

Mary Wollstonecraft's Feminist Critique of Property: On Becoming a Thief from Principle

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The scholarship on Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) is divided concerning her views on women's role in public life, property rights, and distribution of wealth. Her critique of inequality of wealth is undisputed, but is it a complaint only of inequality or does it strike more forcefully at the institution of property? The argument in this article is that Wollstonecraft's feminism is partly defined by a radical critique of property, intertwined with her conception of rights. Dissociating herself from the conceptualization of rights in terms of self-ownership, she casts economic independence—a necessary political criterion for personal freedom—in terms of fair reward for work, not ownership. Her critique of property moves beyond issues of redistribution to a feminist appraisal of a property structure that turns people into either owners or owned, rights-holders or things acquired. The main characters in Wollstonecraft's last novel—Maria, who is rich but has nothing, and Jemima, who steals as a matter of principle—illustrate the commodification of women in a society where even rights are regarded as possessions.

The Enlightenment philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) is known and read today for her case for women's rights, her support for the principles of the French Revolution, and her critique of the patriarchal family. Her contributions to the budding genre of the political novel have attracted the attention of literary scholars, and her short but eventful life is a biographer's dream. Her importance for feminist philosophy is undisputed, but on one crucial matter opinions are divided. What was her view of women's role in public life? Emphasizing civil recognition, together with economic independence, as necessary criteria for personal freedom in Wollstonecraft's theory, I argue that economic independence forms part of a radical critique of property that is a defining feature of her feminism and her conception of rights.

My analysis takes us through Wollstonecraft's ideas of rights and personhood in which she dissociates herself from the conceptualization of rights in terms of self-

ownership. In line with her approach to society as a vehicle for moral development, she casts economic independence in terms of reward for work, not of benefiting from ownership. Women were virtually shut out from employments regarded as respectable, and married women—many of whom did work—had no legal claim to their own earnings. It is this fact that makes economic independence such a crucial thing on which to insist for Wollstonecraft. Her critique of property goes deep into the core of civic society and its economic institutions, moving beyond issues of redistribution to a feminist appraisal of how the property structure turns people into either owners or owned, rights-holders or things that the rights-holders acquire. I illustrate this point with the main characters in her last novel: Maria, who is rich but has nothing, and Jemima, who steals from principle.

My analysis is based on texts that Wollstonecraft published or meant to publish. I do not refer to personal correspondence, I resist the temptation to use her personal history as testimony to her philosophy, and I do not address her legacy for the generations after her, neither in terms of theory nor of political movements.¹

PROPERTY AND RIGHTS

Analyzing Wollstonecraft's critique of property requires a grasp of her concept of natural and political rights. "Rights" and "birthright" are foundational notions for Wollstonecraft and—as such notions often are—are asserted as incontrovertible truths, rather than proposed in argument. We can, however, analyze what rights do in her theory. Wollstonecraft defines the "birthright of man" as: "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" (Wollstonecraft 1989c, 9). This definition runs the natural and the political together, referring to liberties of a kind that make sense only within political society; "civil liberty" has no point of reference outside of it. Yet these political liberties are predicated upon a natural principle of morality according to which human persons, by virtue of "their improvable faculties" (14), have a natural right to moral equality, hence the familiar condition that no one may claim more liberty than is compatible with the liberty of others.

A philosophy of natural rights in the context of English Enlightenment evokes an expectation of the familiar trinity of life, liberty, and estate. Indeed, in her subsequent defense of post-revolutionary France, Wollstonecraft refers to property as one of the natural rights protected by the constitution (Wollstonecraft 1989d, 162, 221). Yet the definition of the birthright of man is not only silent on property but is offered in the opening pages of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* as a consistent attack on "the demon of property" (Wollstonecraft 1989c, 9), a phrase she borrowed from Rousseau.² If you operate within a natural-rights position—typically imbued with the notion of property as a right—but exclude property from your own definition, adding for good measure that property is a "poisoned fountain" (1989d, 211) of evil and vice, then surely you want to make a point.

