

7 **A woman's struggle for a language of enlightenment and virtue**

Mary Wollstonecraft and Enlightenment
'feminism'¹

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Feminists and feminist scholars have often been overly dutiful daughters. Despite our critical stance, and attempts to create our own thoughts and theories, feminist scholars have sometimes gone too far in accepting the definitions and views of dominant theoretical traditions as they have been shaped and applied in clearly male-dominated and non-feminist communities. This influence has sometimes warped our interpretations of our own intellectual history. This is certainly true with respect to dominant views of 'Enlightenment feminism' in feminist scholarship.

Feminist theory developed as a self-conscious enterprise in the 1970s and 1980s, when relatively rigid distinctions among theoretical schools were especially important. Communities of theory took on remarkably patriarchal forms. A cottage industry of feminist theory devoted itself to showing how one or another new theoretical formulation could now become the foundation for feminist theory. These formulations were usually named for their fathers, for example Marx, Freud or Lacan, or could be spoken of only in reference to their fathers, for example Rawls or Foucault. Feminists should be especially wary of expending too much effort in earning the right to take someone else's name. A few efforts to clarify the sources of feminist theory became unfortunately crystallized into a commonly accepted set of categories used to define types of feminist theory. Many observers continue to describe modern feminist theory as being divided into three types: liberal, socialist and radical.² These labels were often used not only to assess the historical complexity of varieties of feminism but to offer notions of competing formulations of the 'best' feminism. Feminist theorists tended to disagree about many things, but to agree on one: 'liberal feminism' and 'Enlightenment' influences on feminism were perhaps important historical forces, but they were so rooted in patriarchal assumptions as to be hardly feminist at all, perhaps not worth much serious feminist attention.

Categorization of theoretical traditions can be useful, but only in the same way as, for example, periodization of history. The name is a label chosen to abstract and represent a limited set of qualities identified by observers as especially important. Categorization of theoretical traditions, such as historical

periodization, unfortunately sometimes takes on a life of its own, such that the labels begin to be taken as causes or explanations rather than as labels fitting to only varying degrees of comfort the cases they describe. Feminist scholars examining women's political and social history during the period roughly labelled 'the Enlightenment' are especially aware of the blinkers that sometimes limit the scope of feminist interpretation. My research on Mary Wollstonecraft and, in particular, on the history of interpretations of and reactions to Wollstonecraft brings the point home forcefully.

HISTORY

I have written about the ways in which the construction of Mary Wollstonecraft reflected the contemporaneous preoccupations of the various ages that interpreted her.³ In contemporary feminist theory she is often seen through the lens of stereotypes of liberalism and the Enlightenment, described and dismissed quickly. Leading schools of feminist scholarship dismiss—or attack—the Enlightenment and anything that could be labelled 'liberal' on a number of well-known grounds that need no rehearsal here. Although in Anglo-American feminism especially Wollstonecraft is regarded as a key 'founding mother of feminism' (and indeed, her influence was geographically wider than that), her political and social theory are rarely seriously studied.⁴ Probing the theme of this book, the languages of feminism, with respect to Wollstonecraft and the Enlightenment, raises an important historical problem. Danger lurks in the attempt to apply a label where no such concept existed. We face special problems in trying to understand a language of feminism in Mary Wollstonecraft's writing or that of the women who preceded her, because they preceded *feminism* as a self-conscious ideology or social movement. Mary Wollstonecraft is especially interesting because she has often been incorrectly labelled the first feminist theorist and because she stands at the historical moment just preceding the development of a feminist movement.

Karen Offen has done admirable work to help us sort out the historical meanings of feminism.⁵ As historian Nancy Cott has written, some misreadings of women's history have resulted from the fact that the 'vocabulary of feminism has been grafted onto the history of women's rights'.⁶ Although it is a matter for debate, I prefer these historical sensibilities to those that seem to imply that a historical figure like Wollstonecraft has little to offer because she did not know her Marx, Bakhtin or MacKinnon very well. One reason we have failed to learn as much from some of our predecessors as we might have done is that some of the key theoretical impulses within feminist theory have tended to abstract and de-historicize the theory and the theorists. While the overarching emphasis on language within feminist theory is correct, studying language by abstracting it out of its material, political and social conditions has led us astray in important ways. Western, white, middle-class feminist theorists have worked

hard to become sensitive to cultural and national difference; they also should become more sensitive about *historical* difference.

