

## “The Oppressed State of My Sex”: Wollstonecraft on Reason, Feeling and Equality

*Moira Gatens*

*Still harping on the same subject you will exclaim – How can I avoid it, when most of the struggles of an eventful life have been occasioned by the oppressed state of my sex: we reason deeply when we forcibly feel.*

*Mary Wollstonecraft, Letter XIX, in Janet Todd,  
A Wollstonecraft Anthology*

Reason and feeling is the governing dichotomy and the source of the major conflicts in Mary Wollstonecraft’s work and in her life. It is her concentration on this dichotomy and her obvious faith in the power of reason to reform sociopolitical life that places her firmly within the Enlightenment tradition. Yet, because she is concerned to address the specificity of female social and political existence, her treatment of the reason/feeling distinction inevitably conjures up its partners: the nature/culture and private/public distinctions. Enlightenment philosophers were able to treat man’s political possibilities without (explicit) reference to sexuality, reproduction, the family and the domestic sphere because these matters were assumed to fall outside the public realm of politics. Certainly, the political body assumes the private sphere, which underpins public life, but this sphere is taken to

be the natural base of political life. Any consideration of women's access to or place in the public sphere necessarily raises the question of their role in the private sphere.

Whereas Enlightenment philosophers argued that political authority is artificial and conventional they assumed that relations between the sexes and within the family are based on natural authority. Wollstonecraft argued against this assumption in favour of a conception of reason as the sole authority in all matters and in all spheres. Her insistence on the role of reason, in all areas of human life, created paradoxes in her application of Enlightenment notions of equality that she was unable to resolve. Eighteenth-century notions of equality were articulated specifically in connection with the public sphere. Men, as husbands/fathers, presumably did not want (or need) to assert the principles of equality in the private sphere since this would, in fact, be acting against their interests. One of Wollstonecraft's major aims is to insist that the power and authority that men wielded in the private sphere was as artificial as the authority of royalty and aristocracy in the sphere of politics. She sees clearly that liberating women from political oppression is not simply a matter of political enfranchisement, since they are also subjected in the private sphere. This makes Wollstonecraft's task far more complex than the task that confronted the political philosophers who were concerned only with men's political rights.

Another major aim of Wollstonecraft's writings is to insist that the natural rights of men are human rights. Therefore women, no less than men, are entitled to political equality and representation. It is in her articulation of this claim that Wollstonecraft strikes paradox after paradox. In her attempt to extend liberal principles of equality to women she neglects to note that these principles were developed and formulated with men as their object. Her attempt to stretch these principles to include women results in both practical and conceptual difficulties. These principles were developed with an (implicitly) male person in mind, who is assumed to be a head of a household (a husband/father) and whose domestic needs are catered for (by his wife). Although the citizen is not explicitly male, the assumed characteristics of the citizen coincide with those of a husband/father. No matter how strong the power of reason, it cannot alter the fact that male and female embodiment, at least as lived in eighteenth-century culture, involved vastly different social and political consequences. Wollstonecraft did not take sufficient account of these consequences in her call for the realization of the rights of women. Women's (traditional) labor is not even visible in the public sphere. It does not count as socially necessary work and is not acknowledged in any system of public exchange. This point is no less relevant in our contemporary context where the equality that women are entitled to, for example in the sphere of employment, is

limited to activities which overlap with male activities. Those aspects of women's lives that bear on female specificity were, until very recently, completely ignored: for example, sexual harassment, maternity, childcare, and so on. Wollstonecraft's tendency to treat the role of wife/mother/domestic worker as one which follows directly from women's biology raises further problems for a feminist analysis of women's social and political status.

The tendency to conceive of women's bodies as complicit in their social and political oppression has certainly been a feature of much contemporary feminist writing. Wollstonecraft was able to tolerate the paradoxes of liberal theory in a way that contemporary feminist theory, at least from the time of Simone de Beauvoir, cannot. This intolerance has caused a marked rift in feminist responses to women's place in contemporary society. On one side are those like Shulamith Firestone<sup>1</sup> who advocate the use of science to effectively "neuter" the female body. Woman can thus truly become a "rational man." On the other, theorists like Carol McMillan<sup>2</sup> see this corporeal denial as anti-woman and argue that difference does not necessarily involve relations of inferiority/superiority. Men and women, she argues, are different and have necessarily different roles, but these roles are of equal value.

The source from which these two responses flow is clearly present in Wollstonecraft's writings. Both views locate the cause of women's social role in her body. This assumption must be challenged on at least two levels. First, feminists must challenge the notion inherited from Cartesian dualism that human beings are separable into two neat bundles: a neutral, universal mind; and a sexed body. Second, we must challenge the imputed "naturalness" of the form and capacities of the female body along with the idea that this form determines the scope of female social being. The converse proposition – that social and political arrangements curtail or impede the form and capacities of the female body – must also be considered. This must be done not simply in order to allot primacy to the social but rather to bring out the complexity of the relationship between the biological and the social.