Wollstonecraft's writings on property easily cause a reader to focus on two things: the detrimental effects of unequal property distribution and women's economic dependence on men. Indeed, Wollstonecraft was highly critical of unequal distribution of wealth and privilege, and the consequences of inequality for virtue and moral development is an important aspect of her complaint.³ Property is a selfish principle, invoked by the rich under the false name of liberty in order to protect themselves against the claims of the poor.⁴ Moral development is a practical matter and virtue is an achievement, acquired through thought and useful activity. But if the rich are admired for being useless and idle, then that is what they will become. Conversely, if you need to work every waking hour to put food on the table, there will be neither time nor energy for thought.

Virginia Sapiro rightly points out that there is no evidence to suggest that Wollstonecraft contemplated the abolition of private property (Sapiro 1992, 90). This need not be surprising; for a critic of social mores, focusing on measures for harm reduction is reasonable.⁵ A fair dissemination of wealth, elimination of hereditary privilege, and reward in proportion to effort are useful means for creating fair expectations and incentives for industry (Wollstonecraft 1989c, 24).⁶

Enabling women to be economically independent is to be preferred for these reformist reasons (Wollstonecraft 1989d, 155, 216–18, 237; Gunther-Canada 2001, 138; Kramer 2009, 1146), which are radical on their own, considering the deep changes of economic relations and institutions that it would take to satisfy them, but we should not infer that these are Wollstonecraft's only concerns regarding property.

Pragmatic considerations aside, Wollstonecraft's theory of rights excludes property from the domain of the natural and hence from moral justification. A key is in her conspicuous avoidance of a particular rights terminology that associates rights with ownership. Her philosophy is not "stock radical-Lockean" (Taylor 2003, 172), but instead radically opposed to the Lockean view of rights and property. My argument calls for an assessment of two things: property in relation to the rights-bearer and the relation between nature and artifice.

Natural-rights terminology offers a recognizable language for expressing the moral standing of the person, the moral relevance of rational thought, the unchangeable nature of moral principles, and the notion that rightness constrains the legitimate scope of law.⁷ One thing that features in natural-rights talk of this period is, however, tellingly absent, and that is the idea that rights are attributes of the person, held as property. Locke famously formulated this as having property in one's own person.⁸ The person owns his actions, by virtue of which external things are drawn into the circle of actions that are properly his. Property in external things is thereby conceived as the natural extension of property of the person.⁹ The rights-bearer is distinguished by this status.

The relations between the person and his rights, and between the person and external things, are two features of property as an inherent part of the right of nature. A political argument for the recognition of various oppressed groups—workers, slaves, women—is easily cast in these terms. Inclusion in the circle of rights-holders would then amount to being reckoned among these individuals: the self-owning persons,

who hold their rights as property. The political appeal is obvious: If I own myself by nature, I cannot be subordinated by nature.¹⁰

Richard Price, an important influence for Wollstonecraft, was an explicit admirer of Locke. Though Price was more egalitarian than Locke himself, the need to “prevent too great an inequality in the distribution of property” (Price 1991b, 144) did not induce him to question property as a natural right or the centrality afforded by Locke to property in the concept of right. Wollstonecraft did question property as a natural right. The Lockean concept of natural rights puts property at the core of morality; the notion of a right is made dependent upon it. Despite the foundational importance that she attaches to the natural rights of the human person, Wollstonecraft never argues in this way.¹¹ This is an indicator that her critique of property goes well beyond a complaint about distribution; it brings us to the relation between society and natural morality.

Liberty as a person’s birthright extends, as we have seen, so far as is compatible with the liberty of all others within the “social compact, and the continued existence of that compact” (Wollstonecraft 1989c, 9).¹² Whatever I can claim as my right is limited by everyone’s equal claim to the same; this is part of the logic of rights. By limiting it also to what is compatible with the continued existence of the “social compact,” the existence of society is made into a precondition for man’s birthright to make sense. Only given society is it possible to conceptualize the limits of what can be claimed in the name of natural right and in relation to whom.