There are a number of historical facts necessary to understanding Wollstonecraft and her work. Certainly it is difficult to imagine trying to comprehend her writing on the family, sexuality and work without attending to the historical structures of work, family, conception and birth in her day. The language she used to talk about these things must be grounded in the different world in which she lived. It should also be fascinating to feminist scholars pursuing the political and intellectual history of women to study this particular feminist, who lived before feminism as a conscious theory, ideology or social movement had been invented. There was no such term as ‘feminism’, ‘feminist’ or even ‘womanist’. In Wollstonecraft’s day, no woman that we know of had made a consciously named ideology or ‘Ism’ of her gender. There was no mass social movement, or none of which she was aware, of women who were acting in their own names for and on behalf of women. Thus one way of reading her work is to engage in watching a woman struggling with how to identify, name, and analyse the wrongs and rights⁷ of woman’s condition at a time in which she had no prepackaged language or analysis on which to draw. Feminists and feminist scholars today have a language that has been developed by others—even if not entirely adequately—which they can use for their own purposes.

Not only did Wollstonecraft not have the benefit of a movement, she did not have a ‘history’. Readers are sometimes surprised to see that Wollstonecraft made no comments about many important (in our eyes) predecessors, such as Mary Astell or Christine de Pizan.⁸ How would she have known about these women? Why would she know any more about them than our much more educated students schooled in an era of women’s studies know about Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anna Julia Cooper, Ellen Kay—or for that matter, Mary Wollstonecraft?⁹ From what libraries, teachers or writers would she have learned about her feminist past?

These observations indicate that Wollstonecraft’s life and career offer a glimpse of the struggle for a language of feminism at the most basic level in the context of the Enlightenment. That is, she was a thinker groping towards the very notion of feminism where the most radical languages generally at her disposal at the time which could be used as tools in this search were the various forms of Enlightenment political thinking, including both ‘liberalism’ as it is often conceived, and republicanism. Wollstonecraft’s political and intellectual context gave her some general tools to use to think about the specifically gendered wrongs and rights of society. But she had to struggle to find the words to cast the problems and solutions in gendered terms. She had to seek for herself a way to make what she saw comprehensible to herself and to others who had no language of feminism. She had to find a language when, given her historical placement, she would have to discover for herself that language itself was indeed a problem for women.

Mary Wollstonecraft is a study in the very problems of enlightenment she

investigated. She was certainly not the only woman in her time or before to do this. But there is a huge difference between the mere existence of similarly situated women and a community of people. Intellectual communities and traditions are social phenomena. The intellectual isolation of women is an important part of their intellectual history and to twentieth-century feminist theory, 'feminism', strictly speaking, must incorporate some consciousness of collectivity.

Wollstonecraft's writing on women is, as many have claimed, an application of Enlightenment principles. During most of her brief but productive writing career, she was a member of a London-based community of intellectuals, writers and artists, one of whose major distinguishing features was that they were religious Dissenters, and thus personally understood the denial of civil and political rights despite their generally high levels of education and despite, in the case of a few of them, their wealth. They also stood on the left wing of the political spectrum (as evidenced by the names Paine, Price, Priestley, Blake, Barlow and Godwin, among others), and they were avid supporters of that most unpopular and un-English revolution in France. This context is important because it not only helps to reveal the *roots* of her writing, but also its *audience*, and this should make a difference in our interpretation. Wollstonecraft wrote primarily of and *to* the left. Then as now, publishers aimed their products at specific markets. Her publisher produced books and pamphlets that were largely of interest to Dissenters and the left.

Thus, it is not surprising that her entire corpus of work shares the language and preoccupations of this socio-political group. She was deeply concerned with the problems of reason, independence, virtue, progress, education and enlightenment. Like her friends and colleagues, she was vehemently opposed to slavery, standing armies and many elements of political patriarchy such as primogeniture, aristocracy, and probably monarchy. She, like many of her friends, spent her intellectual life trying to figure out how a free and virtuous society might be constructed. Among the thinkers of the past whose work most influenced her, as it did them, were John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. At the same time, she continually demanded in print that her audience, this group of dissenting radicals, must expand and alter the terms of their analysis, in large part by applying their just principles more consistently and coherently to incorporate individuals excluded from their political analysis—women and children—and to incorporate a social institution that had been excluded from the terms of their analysis: the family.¹⁰ If this struggle to incorporate gender into individual and institutional social analysis is a minor feat, then feminism itself must be defined as a trivial enterprise.