In this paper these issues are brought to bear on Wollstonecraft's struggle with the reason/feeling distinction. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *The Wrongs of Women, or Maria* will be examined in the light of Wollstonecraft's attempts to work through the power of both reason and feeling in women's lives. The progressive sophistication with which Wollstonecraft analyzes the complexities of women's social and political position may be linked to the increasing social and political complexity in the progress of her own life. Various commentators have railed against the legitimacy of referring to Wollstonecraft's personal life in the context of appraising her work. Given the close kinship between her life and her

politics, the subject matter of much of her writings and her own lived experience, it seems appropriate to at least indicate the links between her intellectual development and her biography. For one thing this approach allows the contemporary reader to ponder the relation between an eighteenth-century feminist's analysis of her social and political context and the exigencies of a life that was lived in that context. Wollstonecraft's life was certainly a struggle and undeniably eventful. She lived through one of the most turbulent and politically unstable times in our recent past. She was vocal in the movement which sought to restore to "men" their natural rights; she was adamant that women also possessed natural rights and natural equality; and she spent some time in France during the revolution. Wollstonecraft also bore two children, had two significant heterosexual relationships, attempted suicide twice, and wrote prolifically. Much of what she wrote is concerned to expose and remedy the social and political injustices experienced by women. However, her work as a whole displays a passionate rejection of oppression in general, regardless of its specific form.

Her first major work of political importance is *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). This text carries the distinction of being the first published response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). The dynamics of her response are governed by the dichotomy of reason and sentiment. Burke's lauding of tradition and hereditary rights and his dogmatic insistence on the conservation of existing rigid political relations are all treated by Wollstonecraft as evidence of his lack of reason. Instead of using his rational capacity – which would reveal to him the natural rights and natural equality of all "men" – he allows his sentiments, his passions and his feeling to dominate his political thinking. For Wollstonecraft it is the preponderance of sentiment in political thought that gives rise to nostalgia and social stagnation, which act to impede the dynamic and progressive nature of sociopolitical life. Moreover, the sentiment displayed by Burke and his kind is riddled with hypocrisy. The romanticism of his conception of a hierarchically ordered political system is belied by the profligacy and corruption of the rich, the degradation of the poor and their appalling conditions of life. It is reason and not sentiment that should dictate the terms of political life and what any person's rational capacities will show is that "The birthright of Man . . . is such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom he is united in a social compact, and the continued existence of that compact."<sup>3</sup> Burke is not only guilty of irrationality, hypocrisy and impeding the progress of civilization, he is also complicit in renegeing on the terms of the social compact and so represents a threat to its continuing existence. Wollstonecraft thus relocates the responsibility for political unrest with the conservatives.

The social and political status of women is not central to the concerns of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft is careful to insist that women, no less than men, are parties to the social compact. Their sociopolitical rights and duties are not, however, identical with those of men. It is the part of the rational woman to “superintend her family and suckle her children, in order to fulfil her part of the social compact.”<sup>4</sup> This difference between the sexes in fulfilling the compact will be treated further when we turn to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. At this stage Wollstonecraft seems content to understand women’s rights as implicit in the genus of men’s rights, appending comments which bear on women’s specificity – childbearing, for example – when necessary. Her naiveté is, perhaps, explicable by the context in which she was then living, working and thinking. At the time of the writing of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) Wollstonecraft was single and part of a (predominantly male) intellectual milieu which included William Blake, Thomas Paine, William Godwin and Henry Fuseli. This group was intoxicated with the idea of social reform and exhibited the boundless optimism typical of the Enlightenment. Yet they, no less than the general reading public, were inclined to understand the rights of man as being just that, the rights of men. This is the context in which Wollstonecraft resolves to write specifically on the question of women’s rights.

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* presents an argument for an enlightened understanding of human nature which stresses that women, no less than men, share in this nature. The result is a text that is plagued with contradictions and irresolvable tensions. Again, the overriding tension is that between reason and sentiment. The tension between these two terms is present in her treatment of friendship versus sexual passion, the socially responsible family versus the sensual couple; the respectable mother versus the degraded concubine. As Cora Kaplan has observed, it is as if Wollstonecraft sees sexuality and pleasure as special dangers to women, as “narcotic inducements to a life of lubricious slavery.”<sup>5</sup> Wollstonecraft’s amulet against the temptations of sensuality is, of course, reason.