This indicates that Wollstonecraft did not regard society as unnatural. The natural state of man is constituted by those social circumstances that are most conducive to that which natural morality serves: freedom and development. Society is natural since morality is natural and includes society in its principle. She never uses “artificial” to refer to political society, which is significant given the early modern tendency to stress the artificiality of political society in order to refute natural subordination to the monarch.¹³ For Wollstonecraft, the distinction between natural and artificial is normative, not ontological; a society is artificial to the extent that it is unjust. Equality is a principle, not a fact, and nature serves the function of expressing the simplicity of this principle over the “unnatural distinctions” (Wollstonecraft 1989d, 93) of unmerited privilege. Society is artificial or arbitrary¹⁴—unnatural—to the extent that it serves as an imposition on the natural principle of equality. Great inequality of fortune is bad for both consequentialist and nonconsequentialist reasons—it causes moral weakness and it violates the principle of freedom—hence the purpose of government is to counteract natural inequality by protecting the weak. Otherwise it disregards “the first principle of it’s [sic] organization” (Wollstonecraft 1989e, 17).

The natural duty to develop one’s intellectual faculties obliges a person only if her circumstances are reasonably beneficial and there is mutual respect.¹⁵ This is an implication of the logic of rights and a practical principle based on observation. Moral development is not an inclination; it is a duty. It is also hard work and has to be “goaded on by necessity” (Wollstonecraft 1989d, 124; compare 1989c, 16). Contrary to the ancient idea that a free political life requires that citizens be

liberated from care of material necessities, Wollstonecraft warns that such a (false) freedom will turn men into “artificial” monsters (Wollstonecraft 1989c, 10), with nothing useful to do or think about. The wealthy and privileged are corrupted by the lack of necessity in their lives, but the hopeless toil of the poor makes for equally unnatural circumstances. Induced to fawn and flatter while simultaneously envying and hating their superiors,¹⁶ the have-nots make spectacles of themselves in order to appear worthy objects of pity. Misery must have its “cap and bells” (15).¹⁷ Jemima, in the novel *The Wrongs of Woman*, brings this humiliating charade to life by describing how she was taught to “put on my rags to the best advantage” (Wollstonecraft 1989b, 112).

This dynamic of inequality indicates that Wollstonecraft’s concern with middle-class women is not due to a preference for the bourgeoisie or a “liberal” political economy,¹⁸ but to a dislike of excess and a belief that wealth and poverty alike corrupt the mind. The middle ranks need to exert themselves, but with hope and without humiliation, and are therefore in the “most natural state” (Wollstonecraft 1989c, 75). This is a view she shared with others, notably Price, who also claimed that wisdom and goodness are more likely to be found among the middle, rather than the high, power-seeking ranks of life (Price 1991a, 87).

With great disparity of wealth and class pressing upon class (Wollstonecraft 1989d, 230), rich and poor are separated into “bands of tyrants and slaves” (1989e, 234) and the poor induced to “consider the rich as their lawful prey” (1989c, 52). The same observation is made in *The Wrongs of Woman* when Jemima, facing up to the hopelessness of poverty, calmly notes: “I began to consider the rich and poor as natural enemies, and became a thief from principle” (1989b, 118). Great inequality of fortune is not only unfair and morally detrimental; it is dangerous. The miserable *will* eventually snap, and “the retaliation of slaves is always terrible” (1989e, 234).¹⁹ A sobering lesson is that the same oppressive and humiliating conditions that cause and justify revolutions make it unlikely for a revolution to end well.

Wollstonecraft’s observations of the harmful effects of wealth and inequality ground arguments for property reform; this is clearly important. Disseminated wealth is better than unequal wealth but, as Wollstonecraft reminds us, most vices can be shown to produce “some benefit to society” (Wollstonecraft 1989c, 51). This only shows that their effects are not uniformly bad; it does not make them morally justified. Another observation that commands our attention concerns the reason why property reforms are resisted.