REASON

A brief vocabulary lesson may identify some of the especially enlightening struggles. I begin with a key term so often misunderstood in her writing: *reason* and its relatives *passion* and *education*. These terms cause trouble for those not very familiar with this period, especially for those who understand them through a post-nineteenth century perspective. These concepts are regularly interpreted in a twentieth-century sense quite different from that used by Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries. Some of these historical differences of language alter dramatically how we might understand Wollstonecraft.

Wollstonecraft and other liberal feminists are often chastised by our contemporaries for accepting masculine cold, hard, mechanical *reason* as the central mode of understanding the world. As Wollstonecraft's works on education, as well as her two vindications make clear, she shared with some of her friends an understanding of Reason derived clearly from David Hartley (1705–57) and Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715–71).¹¹ For them, Reason was not a kind of abstracted mathematical play with words, but a matter of what they called the 'association of ideas', the process by which people learn to turn sense impressions into ideas, and combine these to create thoughts and judgments. It refers to the active process of reaching understanding from experience, not to a set of formulations found in a logic textbook. Reason is possible only if we learn to exercise our minds to gain their strength and independence, much as we might exercise our bodies to gain their strength and independence.

Wollstonecraft defined thinking as an active process in which the mind is trained not to substitute faith, obedience, imitation, unexamined habit or first impressions for real thinking. Unfortunately, she believed, most people regularly substitute these former processes—what she called 'prejudice'—for reason and thought. The fact that Wollstonecraft, like other Enlightenment thinkers, understood the mind as defined and shaped by experience led her to understand the nature of thinking and prejudice in an institutional and social context as well. All forms of inequality and social subordination that she could detect—what she called 'unnatural distinctions'—militated against the possibility of developing the strength and independence of mind necessary for reason. All forms of social subordination, including those based on rank, property, religion, race, age and gender, required such mechanisms as obedience and faith, ceremonies and rituals, fear and disdain, all of which barred all parties to these social relationships from being able to develop strength and independence of mind.

Thus, Wollstonecraft's work, especially when we consider all of her major works and not just the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,¹² is one of the earliest to grapple with the key issue of social change that feminists and other political activists confront: by what means can we, members of an inequalitarian, corrupt, and unenlightened society based on prejudice develop

a more enlightened vision of society for ourselves, and then attain that vision in reality? One answer—the key one that the Enlightenment suggested—was employing the development of mind and reason. In this model we work through education to strip away the prejudices of past ages, reach a higher level of understanding of how we should be, and reform our minds, our ideas, our culture to conform to this improved notion.

Here it is important to examine this idea of education and the role it played in Wollstonecraft's work. Certainly, she spent her entire writing career probing problems of education. But for her, as for many of her contemporaries, education did not refer just to formal training received in schools. Although the small handful of pages in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* devoted to discussion of schooling and school systems is probably the most famous of all her work, if we take account of her entire corpus of writing, it is clear that for Wollstonecraft, education more often means much what the term 'socialization' means to us today: a broader concept of the development of the individual through all her experiences. Wollstonecraft was attentive to the breadth of experiences from which we learn—not just from schools, but from the structure of the institutions in which we live, from ceremonies and rituals, from our modes of dress and the way we eat. The problem—of which Wollstonecraft was well aware—was that if the structure and culture of the society around us so shapes how we think, how do we actually achieve an adequate vision of the virtuous alternative? And how do we change people's habits of mind if the structure of society has not yet changed? Despite her emphasis on education broadly and narrowly construed, her understanding of the effects of the unnatural distinctions that structured society led her to write in her famous *Vindication*, that 'It may...fairly be inferred, that till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education'.¹³

While attending to reason as a means of change, she saw little possibility for real change unless there were more radical changes in the structure of society, especially the end to subordination by rank and gender. But her experience with the French Revolution, and especially the Terror, which she witnessed first hand, also led her to be uneasy about the likely nature of radical change that flowed from ideas developed in a basically corrupt society. The French Revolution, she believed, was part of the human destiny for improvement, but it proved to Wollstonecraft that the path to that goal was treacherous. Even as she hailed the revolution in often poetic terms, she worried about the outcome. As she thought about the now-silent palace of Versailles she felt glad of its demise as a symbol of tyranny, but also detected

the vestiges of thy former oppression; which, separating man from man with a fence of iron, sophisticated all, and made many completely wretched; I tremble, lest I should meet some unfortunate being, fleeing from the despotism of licentious freedom, hearing the snap of the *guillotine* at his heels; merely because he was once noble, or has afforded

an asylum to those, whose only crime is their names—and, if my pen almost bounds with eagerness to record the day, that levelled the Bastille, the recollection, that still the abbey is appropriated to hold the victims of revenge and suspicion, palsies the hand that would fain do justice to the assault.¹⁴