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is not so much an appeal to women’s reason – which she takes to be obscured by a culture which encourages the exaggerated development of women’s sentiment, feeling and passion – as it is an appeal to men’s reason. The addressee, as Anca Vlasopolos convincingly argues,<sup>6</sup> is male. It is pertinent to recall that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is dedicated to Charles Talleyrand whose proposal for free national education (for boys) was then before the French National Assembly. By dedicating her treatise to Talleyrand, Wollstonecraft hoped to encourage him to extend his proposal to include girls (needless to say, he did not). The future strength of the New Republic, she argued, will be

ensured only when children of both sexes are trained to reason. She challenges Talleyrand:

if women are to be excluded, without having a voice, from a participation of the natural rights of mankind, prove first, to ward off the charge of injustice and inconsistency, that they want reason – else this flaw in your NEW CONSTITUTION will ever shew that man must, in some shape, act like a tyrant, and tyranny, in whatever part of society it rears its brazen front, will ever undermine morality.<sup>7</sup>

Her own analysis of women's social and political status, she tells him, aims "to prove that the prevailing notion respecting a sexual character was subversive of morality."<sup>8</sup> In fact her target is much wider than morality. She also seeks to show that reason has no sex, knowledge has no sex, in short, that the mind itself is sexless.<sup>9</sup> The distinction between the sexes is entirely bodily and of relevance to one issue only: the reproduction of the species. All other human activity, if it is to deserve the title "human," should be governed by the principles of reason which are "the same in all" and appropriate to any task – even, or especially, childrearing.<sup>10</sup> It is to the shame and detriment of the society she addresses that human activity is so infrequently governed by these principles. Rather, it is passions and prejudices that determine social mores and this is nowhere more evident than in the social expectations surrounding women.

Wollstonecraft's social theory is very much dependent on her conception of human being and what it is capable of becoming. A rational society is one which takes account of and founds itself on the character and needs of human nature. That society is most just and rational that allows human beings to actualize, to the highest possible degree, their potentialities. Her opposition to a society which is governed by royalty and aristocracy, or as she calls them, the "pestiferous purple," is grounded in her belief that this kind of society limits the freedom of human beings to improve themselves, which in turn limits the progress of society. A human life is not worth living, is not truly a human life, unless there is opportunity for growth and self-improvement:

the perfection of our nature and capability of happiness, must be estimated by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge, that distinguish the individual, and direct the laws which bind society: and that from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow, is equally undeniable, if mankind be viewed collectively.<sup>11</sup>

Just as monarchical rule is an irrational basis for society, so too is patriarchal rule. She chastises the enlightened philosophers for not going far enough in their challenge to illegitimate authority. She argues that "the

divine right of husbands,” like the “divine right of kings,” must be contested. If hereditary power amounts to illegitimate authority and is damaging to society then it is damaging in all its forms.

In the presentation of her case for the rights of women, Wollstonecraft most frequently employs the *reductio ad absurdum* form of argument. She repeatedly undermines her opponents’ accounts of women’s roles and duties by uncovering the inconsistencies in their arguments. The central example, which appears in several guises throughout the text, is the following: men argue that rights and duties assume one another; men deny women their rights; yet, men expect women to honour their duties. Wollstonecraft’s own views on rights and duties are complex. She does not deny that much of what has been written about women is easily verified by experience. Some passages in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which describe the frivolity, vanity and inconstancy of women, are far from flattering. However, rather than judging that social and political rights should not be granted to such weak creatures, she argues that rights are the only remedy for their weaknesses. Women will not become dutiful or rational until they are treated with the same dignity and allowed to share in the same privileges as men. In this context she asks: “Why do men halt between two opinions, and expect impossibilities? Why do they expect virtue from a slave, from a being whom the constitution of civil society has rendered weak, if not vicious?”<sup>12</sup>

In order to answer this question Wollstonecraft turns to a critical reading of Rousseau’s *Emile*, which was presented, and widely used, as a handbook for the education of children. She also considers several “popular” books that were influential in the formation of bourgeois expectations of female behavior and manners. These include writings by Dr Gregory, Dr Fordyce and Lord Chesterfield. These four writers are her main opponents in *Rights of Woman*. It is significant that it is mainly the informal “philosophy of manners and customs” that Wollstonecraft is obliged to engage with in her assessment of the dominant social attitudes toward the formation of women’s character. It reveals the extent to which the socialization and control of women was a “private” affair.