Moral principles do not estimate right and wrong “according to the point of sight” (1989c, 52), but support for property depends for its reasonableness on the point of view of privilege. In *The French Revolution*, Wollstonecraft explains the resistance against the abolishment of privileges with the fact that they are regarded as property, the loss of which merits compensation (Wollstonecraft 1989e, 58). The main problem remains: property is regarded as a right rather than a convenience. The disinterested view is the view of the philosopher, which here is the same as the view of poor men, the dispossessed, with no titles or riches to lose (Wollstonecraft 1989c, 47, 49; also Price 1991a, 87).

PROPERTY, LABOR, AND WORK

The philosophical view of property that Wollstonecraft advocates, the view of the poor man, amounts to an implicit refutation of the Lockean theory of rights and labor, as I will show. First we need to get a sense of the centrality to her feminism of economic independence through work.

Freedom from personal dependence has two main political components intimately linked to each other.²⁰ One recalls the citizen in Roman law who acts on his own behalf in public, represented by political institutions and protected by civil laws. Wollstonecraft refers to this status as civil existence,²¹ which includes the capacity to hold property and make contracts, capacities necessary for the second political component of personal independence: economic self-sufficiency.

Some commentators downplay the role of economic independence for Wollstonecraft's feminism, and others discuss it only to claim that its significance is secondary to women's domestic roles.²² This could be surprising considering that personal freedom for women is defined in terms of economic self-sufficiency, together with civil recognition, several times in *The Rights of Woman*:

... enable [women] to earn their own subsistence, the true definition of independence. (Wollstonecraft 1989d, 155)

But, to render her really virtuous and useful, she must not, if she discharge her civil duties, want, individually, the protection of civil laws; she must not be dependent on her husband's bounty for her subsistence... for how can a being be generous who has nothing of its own? or virtuous, who is not free? (1989d, 216–17)

... they become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men; in the same manner... as one man is independent of another. (1989d, 237)

Respectable women will continue to “marry for a support” (1989d, 218) until they are allowed to pursue employments other than the menial ones and respected for doing so. This would, however, result in public benefit only if they were also granted “a civil existence in the state, married or single” (219). Importantly, supporting yourself is not enough. Women's independence within political society requires, indivisibly, these two things: civil recognition and economic self-sufficiency.

Exploring how economic independence is construed, we find that, for Wollstonecraft, earning a fair reward for industry and exertion, not the possession of wealth, is key to economic independence. Independence is a *moral* principle and holding property has no moral function; working has.

The notion that working for wages contributes to securing a person's independence was not a dominant view in the eighteenth century. Immanuel Kant, Wollstonecraft's contemporary, advocates the common position that wage labor disqualifies a person from citizenship. His distinction between active members of and auxiliaries in the commonwealth is between those (adult men) who live off their

property or hold public office and those who work for another for pay.²³ Wollstonecraft is influenced by Rousseau's views on work and idleness,²⁴ but the thing for us to note is how working for pay ties in with her critique of property as a right and the idea that rights are property.

Locke introduced a technical understanding of labor in his theory of rights as property. Land, originally held in common, can be turned into an object of private right through a performative act of appropriation. Labor is his term of choice for that act whereby a thing is acquired out of the common stock and turned into a person's property. Labor is an activity of the rights-holder whereby he fixes his property in things taken out of the commons (Locke 1988, 288, §27). Labor in this technical sense can as a matter of definition not be done for wages. Working for wages is to perform a service on behalf of another's right; any right of possession emanating out of a servant's work is the master's right.²⁵ The master does the laboring, in the sense of acquiring the right of property, even if the paid servant does the actual work.