The revolution was good, but it was born of a corrupt society, and thus must itself contain elements of that corruption. The problem, her writing suggested repeatedly, is that the solution must be found by the mutual enlightenment of equals who can imagine a virtue that can only come from the system not yet created. She explicitly denied that a specially enlightened vanguard could offer the solution; people are the products of their environment.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Wollstonecraft's basic enlightenment understanding of reason, virtue and experience, mixed with close examination of specific cases of subordination, led her to begin to probe a set of questions that have been central to feminist analysis since then: the tensions between social structures and individual psychology or between material and culture as the thread to pull when trying to unravel an old society and create a new one. This aspect of her work is most clear with respect to her understanding of women in her final manuscript, *The Wrongs of Woman, Or, Maria*, which lay unfinished on her desk when she died. The text weaves together the life histories of three people who find themselves in an insane asylum: one woman born poor, one man born wealthy and one woman born middle class. Each had been subjected to the special violences common to his and her own class and gender in an oppressive patriarchal system. The main character, Maria, has been locked up by her husband, who also took her child from her. The text that is available to us was compiled and edited by William Godwin, who found it as loose sheaves. Wollstonecraft's notes suggest at least five alternative plot courses for the unwritten conclusion.

Wollstonecraft's letters indicate she found this her most difficult work to write.¹⁵ *The Wrongs of Woman* contains many unresolved problems. They are unresolved because the book was never finished, but the book was never finished partly because the problems were not resolved. I believe this lack of resolution was caused by Wollstonecraft's ever-increasing grasp of the systemic and enveloping nature of the structure of gender relations in their individual, cultural and institutional complexity. The author of this book understands physical and psychological violence against women and children in the context of intimate relationships that stems both from learned individual patterns of thinking and behaviour, and from the logic of social institutions as they are constructed by law.

The gothic convention of the insane asylum/prison from which one might conceivably escape, but only with great luck, craft or assistance is given life through the figurative and more inescapable prisons of marriage and property law, and the corruptions of mind and heart. Here is perhaps the one instance in which a comparison of Wollstonecraft and Godwin is truly appropriate. Maria's observation that 'Marriage had bastilled me for life'¹⁶ this crucial political term for this private institution—harkens back to Godwin's most famous passage in *Caleb Williams*,¹⁷ his fictional rendition of his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*.

Thank God,' exclaims the Englishman, 'we have no Bastille! Thank God, with us no man can be punished without a crime!' Unthinking wretch! Is that a country of liberty, where thousands languish in dungeons and fetters? Go, go, ignorant fool! and visit the scenes of our prisons! witness their unwholesomeness, their filth, the tyranny of their governors, the misery of their inmates! After that, show me the man shameless enough to triumph, and say, 'England has no Bastille!'¹⁸

The dark scenes of Maria's vain attempts to escape from her husband are reminiscent of Caleb Williams' escape attempts from his prisonkeeper. Wollstonecraft, in contrast to Godwin, extended her political analysis very clearly into the family, identifying it as an extension of the state, with the husband not just as the patriarch in the little commonwealth, but as its police as well.

The incidents in the characters' lives are plausible under the law of the time. But Wollstonecraft also recognized that oppression worked through the mind and heart as well as through law and material inequality. Oppression is not just a cage—it reaches into people's minds, destroying any simple notion of escape. Jemima, an impoverished woman who has suffered most forms of violence known especially to woman, has had her spirit crushed. Maria claims her own independence, but the court is there to stop her. Maria seems to try to save herself from the tyranny of one marriage by entering another as though that were the solution, but Wollstonecraft's notes for her unchosen conclusion suggest a strong likelihood that that 'solution' would prove the wrong one.