Wollstonecraft condemns these texts for encouraging “a sexual character to the mind.” Since all human beings naturally possess the capacity for reason, and hence for knowledge and virtue, the fact that women often are not rational or virtuous indicates that art has “smothered nature.” And women are, for Wollstonecraft, the most artificial of creatures. This artifice, however, is not the invention of women. Wollstonecraft very firmly locates the source of women’s corrupt nature in the passions of men. She writes that “all the causes of female weakness, as well as depravity, which I have already enlarged on, branch out of one grand cause – want of chastity in men.”<sup>13</sup> She finds Rousseau, and his “philosophy of lasciviousness,” par-

ticularly culpable. Wollstonecraft traces the many inconsistencies of Rousseau's philosophy to his poorly controlled sexual passions. Fearful of losing the services of an odalisque, men withhold the means whereby women could become free and rational companions. The iniquitous result of this attitude is that it denies women the opportunity to "unfold their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue."<sup>14</sup> This "philosophy of manners" limits the possibilities of female understanding by ensuring that it is "always subordinated to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment."<sup>15</sup>

In this argument Wollstonecraft is worrying a sensitive spot in Enlightenment discourses. If certain rights are "human" and "inalienable" then how can one consistently deny these rights to women (or "savages", or children)? At certain points the Enlightenment discourse threatens to fall back on its dark Aristotelian and Thomistic past. Is woman a part of mankind? Is she a "lesser" or inferior type of man?<sup>16</sup> There are two, overlapping notions that save the "modern" philosophers from falling back on their fathers. The first is the notion of human progress: different cultures, and so perhaps different sexes, progress at a differential rate. This form of argument was certainly used by the newly formed French Republic to justify the exclusion of women from political participation. One such argument, offered by Amar who was representing the views of the Committee for General Security, goes as follows:

If we take into account the fact that the political education of men is still at its very beginnings, that all the principles are not yet developed, and that we still stammer over the word "liberty," then how much less enlightened are women, whose moral education has been practically non-existent. Their presence in the *sociétés populaires*, then, would give an active part in government to persons exposed to error and seduction even more than are men. And, let us add that women by their constitution, are open to an exaltation which would be ominous in public life. The interests of the state would soon be sacrificed to all the kinds of disruption and disorder that hysteria can produce.<sup>17</sup>

Wollstonecraft dispenses with this argument by pointing out that if the female body is hysterical it will infect the political body whether it has "a voice" or not. Women's indirect influence on the public sphere, she argues, is pernicious precisely because of its clandestine character. If marriage and the family are the "cement of society," excluding women from the civic sphere does not remove the foundational threat they pose to that sphere. Second, Cartesian dualism was called upon to provide a justification for women's weaker reason. Descartes thought that the mind had no sex. Nevertheless female consciousness may be inhibited in its operations by its association with the female body and its unruly passions.



Wollstonecraft's strategy here is quite ingenious. She shifts the cause of women's weaker reason from the female body to the social environment, in particular to educational practices. She effects a neat inversion of the philosopher's arguments by locating the ultimate cause of female inferiority in the male body and its lasciviousness and in the masculine body politic which denies women access to reason. This, of course, puts a new slant on Rousseau's stricture that it is reason and not prejudice that dictates that women be educated "to please men."<sup>18</sup>

It is with arguments such as these that Wollstonecraft refutes the notion that women's social status is just, natural or necessary. She argues for the improvement of the female mind both for the sake of women and society. The performance of the "peculiar duties which nature has assigned them" will only be improved by the acquisition of reason. These duties are no less human for being peculiarly female. Wollstonecraft's arguments for the rights of women are not restricted to the right of the individual to realize and improve his or her own nature. Her particular conception of the relation between the individual and society is such that to improve (or inhibit) the possibilities of an individual necessarily improves (or inhibits) society in general. She therefore has an additional argument in favor of the "revolution in female manners" which bears on the quality of the social body.

Virtue is the product of reason, it is not relative to situation or sex. The sham virtue that women are encouraged to practice – notably by Rousseau – has public repercussions since "public virtue is only an aggregate of private."<sup>19</sup> The dire consequence of rendering women weak and irrational is that the progress and strength of the human race is thereby endangered. Wollstonecraft makes this point graphically:

Make them [women] free, and they will quickly become wise and virtuous, as men become more so; for the improvement must be mutual, or the injustice which one half of the human race are obliged to submit to, retorting on their oppressors, the virtue of men will be worm-eaten by the insect whom he keeps under his feet.<sup>20</sup>

This view of social progress makes Wollstonecraft's stress on the necessity for both sexes to be chaste, seem less prudish. The relation between the sexes lies at the core of the body politic. If this core is bad it will, eventually, infect the political body.

Wollstonecraft's recommendations, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, concerning the improvement of women's character, and so society in general, range from an abstract appeal to men that they allow their reason to show them the importance of chastity and intersexual friendship, to the provision of practical guidelines for the institution of national coeducation.