The exploitative character of this relation, between he who commands and acquires and he who works to secure a right for another, goes unrecognized by Locke but is of course important for Rousseau, who treats property as part of a system of exploitation that drives a wedge between private interest and public good. The influence of Rousseau on Wollstonecraft is a further reason to recognize the centrality of a radical critique of property and commerce to her views on moral development and the role of the state.

A couple of things beg particularly to be noted about the Lockean position. First, through the conceptual association between having rights and holding property, Locke dissociates labor from exertion and industry; property can be acquired by simply issuing a command to a servant, or by benefiting from the work of another. Second, working for pay is left with no dignity of its own. It is a dependent activity, lacking any positive quality.

Wollstonecraft objects to both these things, stating that "The only security of property that nature authorizes and reason sanctions is, the right a man has to enjoy the acquisitions which his talents and industry have acquired," adding that the world would be a better place "if there were no other road to wealth or honour" (Wollstonecraft 1989c, 24). The implication of this claim is that a capacity to gain wealth and privilege through the exercise of power over others is a moral depravity, since the only rightful road to wealth and honor is the same as the only road to virtue: the exercise of reason that comes with exertion. This forms into a normative position on the dignity of work. All passages in *The Rights of Woman* wherein women's freedom is made to require economic self-sufficiency refer to earnings, and exertion for subsistence, not to possession of property. Freedom pertains to persons and persons are agents, shaped, as Sapiro points out, by their activities.²⁶ Wollstonecraft lets us understand that even in the absence of respect for a job well done, a low-status profession is better than none for two reasons: the benefits to one's character of activity and the value of turning oneself into something other than a kept dependent.

Being *enabled* to support yourself implies, however, that you are regarded as someone to whom things are due by law and contract. The capacity to claim things as

one's own is predicated on the status of being *sui iuris*, a person in the eyes of civil law. Women who worked still had to marry for support since they needed a husband to act as owner or claimant of the money that they, the women, already made.²⁷ Their dependence goes to the core of their persons.²⁸ In order to analyze what this means and see the importance of it for Wollstonecraft's feminist critique of the property theory of rights, we will look at two figures who are not even on the map in Locke's and Kant's property structures, and not in Rousseau's either for all his radical yet misogynist fervor: the wife and the female worker.

WOMEN AS PROPERTY

Political and social inequality and subordination affect people in their capacity to lead moral lives and to act freely. As I have argued elsewhere, there are different ways visible in Wollstonecraft's writings as to how this happens (Halldenius 2013). There is a psychological effect; people become habituated to oppression and come to see it as a natural fact of life rather than a changeable circumstance. If treated like a child, you become childish; if treated like a commodity, you will try to make yourself marketable. A woman used to life as a kept thing is likely to think it proper that a man should be her master.²⁹ Women who manage to resist this effect are still likely to end up conditioning their deliberations to those options that are deemed morally proper for women. An example is Mary in Wollstonecraft's first novel, who reluctantly gives up freedom, resigning herself to being good in the only practically possible way, through "benevolence and religion" (Wollstonecraft 1989a, 73).

Maria and Jemima, the heroines of *The Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft's second novel and most angry work, are a different case altogether. They have withstood all attempts to dupe them into hugging their chains (1989d, 152). They hate their chains and do not resign themselves to anything. Their tragedy is that even though they think freely, they cannot act freely. For those women whose characters are not broken and battered into their sedate place, there is still no liberty to be had as long as women are, in a word, property. *The Wrongs of Woman* shows how deep the "evil and vice" of property go. Behind the obvious and empirical signs of selfishness, envy, and poverty, there is a humiliation inherent in a hierarchy where people either have rights or not, a distinction that is the same as having property—in yourself and your estate—or being it. Kelly Jordan interestingly shows how literal a wife's legal status "as part of the husband's person or goods" (Jordan 1997, 224) really was, and that this identity might never be apparent to a woman, unless she became involved in legal action.