CHARACTER

The mechanisms of the mind in a corrupt society also point to another problem raised in Wollstonecraft's work: The character of women. Wollstonecraft is well-known for the negative things she had to say about women's character, especially their weaknesses and their use of beauty and sexuality as cunning instruments of tyrannical power. A short-sighted view understands her criticisms as the mere deficiencies of victim blaming. But in fact much of her work—especially the two vindications, but also her history of the French Revolution

and her final fiction—emphasized the corrupting influences of unnatural distinctions or social subordination on all parties to the inequality.

Self-preservation is a natural instinct. And for Wollstonecraft, those who are raised without reason, either because they are unnaturally raised to positions of power or unnaturally lowered to positions of subordination, are especially likely to be self-regarding and unjust in their relations with others. With each form of social subordination Wollstonecraft investigated—those based on rank, property, age and gender—she showed how the character and minds of both the dominant and subordinated partner within dominance relations become corrupted into a self-regarding short-term rationality framed by these unjust relations. She consistently framed her discussion of gender relations with metaphors of power and tyranny that would be more immediately politically comprehensible to the men around her than arguments about gender; the tyranny of men over women and its resulting effects on both men and women were like the tyranny of kings over their courtiers, to the profound corruption of both.

Woman's 'problem' is not just that she has been kept from an education that trains her mind and gives her substance; it is that her entire experience, like that of men, is shaped by unjust power relations. Women, when they are not entirely crushed by men's tyranny, too often turn to cunning, especially in the use of their bodies and sexuality, because that is the only weapon they have for survival in this system. As Wollstonecraft explained, 'this exertion of cunning is only an instinct of nature to enable them to obtain indirectly a little of that power of which they are unjustly denied a share'.¹⁹ Both women and men are corrupted by this system of subordination, but she laid the lion's share of the blame at men's feet.

From the tyranny of man, I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed; and the cunning, which I allow makes at present a part of their character, I likewise have repeatedly endeavoured to prove, is produced by their oppression.²⁰

She did not blame women for their relationship with men. She did, however, despise each of these relationships. This is a very different view from that of contemporary feminist commentators who sometimes seem to suggest that despite living within corrupt and unjust power relationships, and social institutions, women nevertheless have remained essentially distinctly nurturant and just, and that the only thing that stands between women and the goal of making heaven on earth is the men that won't let us do this.

Thus far we have followed a very few threads from Wollstonecraft's use of a basic Enlightenment vocabulary to her analysis of gender relations. Hers was an era that initiated a tremendous critique of institutions such as churches and governments and, with the help of Mary Wollstonecraft among others, the family. These people asserted the importance of the dignity of the individual human being, and the individual human mind and conscience against patriarchal

institutions.²¹ Wollstonecraft's main contribution here was that she would not let her friends leave women and the family out of this picture. The key to the complexity is that she was not focussing on disembodied reason, but reason driven by and embedded in experience, which creates a powerful political psychology. (It is no coincidence that her century gave birth to psychology and, more generally, social science.) That political psychology raises many of the issues that are central to the feminism that followed.

LANGUAGES OF FEMINISM: CONCLUSION

Finally, let us consider 'languages of feminism' in a narrow sense. I have asserted repeatedly that Wollstonecraft's feminist theory must be understood as one that preceded feminism as a named self-conscious entity and thus that it preceded the time in which a community of women had already worked out a basic vocabulary for naming their problems and searching for solutions. Consider an important implication: given Wollstonecraft's historical position, living in a great revolutionary era in which some of the leaders of the great nineteenth-century feminist movements were literally just about to be born, her work can be seen as a struggle towards a vocabulary, a recognition that there are special problems with language itself that must be solved before women can have justice. What follows are some illustrations.

One of Wollstonecraft's methods was to probe the meaning of key terms of social discourse. She asked whether they have the same or different meaning for women and men, and if different, why. Clearly, much of her discussion of reason and related terms falls into this pattern. She also, however, offered intriguing discussions of the gendered meanings of 'virtue', 'modesty', 'honour' and 'heroism'. She showed little trust in the words used by her political opponents, and assessed them very critically. She saw ordinary language as a tool of oppression:

'As a philosopher, I read with indignation the plausible epithets which men use to soften their insults; and as a moralist, I ask what is meant by such heterogeneous associations, as fair defects, amiable weaknesses, etc.?'²² She saw these as phrases 'men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence'.²³

Her belief in the development of the mind as the habitual association of ideas meant that such 'heterogeneous associations' or morally contradictory ideas could be bound together in people's minds, thus allowing the good and bad to be confused.