She also stresses the necessity for women to be granted “the protection of civil laws”; the freedom to follow careers compatible with their “natural” duties (for instance, physicians, nurses, midwives); and even mentions, though with some embarrassment, that women ought to have representatives in the government. These recommendations do not sit very easily with her attitude towards women’s “natural” role as childrearer and domestic worker. The sexual division of labor, and its corollary, the public/private split, remain structurally untouched. This reflects Wollstonecraft’s enormous faith in the power of reason to bring about the revolution in manners. If we follow reason, the flourishing of sexual fidelity, virtue, friendship and equality between the sexes will be the automatic result.

The uneasiness we may feel with this resolution only increases when she, unselfconsciously, paints a picture of domestic bliss – complete with a female servant:

I have then viewed with pleasure a woman nursing her children, and discharging the duties of her station with, perhaps, *merely a servnt maid to take off her hands the servile part of the household business*. I have seen her prepare herself and children, with only the luxury of cleanliness, to receive her husband, who returning weary home in the evening found smiling babes and a clean hearth. My heart has loitered in the midst of this group, and has even throbbd with sympathetic emotion, when the scraping of the well known foot has raised a pleasing tumult.<sup>21</sup>

From our perspective, it is interesting to note the extent to which Wollstonecraft seems utterly oblivious to the contradictions implicit in her view. The sexual division of labor lies at the heart of the difficulty and she does not see this division as socially constituted, but rather as dictated by nature. This passage is worrying also for its apparent blindness to class differences between women. These difficulties flaw the basic argument of *Rights of Woman* making its conclusion inevitably paradoxical: “The conclusion which I wish to draw, is obvious; make women rational creatures, and free *citizens*, and they will quickly become good *wives*, and *mothers*; that is – if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers.”<sup>22</sup>

This formulation leaves the asymmetry between the citizen/husband/father and the citizen/wife/mother unaddressed. In the eighteenth century, public interest is constructed, both conceptually and practically, in direct opposition to the domestic sphere of women and the family. “Women” and “the family” are almost indistinguishable, both in terms of the way their interests are represented and in terms of their relation to civic and public pursuits. Given the character of liberal social organization it is inappropriate to argue that women are as free as men to occupy the public sphere as “disembodied” rational agents. This ignores the asymmetrical

consequences of embodiment for man and woman *within that organization*.<sup>23</sup> For men, the actualization of the option of marriage, parenthood and the establishment of a private familial unit does not intrude on their access to the public sphere. Nor does it deplete their power to act in that sphere; on the contrary, it may enhance their power. The same cannot be said of women. The tensions brought about by the sharp division between the public and the private sphere crystallize around the issue of men's rights and duties and women's rights and duties. Several philosophers (unsuccessfully) attempted to resolve the dilemma by insisting on men's civil and political rights by carefully specifying women's private duties. As Wollstonecraft points out, there is a lacuna in this argument. Human rights and duties seem to be sexually divided: men get the rights and women the duties!

A major problem with the argument of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is its uneasy alliance with the suspect notion of the essential sexual neutrality of the rational agent. Wollstonecraft thinks it is sufficient to overcome social prejudice in order to allow woman to realize her rights and hence her "true nature." This approach simply does not take the structural necessity of women's subordination in liberal society seriously. Yet, limitations on what can be demanded from the public sphere are revealed in Wollstonecraft's own writings. Demands concerning the character and quality of women's lives in the private sphere are inevitably addressed to an individual man, whose own involvement in the private sphere is often marginal, or actually oppositional, to his public activities and interest. In this regard women *qua* women lack a "voice" in the body politic. Their lot seems to be circumscribed by natural, familial or personal arrangements which fall outside the scope of public interest or relevance.

The great difficulty confronting Wollstonecraft in her attempt to resolve the moral and political disjunction between the (female) private sphere and the (male) public sphere is worsened by her acceptance of the idea that it is nature rather than social organization that requires women to assume the responsibility for childcare and home maintenance. This sexual division of labor is inherent in the rationalism of the liberal paradigm. That paradigm is necessarily limited when it comes to consider the question of the social status of women. It may well be that it offers an inconsistent argument, as Wollstonecraft herself recognizes. However, she does not, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, seem to acknowledge that it is a necessary inconsistency that cannot be resolved within the terms of liberal political theory. While feminists continue to accept the liberal emphasis on the essential neutrality of the mind, sexual discrimination will continue to be "justified" by natural bodily difference. Given the high value placed on the neutrality and universality of mind, it will be female corporeality which is conceived as limiting. The female body will appear as the natural

site of women's oppression, turning attention from the sociopolitical organization that can then present itself as an *effect*, rather than a cause.