The "misery and oppression peculiar to women" (Wollstonecraft 1989b, 83) go beyond the character-damaging consequences of inequality and expectations, to the association between having rights and holding property. Eileen Botting argues that Wollstonecraft's defense of the egalitarian family and its importance for the *ethical* development of the civic sphere is her most important contribution to Enlightenment thought (Botting 2006, 695). I would prefer to stress Wollstonecraft's insistence on

the connection between the hierarchical family and the commodification of persons. The lady in a gilded castle, the wife of a merchant, and the drudge in a scullery all have this in common: The peculiarity of women, regardless of class, is that they are slaves, and the wrongs of slaves attack property at its core.

Maria is an educated woman of the upper classes, who married in order to escape her awful family home. Upon realizing that her husband—a gambler constantly in debt—has offered her sexual services to a business associate, she runs away. She is caught; a wife outside of her husband's house is, after all, displaced goods that should rightfully be returned to him. He uses his conjugal power to have her committed to a lunatic asylum, with the intention of gaining freer access to an inheritance settled on their daughter. Before running away, Maria had declared herself free from the marriage in a futile act of defiance, but now here she is: a prisoner in a cell.

Jemima, her guard, is born the illegitimate daughter of servants, raised without love or friendship. She has lived on the streets and survived on her wits, through begging, thieving, and prostitution. Hardened but not broken, Jemima is as cynical as she is perceptive. These two women of different worlds discover that there is one thing that accounts for why they understand each other so well. They know what it is like to live as a thinking person in a society where women are sold, bought, lent, bartered, and finally thrown away. As Barbara Taylor shows in her fine analysis of the figure of Jemima, the affinity between these two women is founded on a shared sense of victimization (Taylor 2003, 238–45).

Property and commerce make everything a possible object of trade. If ownership of external things is predicated on property in one's own person, then those who cannot own external things are by logical implication denied property in their own person. Since they do not own themselves, they are without protection against being claimed by another. If property status is all-important, then you are nobody if you have nothing. Denied a person, you have no value, only a price.

We see this in the way that Maria and Jemima share the experience of being claimed and owned. They both refer to themselves as property and slaves, but with a significant difference.

Maria is as much a civil nobody as all women are,³⁰ but she does have the social distinction of her rank as a married lady. A wife and the daughter of a man of substance, Maria exemplifies women's personal dependence on individual men whose prerogative it is to control and represent them in all matters. But what is Jemima? With no recognized father, no male relative, no husband, and no name, she is unconnected to men. How can society relate to such a woman?³¹

Maria refers to women like herself as out-laws (Wollstonecraft 1989b, 146). She is unrecognized by civil law but is part of the structure of society, part of her husband's person. She makes complete social sense. Jemima is an outcast (89). Her exclusion is more radical; in fact, it is complete. She cannot be explained in relation to men and therefore, from a political perspective, she does not exist at all. Maria fits within the social fabric; Jemima does not. This nonexistence opens up a certain room for maneuver; Jemima the outcast is in a factual sense less restricted than Maria. It is no

coincidence that the respectable married woman is the prisoner, while the unmarried bastard holds the key to her door.

Maria tells us that “being as much a man’s property as his horse, or his ass, [a wife] has nothing she can call her own” (Wollstonecraft 1989b, 149). She has been acquired, proprietorship is settled; her husband owns her. Jemima is part of a Lockean common stock. Owned by all but acquired by no one, she refers to herself as common property (112),³² only to go on to say, surprisingly, that she valued her independence. Can a person be owned *and* independent? Certainly not in moral terms, but the strictly economic independence that Jemima, moving under the radar of society, is able to acquire is wholly unavailable to Maria. Understanding what is distinctive about Jemima’s position requires that we recognize that her subordination is not personal. There is no *one* who is authorized by law and custom to speak for her, act for her, *be* her. Her owners are nameless and faceless; they are anybody and nobody. This gives her some leeway in actual fact even though, in moral and civil terms, she remains as enslaved as all women stripped of their right to liberty.