In the *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft both noted the power of corrupt associations of ideas, and attempted political polemic through analysis of language. The words 'feminine' and 'masculine', she argued, were used as weapons against women. Wollstonecraft concluded that the common sense of 'masculine' included the human virtues of reason, strength and

independence she so valued. The term itself could therefore be used to help deny women the opportunity to become virtuous. She believed ‘the word masculine is only a bugbear; there is little reason to fear that women will acquire too much courage or fortitude’.²⁴

In the end, Wollstonecraft herself remained caught in a gender-bound language that was not, as she herself indicated, merely external drapery to different thoughts, but a part of the mechanism of her own thinking.²⁵ She showed signs of trying to free herself from the confines of gender-structured (and therefore structuring) language. In the *Rights of Woman*, for example, she remarked on Catherine Macaulay’s book:

I will not call hers a masculine understanding, because I admit not of such an arrogant assumption of reason; but I contend that it was a sound one, and that her judgment, the matured fruit of profound thinking, was a proof that a woman can acquire judgment, in the full extent of the word.²⁶

Wollstonecraft also worked out some ‘heterogeneous associations’ of her own, revealing her resistance and occasional sabotage of common gendered understanding. By the time she wrote the *Rights of Woman*, she was most likely to accuse men of being unmanly when they were acting most as men were expected to act, especially towards women. She referred to the apparently most masculine of characters as feminine, including the military and men engaging in common courtship rituals. But she certainly had no well-worked theory of language and no clear alternative.

One superb indication of her struggle with a language of feminism can be found in a generally neglected passage in which, I argue, a distinctly feminist voice appears to be on the point of emerging, and in which she begins to exemplify a feminist politics. I say ‘exemplifies’ rather than ‘discusses’ (or any similar word) because she demonstrates through incompleteness. For this, we return to her last work, *The Wrongs of Woman*. Consider this passage, in which Maria addresses her daughter as she writes her memoirs.

Addressing these memoirs to you, my child, uncertain whether I shall ever have an opportunity of instructing you, many observations will probably flow from my heart, which only a mother—a mother schooled in misery, could make.

The tenderness of a father who knew the world, might be great; but could it equal that of a mother—of a mother, labouring under a portion of the misery, which the constitution of society seems to have entailed on all her kind? It is, my child, my dearest daughter, only such a mother, who will dare to break through all restraint to provide for your happiness—who will voluntarily brave censure herself, to ward off sorrow from your bosom. From my narrative, my dear girl, you may gather the instruction, the counsel, which is meant rather to exercise than influence your mind.²⁷

This passage may appear innocent of politics at first, perhaps a mere example of conventional sentimentalism. But Maria is telling her daughter that her misery is not random, unique or exclusively personal, but rather that it falls systematically on the shoulders of women because of the ‘constitution of society’.

Something else about Maria’s statement of misery endows her words with a political significance that was rare before a woman’s movement was available to foster gender-based political consciousness among women. It is ‘only such a mother, who will dare to break through all restraint to provide for your happiness—who will voluntarily brave censure herself, to ward off sorrow from your bosom’. Maria will defy the restraints placed on her by law and social convention due to her sex, and despite the punishments she knows she must receive because she hopes to relieve the burdens on the younger woman. Maria knows the limits of the counsel. Mere individual enlightenment is insufficient because the ‘state of society’ will not have changed. And further, she *will not* tell her how to live. But the ‘exercise’ of the daughter’s mind with respect to these restraints may give her the strength to make her own choices.

The narrator of the *Wrongs of Woman* did not play the role of authoritative reasoner as she did in the *Rights of Woman*; in the former she took the part of a woman speaking with love to her daughter. Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft instructed her readers to understand this story ‘as (rather) of woman, than of an individual’.²⁸ We should not take the letter from mother to daughter at face value. Wollstonecraft seemed to be reaching towards the means to a shared political consciousness with her female readers. As Maria and Jemima, women from different classes, share their personal stories, they begin to realize that the sources of and possibly the solutions to their problems are not individual and personal. Perhaps the same might happen if Maria had a chance to share with her daughter the personal narrative that is, in truth, their shared story.

