicted it would take women another six generations to come into their own. We should be approaching the finish line if Woolf's math was as good as her English. A little over a century before her, another Englishwoman, Mary Wollstonecraft, declared in her revolutionary book of 1792, "The Vindication of the Rights of Woman," that not only had the time come to begin the long slog to selfdom, freedom, empowerment -- or whatever current feminist term serves -- but that she would be the first of what she called, using the language of taxonomy, "a new genus."

It took the renegade second child (of seven) -- and first daughter -- of Edward John Wollstonecraft, a drinker, and the unhappy Elizabeth Dickson, to take this virtually unimaginable plunge into uncharted waters. And she took this leap while displaying the full measure of female unpredictability, while the world watched, astounded, dismayed and outraged. This Mary *was* quite contrary, and her reputation over time, unsurprisingly, has suffered from this complexity. Surely we women have a gene -- in addition to those saucy, but ill-mannered, hormones -- for theatrics, so frequently do they puncture our inner lives and decorate our outer ones in operatic robes. But occasionally high drama is the most efficient way to break through the status quo, and Mary Wollstonecraft's radical mission called for extreme measures.

In her wonderful, and deeply sobering, new book, Lyndall Gordon, the distinguished biographer of T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Brontë and Henry James, tackles this formidable woman with grace, clarity and much new research. Despite occasional slips into strangely purple prose (when she reproaches her lover, "retorts -- great sprays of indignant eloquence -- would fountain from her opening throat"), Gordon relates Wollstonecraft's story with the same potent mixture of passion and reason her subject personified.

Here's how things stood for women in the world Mary was born into, the England of 1759: your property and your children were the property of your husband, divorce was impossible, and if you dared to leave your horrid -- or abusive -- husband you had to desert your children in the process and become an outlaw. Marital rape was perfectly legal, and probably frequent. (In all fairness, a new law in 1782 stated that a husband should not beat his wife with a stick wider than his thumb.)

Samuel Johnson identified the real issue: "The chastity of women is of all importance, as all property depends on it." While women were not admitted to universities for another hundred years, the education they did receive was about conduct and little else. One Mrs. Barbauld, a well-known writer and former boarding-school mistress, summarized this teaching when she explained to young ladies, "Your BEST, your SWEETEST empire is -- TO PLEASE."

Miss Mary Wollstonecraft, however, was not interested in pleasing anyone, most especially a member of the opposite sex. She declared at 15 that she would never marry. Nor, as her life would prove, would she ever internalize her own subjugation to such frivolous teachings. This was no empty declaration, coming as it did from a girl who slept across the threshold of her parents' bedroom to protect her mother from her father's rages. Despite her mother's unloving demeanor, the young girl developed a compassion for women that became what she would call "the governing propensity" of her entire life. She was obsessed with educating herself against all odds, writing as a teenager, "I have a heart that scorns disguise, and a countenance which will not dissemble." The prospects for a woman in her time who chose not to marry

were limited to schoolteacher, paid companion, governess and prostitute -- all of which Wollstonecraft essayed except the last.

By 1787 Wollstonecraft had landed in London, setting up house near the publisher Joseph Johnson, and was participating in intellectual circles that included William Blake (who illustrated an edition of her book "Original Stories from Real Life" in 1791), the naturalist Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of Charles), the painter Henry Fuseli, the radical philosopher William Godwin and Thomas Paine. Said Godwin of this outspoken woman, "I . . . heard her, very frequently when I wished to hear Paine." She began publishing novels and essays while doing translations (German, Italian, French), book reviews and anthologies. In her first book, "Thoughts on the Education of Daughters," she gives us the 18th-century version of "he's just not that into you," when she deplores women's "susceptibility to unsuitable men." She declared there to be no greater misery, besides, than loving someone whom reason cannot respect.

In late 1790 Wollstonecraft's "Vindication of the Rights of Men," the first counter to Edmund Burke's treatise on the dangers of the French Revolution, was published anonymously; "all the best journals of the day discussed it." But when she produced "The Vindication of the Rights of Woman" just 14 months later, her name was on the title page and all hell broke loose. It was the most immodest emergence of a woman's voice in memory and the 32-year-old Wollstonecraft became famous. While the American statesman Aaron Burr declared "your sex has in her an able advocate . . . a work of genius" (and John Adams teased his wife, Abigail, for being a "Disciple of Wollstonecraft!") Horace Walpole's reaction was more typical. He called her a "hyena in petticoats."

In her masterwork, Wollstonecraft expounded in dense and literate prose -- Gordon might have quoted more extensively here -- on the necessity of women becoming less trivial and more rational and educated creatures. She suggests that women "labor by reforming themselves to reform the world." A hyena, definitely.

"The minds of women are enfeebled by false refinement," she wrote, continuing: "Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind . . . and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show . . . that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being." So begins her uncompromising polemic, a document as necessary an admonition today as in her own in its plea to the owners of wombs to invest in that invisible fortification called character before fluffing their petticoats or tattooing their bellies.