It is an implicit assumption of modern political theory that men are able to dissociate themselves from sexuality, reproduction and natural passions. Male subjectivity and male sexuality are divorceable conceptually and spatially in a way that female subjectivity and female sexuality are not. As Rousseau puts it, "man is only man now and again, but the female is always a female."<sup>24</sup> Since it is she who has been allotted the role of perpetuating and managing the natural base of culture, she cannot be considered independently of these functions, which coincide, in traditional accounts, with her sexuality. The satisfaction of the needs of "natural man" has become the work of woman. She tends to his natural, corporeal needs while he is transforming himself into rational "social man."

Any attempt to introduce women into the body politic necessarily raises the question of how these "natural" human needs are to be satisfied. The social reduction of woman to her function of satisfying these needs makes it conceptually impossible to consider her social possibilities without also considering, as a social problem, the question of the reproduction and management of the natural base of cultural life.

The liberal paradigm, assumed by Wollstonecraft, is not helpful at this point. Its traditional concern with protecting the individual in his private sphere of thought, personal taste and private relations from the intrusions of the state forecloses the possibility of challenging the "private" arrangements between men and women. The labour, effort and "self" of women are contained in the private sphere – "protected" from public scrutiny and legislation – making structural inequalities between its inhabitants socially and politically invisible.

By the time Wollstonecraft begins her next major piece on women, *The Wrongs of Women, or Maria*, she has obviously become painfully aware of this fact. If *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was Wollstonecraft's eulogy to the powers of reason, *Maria* is her diatribe against the bondage of passion. Yet in both cases the reason and the passion are peculiarly masculine. The figure of woman stands in an ambiguous relation to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideal of man. She may gain from sharing in masculine rationality but can be ruined by masculine passion. And it is here that the source of the tension in this central dichotomy is bared. Reason, which Wollstonecraft saw as the force of progress, is Janus-faced. *How* such reason is lived in eighteenth-century culture is closely associated with the public/private split. This division is a highly sexualized one: the public or civic sphere is conceptualized as the realm of rational and contractual pursuits and the private sphere as the realm of nature, feeling and the family. Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, hoped to neutralize passion in both spheres, going so far as to argue that

“a master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion. I mean to say, that they ought not to indulge those emotions which disturb the order of society.”<sup>25</sup>

However, from our present context we must question this neutralization. How dependent is Wollstonecraft’s conception of (public) reason on the privatization of passion? Does masculine reason, in the sociopolitical sphere, rest on and assume men’s access to the corporeal and passionate via their role as “head” of a familiar body corporate? If the response to these questions is affirmative then how can women have an independent relation to either reason or passion? This cluster of questions was not consciously raised by Wollstonecraft. Her historical placement is such that these questions defy clear articulation. Yet, from our perspective, a parallel reading of *Rights of Woman* and *Maria* displays the problem clearly enough. It is just not the case that reason and passion or reason and feeling are the provinces of men and women, respectively. Rather, women’s exclusion from the social contract bars them from the civic sphere of reason and their containment in the private sphere of feeling and the “natural” family does not guarantee their access to either passion or feeling since they are the servicers rather than the consumers even in the private sphere.

What motivated the writing of the novel, *Maria*? Within two years of the publication of *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft had a passionate affair with Gilbert Imlay – who, from most accounts, was an opportunist, an entrepreneur, and a womanizer – had borne a child by him and was abandoned by him. This precipitated her first suicide attempt. Many commentators have seen this episode as evidence of a damning inconsistency between Wollstonecraft’s rational recommendations for heterosexual relations in *Rights of Woman* and her irrational behavior with Imlay. There is no good reason for accepting this interpretation. Any inconsistency in this episode should be located in the sociopolitical body and its constitution rather than in Wollstonecraft and her (mental and/or physical) constitution. In fact, Wollstonecraft’s life becomes an unfortunate illustration or verification of her analysis of society and women’s position within it. It is a testimony to the power of social structures to ensnare (and sometimes destroy) even, or perhaps especially, those who have a reflective grasp of their operations. “Free love,” mutual respect and an ethical relationship between the sexes all suppose a sociopolitical context suitable to such relations. The sociopolitical context in which Wollstonecraft wrote and lived not only tolerated but actually encouraged “the tyranny of men.”<sup>26</sup> One of Wollstonecraft’s letters, written while travelling in Scandinavia, captures not only her personal disappointment with Imlay, but also, by her provocative use of metaphor, something of the general feminine tenor of sexual disenchantment:

Uniting myself to you, your tenderness seemed to make me amends for all my former misfortunes. – On this tenderness and affection with what confidence did I rest! – but I leaned on a spear, that has pierced me to the heart. – You have thrown off a faithful friend, to pursue the caprices of the moment.<sup>27</sup>

Read in its context this letter is, among other things, a complaint concerning the difficulty of assigning a value to friendship in heterosexual relations.