I emphasize that Wollstonecraft appeared *in the process* of finding the means to the leap from personal narrative to political consciousness. She was, literally, not in the position of the informed narrator unfolding an already known story. We, on the other hand, are readers informed by the passage of two centuries of feminist history since Wollstonecraft struggled with her manuscript. In the nineteenth century, and even more in the late twentieth century, one of the most powerful means by which feminism as ideology and practice developed was through the process of women sharing their common personal stories. In the late 1960s this process was adopted and refined as a political strategy and given a name—consciousness-raising—but the process was not invented whole. It evolved out of the personal conversations among female friends and kin that, in particular historical contexts, became political. In Wollstonecraft’s writing we see the glimmerings of the idea of a political practice that later became instrumental in the development of feminist politics.

It would probably make sense to Wollstonecraft that discussion of 'private' pains within a particular oppressed social group could lead to a special form of enlightenment: realization of the underlying principles that unify social and individual human life to foster or inhibit the development of virtue. What Wollstonecraft did not seem to imagine was how this enlightenment might be translated into political action. But then, of the women who eventually conceived of a gender-based political movement, only a couple were even born during Wollstonecraft's lifetime, and they were still babies when she died.

In her last manuscript the text suggests that Wollstonecraft did indeed feel 'bastilled'. The development of her political and social ideas was closing her in, driving a wall between her own beliefs and the era of light. She had not yet found a way out of this story, just as she was not sure of a way out of the story of despotism and the Terror or, indeed, the story of her own life. We can learn from that. Political theory, including especially democratic feminist theory is not written in hindsight. By definition, if one is willing at all to accept any terms of enlightenment, it is done partly in the dark.

NOTES

- 1 This discussion is drawn substantially from my book, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992. I refer the reader there for elaboration of the argument and more extensive documentation.
- 2 One of the most useful and intelligent examples of this approach is found in A. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Ottawa, NJ, Rowman and Allanheld, 1983.
- 3 Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue*, chap. 8.
- 4 In contrast, there is an extensive literature of literary criticism of Wollstonecraft. See the Bibliography in Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue*. One—perhaps too personalized—indication of the undervaluing of Wollstonecraft as a political thinker in feminist circles is that *A Vindication of Political Virtue*, the first full-length work devoted entirely to the subject of Wollstonecraft's work specifically as feminist political theory, published in 1992 by a major scholarly publisher, was never (at least through spring 1996) reviewed by a single journal or periodical that identified itself as 'feminist'.
- 5 K. Offen, 'Defining feminism: a comparative historical approach', *Signs*, 1988, 14, pp. 119–57.
- 6 N.F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987, p. 3.
- 7 Here I use the term 'rights' in an ordinary generic way, not as a juridical term.
- 8 Mary Astell (1668–1731) was a British writer best known for *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest*. Christine de Pisan (c. 1364–c. 1430) is best known for *The Book of the City of Ladies*.
- 9 Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1868–1935) was an American feminist writer whose best-known works include *Women and Economics* (1898), *The Man-Made World: Our Androcentric Culture* (1911) and *Herland* (1915). Anna Julia Cooper was an African American writer and educator whose best-known work was *A Voice from the South* (1892). Ellen Key (1849–1926) was a Swedish social feminist who wrote and lectured widely on feminist subjects.
- 10 One of the best works on this group is I. Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois*

Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1990.

- 11 The most relevant works would be Hartley's *Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations* (1749) and Helvétius' *De l'esprit* (1758). Both of these were extremely influential. In 1775 Joseph Priestley published *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind, on the Principle of the Association of Ideas*, an abridgement of Hartley's earlier work. Elie Halévy claims this is the work that made Hartley so popular among the moral scientists; see Halévy, *The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism*, Boston, Beacon, 1955, p. 8.
- 12 This work has been reprinted in many editions. It, along with almost all of Wollstonecraft's other known writings except her correspondence, can be found in J.Todd and M.Butler (eds), *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, London, Pickering, 1989.
- 13 M.Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in Todd and Butler, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 90.
- 14 M.Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe*, in Todd and Butler, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 85.
- 15 Her correspondence can be found in R.M.Wardle (ed.), *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979.
- 16 M.Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman*, p. 146.
- 17 W.Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, New York, Norton, 1977, p. 188.
- 18 W.Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Justice*, New York, Penguin, 1976.
- 19 M.Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in Todd and Butler, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 68.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 265.
- 21 In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in Todd and Butler, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 11, she wrote that *reason* and *conscience* are synonymous.
- 22 M.Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in Todd and Butler, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 103.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 25 On this point, see M.Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- 27 M.Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman*, in Butler and Todd, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 22.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 83.