And then, astonishingly, within two years, this brilliant, focused woman moved to Paris to write about the French Revolution, lost her virginity at 34 -- yes, she was, notably, a virgin when she wrote her germinal work, and perhaps the wiser for it -- to the charismatic though clearly "unsuitable" American adventurer Gilbert Imlay and gave birth to their daughter, Fanny. She attempted suicide with laudanum when Imlay proved faithless. Within two weeks, Imlay persuaded her to spend several months, with baby and French nanny in tow, on a mysterious, madcap mission to Scandinavia to recover, on his behalf, £3,500 worth of silver cargo from a treasure ship. There was no silver, no ship and, when she returned to England, no Imlay; he had taken another mistress.

Still, Wollstonecraft had written a wonderful travel book about her Scandinavian adventures. Then this woman, who so reasonably advocated reason for her own sex, lost her own, and jumped in the Thames in her second suicide attempt in five months. Miraculously, she was found, unconscious, revived and thus lived to have what Virginia Woolf considered the most fruitful experiment of Wollstonecraft's

experimental life -- her love affair with William Godwin. Yes, the William Godwin who only a few years earlier had wanted less Wollstonecraft and more Paine.

It is here that one rejoices that this woman who struggled with poverty her entire life (she supported both her father, and numerous siblings, as often as she could until her dying day), who withstood a reputation as a wanton and reckless woman, the writer of an "amazonian" book, a cornerstone treatise for women's liberation, attains at the end of her life some experience of comfort, elation and kindness in the arms of a man she could respect.

The story of their love is all the more touching for its brevity -- 17 months. Godwin, a reserved bachelor three years her senior, wrote of Wollstonecraft in 1796: "I found a wounded heart, &, as that heart cast itself upon me, it was my ambition to heal it." William Hazlitt wrote of Godwin that he has "less of the appearance of a man of genius, than any one who has given such decided and ample proofs of it," while a certain Mr. Horseman proclaimed that Godwin and Wollstonecraft were undoubtedly "the two greatest men in the world."

After three failed attempts to consummate their attraction, recorded concisely in Godwin's diary as "chez moi," "chez elle" (twice), victory is finally denoted by "chez elle toute" -- surely one of history's most succinct sexual success reports. Wollstonecraft's diary indicated that while it was not entirely "toute" for her -- not the "rapture" of Imlay, her only other lover -- it was an experience of "sublime tranquillity."

Once starting their affair they meticulously practiced the most sophisticated birth control of the day: abstention for three days following menstruation and then frequent sex for the remainder of the month (frequency was thought to lower the possibility of conception.) Bingo! Within a few months Wollstonecraft was pregnant and these two outspoken opponents of marriage, married, though they maintained their separate abodes and their mutual, and separate, circles of acquaintances.

Meanwhile Godwin held fast to his belief that matrimony offers "the most fertile sources of misery to mankind," while Wollstonecraft softened up considerably to her new marital status, declaring, "a husband is a convenient part of the furniture of a house, unless he be a clumsy fixture."

Deciding to have her baby at home with a midwife -- hospitals were rife with infection -- Wollstonecraft produced, after an 18-hour labor, a girl child on Aug. 30, 1797. But the placenta had not fully expelled itself and a doctor was called in to rip out the rest -- for four hours -- without anesthesia. She said afterward that she had not known pain before. The botched operation left her with an infection that killed her 11 days later. She was 38.

Her last words were that Godwin was "the kindest, best man in the world." He recorded the precise time of her death in his diary followed by three trailing blank lines. In his memoir of his wife, he wrote that she had an "unconquerable greatness of soul." One does not doubt him.

And, in turn, that daughter, the future Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley, sent forth, 20 years later, in 1818, what she called "my hideous progeny" in the most famous horror story of all time, "Frankenstein." Thus the great Mary Wollstonecraft became grandmother to the most wounded of motherless children and his cautionary fable about the hubris of men, the fears of pregnancy, the dangers of child-rearing and the destruction and despair that ensue from the unloved child. The tale is chilling as legacy alone.

Two years earlier, Mary's half-sister, Fanny (Wollstonecraft's daughter by Imlay), had succeeded where her mother had failed, and killed herself with laudanum at age 22. "The best thing I could do," she wrote,

"was to put an end to the existence of a being whose birth was unfortunate. . . . You will soon have the blessing of forgetting that such a creature ever existed." An eerie loss -- and choice of words -- indeed.

Who can say that we women are not now all members of the new genus Wollstonecraft so brazenly constructed? Or that each of us does not benefit? Gordon's book is worthy of its subject. It is also a welcome reminder of a brave woman who lived her brief and difficult life for us, whom she never knew. Or did she? Besides, according to Virginia Woolf, we're only three generations away from the promised land. Let's hope we all make it there, and see what the visionary Mary Wollstonecraft saw for us over two centuries ago.

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