It is tempting to see her next liaison, with Godwin, as the inverse of her relation with Imlay. Godwin is a friend, a comrade in political struggle, a rational companion. Their love is certainly no *grande passion* and in her relation to Godwin it seems clear that Wollstonecraft has forfeited passion/sensuality for “a convenient part of the furniture of a house.”<sup>28</sup> Were these the choices for women? If the public/private split ensured that, once wedded and bedded, a woman’s access to the public sphere of reason is forfeited for the role of wife/mother, how can she maintain a relation to either reason or feeling? The (male) citizen is certainly differently placed. He straddles the dichotomy and enjoys a spatial split between his civic, rational pursuits and his sensual, sentimental ones. How can woman, in early modern liberal society, achieve this dual role? (How this quandary should be assessed in our contemporary context is not considered here.) Perhaps it was the experience of motherhood which presented these paradoxes of female existence to Wollstonecraft in such stark form. The task of deciding how best to socialize a female child must have presented her with great difficulties. As Wollstonecraft laments in a letter concerning her daughter Fanny: “I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart . . . I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit.”<sup>29</sup>

These reflections on Wollstonecraft’s life and intellectual development help to explain why she turns, not to the genre of the political treatise but to the novel in order to explore how the sociopolitical context constructs women as victims of (male) passion and feeling. *The Wrongs of Women, or Maria* is the result. The addressee of this work is not the enlightened (male) social reformer. It reads as a novel designed for the edification and chastening of a culture. In the introduction Wollstonecraft writes: “In writing this novel, I have rather endeavoured to pourtray passions than manners . . .” and “my main object, the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society.”<sup>30</sup> She certainly achieves her object. *Maria* is set in an insane asylum, yet none of its characters is insane. The three main figures are Maria, Darnford and Jemima. Maria is a middle-class woman whose husband wastes her fortune, offers her person as payment to a debtor and finally separates Maria from her daughter when he exercises his legal

right of having her committed. Darnford, a middle-class man, functions mainly as the recipient of Maria's affections. He represents the precarious possibility of intersexual friendship. Jemima is a lower-class woman who was born out of wedlock, the issue of a heartless seduction, who is seduced and abandoned in turn, who became a thief and a prostitute and whose relative social "respectability" is bought at the ironic price of acting as a "keeper of the mad." By acting as madhouse attendant, she colludes with the society that rejects her by guarding those whom, like her, society wishes to exclude from its ranks. *Maria* was never finished. Wollstonecraft died from complications arising from childbirth before it could be completed. The outcome of the web of friendships linking this unlikely trio is thus left open to history, open to our present.

Is there any reason for us to be more optimistic than Wollstonecraft could have been about the possibility of friendship between women of different classes or about friendships between men and women? It is at least possible, in our current context, to raise these questions as meaningful political and ethical issues. But is there, even now, a basis for ethical relations between women? The governing ethic between men and women is still primarily conjugal in that it treats women primarily as wives/mothers/sexual partners. Perhaps the most important insight we have to gain from Wollstonecraft's novel is that political and economic reforms are necessary but not sufficient for women's genuine access to social, political and ethical life. This inevitably returns us to the "private" arrangements made between men and women in the shadow of the civic sphere.<sup>31</sup> We need to bring that relation out of the shadows and examine it. Claims that it is based on nature, natural desire or necessary reproductive survival have by now worn thin. We also need to ask how this shadowy relation effects relations between men and women, and women and women, in the public sphere. Perhaps it is time to return, with new insight, to Wollstonecraft's early claim that "The most holy band of society is friendship. It has been well said, by a shrewd satirist, 'that rare as true love is, true friendship is even rarer.'"<sup>32</sup> This is an issue that feminists should resist reducing to a question of sexuality or, as is more usual, *heterosexuality*. The logically prior problem is a problem in ethics: the meaning and value of friendship.

If the liberal paradigm posits that sexual equality can only be had at the price of sexual *neutrality* (meaning the "neutering" of women, since men are already "neutral") then there is a serious problem with the relevance of this paradigm to women's situation. Part of the problem is that the liberal notion of "equality" has developed historically with a male bias towards the public sphere. As Wollstonecraft's writings show, this notion has great difficulty extending itself to issues relating to sexual difference. All liberal theory has to offer on the question of sexual equality is that

women are entitled to be treated "like men," or "as if they were men." In order to pinpoint what is wrong with this response, we are compelled to return to a morality that takes account of bodily specificity. The demand for political equality thus spills over into the ethical, because the very terms in which the demand for political equality is made misses the ethical point: to treat all beings as "the same" is to deny some beings the most basic ethical principle, that is, acknowledgement of its specific being.<sup>33</sup> It is on this point that Wollstonecraft, and other liberal feminists, are at their weakest. On their paradigm, fair and equal treatment for women will only apply to those activities which simulate the neutral subject. In those aspects of her being that bear on her specificity, she will be offered little or no protection: for example, rape, domestic violence, enforced pregnancy. These infringements on women's autonomy significantly overlap in that they represent the unwanted use or abuse of her bodily capacities. The ultimate irony of the liberal state, in relation to woman, is revealed. The founding principle of liberal theory, the right and freedom to use one's bodily capacities as one sees fit, is denied to women with regard to the specific character of their bodies.

*Rights of Woman* and *Maria* are fruitful texts to study in attempting to clarify these two issues of embodiment and ethics. This problem, in all its complexity, can be found there. Wollstonecraft shows, albeit unintentionally, that settling the political question will not settle the ethical one. Perhaps this should not surprise us. The liberal tradition itself was ushered in not simply with a political question but also with an *ethical* one. Is monarchical power legitimate? What would constitute an ethical relation between men? Aspects of Wollstonecraft's work can be read as gesturing toward questions that still have not been satisfactorily addressed. What would constitute an ethical life for women *qua* women? What are the possibilities for women and men sharing a co-authored ethical community? Viewed from the standpoint of present feminist concerns, these unanswered questions are perhaps the most important legacy of Mary Wollstonecraft's life and work.

#### Notes

My thanks to Mary Lyndon Shanley who offered extensive comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

- 1 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam, 1971).
- 2 Carol McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982).
- 3 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in Janet Todd, *A Wollstonecraft Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977; Cambridge: Polity, 1989), p. 65.



- 4 Ibid., p. 72.
- 5 Cora Kaplan, "Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism," in *Formations of Pleasure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 18.
- 6 Anca Vlasopolos, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Mask of Reason in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," *Dalhousie Review*, 60 (3), 1980.
- 7 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. C. H. Poston (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 5.
- 8 Ibid., p. 4.
- 9 Ibid., p. 42.
- 10 Ibid., p. 53.
- 11 Ibid., p. 12.
- 12 Ibid., p. 47.
- 13 Ibid., p. 138.
- 14 Ibid., p. 26.
- 15 Ibid., p. 23.
- 16 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 35n.
- 17 Quoted in J. Abray, "Feminism in the French Revolution," *American Historical Review*, 80, 1975, p. 56.
- 18 See Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Emile* (London: Dent, 1972), p. 324, and Moira Gatens, "Rousseau and Wollstonecraft: Nature vs. Reason," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 64 supplement, June, 1986.
- 19 Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, p. 192.
- 20 Ibid., p. 175.
- 21 Ibid., pp. 142–3 (emphasis added).
- 22 Ibid., p. 178 (emphasis added).
- 23 For an interesting discussion of this question see M. Tapper, "Can a Feminist be a Liberal?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 64 supplement, June, 1986.
- 24 Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 324.
- 25 Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, p. 30.
- 26 That this was Wollstonecraft's view is obvious from Letter XXXI in *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, in Todd, *Wollstonecraft Anthology*.
- 27 Letter LXVII, in *ibid.*
- 28 Letter from Wollstonecraft to Godwin, quoted in R. M. Wardle, *Mary Wollstonecraft* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1951), p. 296.
- 29 Letter VI, in Todd, *Wollstonecraft Anthology*.
- 30 *The Wrongs of Women, or Maria*, in Todd, *Wollstonecraft Anthology* p. 195.
- 31 See Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
- 32 Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, p. 30.
- 33 See L. Irigaray, *L'éthique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris: Minuit, 1984).

# On Hegel, Women and Irony

*Seyla Benhabib*

*Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es bekannt ist, nicht erkannt.*

*(The well-known is unknown, precisely because it is well-known.)*

*G. W. F. Hegel, Phänomenologie des Geistes*

## **Some Methodological Puzzles of a Feminist Approach to the History of Philosophy**

The 1980s have been named “the decade of the humanities” in the USA. In many institutions of higher learning a debate is underway as to what constitutes the “tradition” and the “canon” in literary, artistic and philosophical works worth transmitting to future generations in the last quarter of the twentieth century. At the center of this debate is the question: if what had hitherto been considered the major works of the Western tradition are, almost uniformly, the product of a specific group of individuals, namely propertied, white, European and North American males, how universal and representative is their message, how inclusive is their scope, and how unbiased their vision?

Feminist theory has been at the forefront of this questioning, and under the impact of feminist scholarship the surface of the canon of Western “great works” has been forever fractured, its unity dispersed and its legitimacy challenged. Once the woman’s question is raised, once we ask how a thinker conceptualizes the distinction between male and female, we