Importantly, even this *de facto* freedom can last only as long as she does not try to fit in. Fearing shame more than poverty (Wollstonecraft 1989b, 107) and intent on social habilitation, Jemima initially tried to make an honest living in domestic service, but found it a thankless task. Trying to make social sense turned out to be a dead end for someone who is “chained by infamy to slavery” (110) and it left her with nothing, in poverty *and* shame, a shame that she could never shake whatever she did. What she could do something about was the poverty, but not as long as she cared about the shame. She turned to the street, begging and stealing from the nameless and faceless.³³ At this stage she is stealing “from necessity” (109). She has neither rights nor a person, but she does have something else that men want, the privileged men who can safely be shameless because their property status as owners of themselves, women, and things constitutes an immunity to social censure.

The insight that Jemima represents is that there is nothing she can do as long as she tries to be respected. The only control she can exercise is from the margins; her position as outcast is the only thing she cannot lose. She stops trying to fit in and steps out of the norm-governed property structure altogether. She hates them now—the men, the rich, the makers of deals, the bands of tyrants.³⁴ Not recognizing anyone’s claim to anything or anyone, and no longer forced to steal by necessity, she comes to regard the rich as the natural enemy of the poor and decides to become a “thief from principle” (Wollstonecraft 1989b, 118).

Her factual economic freedom—as prostitute, thief, asylum guard—is possible only because she is not personally dependent on an individual man. If she were she could not hoard her wages as she does now; it would all be his. Maria and Jemima represent a critique of property that makes privilege and inequality into symptoms of a more serious disease. Piecemeal reform of who has what would not even begin to address the slavery they are under, regardless of what actual room for action they might be able to carve out for themselves. They are robbed of their person by a society so deeply structured around the binary logic of owners and things that even rights are property and the right-less consequently are not only property-less, but owned.

The cloak of respectability offered by society as the only protection for women like Maria amounts to a personal and complete dependence. Maria is rich yet owns nothing; she is protected and therefore completely subsumed. She cannot hoard, negotiate, nor even steal; she is a thing owned. Jemima's lawless freedom as a thief stealing out of principle, and the economic security that she is building for herself, is predicated on her excommunication from the social compact. So, a woman either stays in the artificial existence as a kept thing or she breaks out of it, in which case she will be either thrown out completely or thrown in behind the very physical confines of a locked door.

Appreciating the radical nature of Wollstonecraft's feminism requires that we look right here, at a critique of property that is not confined to patterns of distribution or rules of inheritance. It strikes at the heart of a natural-rights theory that turns rights into possessions, elevating the selfish construction of property and ownership into the main principle for society. All but the male master, the owner, are thereby placed in a state of dependence, as servant, wife, worker, thing. Maria and Jemima both try to, and for a time think that they can, live as persons, but in the end you can only either be owned or you can be infamous. The only other option, and the only way out for women, is to exit altogether. Jemima's decision to step out of the property norm, and become a thief from principle, is Wollstonecraft's final critique of the Lockean theory of rights as possessions. While the owner lords over the worker and the wife, the thief stealing out of principle stands morally erect at the margins of society.

NOTES

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1. For Wollstonecraft's own texts I use *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1989) in seven volumes.

2. On Wollstonecraft in relation to Locke, see Natalie Fuehrer Taylor, who claims that Wollstonecraft's ideas of equality are not based on natural rights but on the character of the human soul and that the purpose of political community is the perfection of human nature (Taylor 2007, 5, 65ff; compare Muller 1996, 48). Taylor mistakenly disconnects the moral role of reason from the political role of rights. Wendy Gunther-Canada stresses the difference in how Wollstonecraft and Locke conceive of the end of government (Gunther-Canada 2001, 85). On Wollstonecraft in relation to Rousseau and property, see Taylor 2007, chapter 1. On Rousseau and property, see Pierson 2013. Pierson does not refer to Wollstonecraft but is useful for tracing Rousseau's influence on her.

3. Gary Kelly stresses the social evils arising from landed property (Kelly 1996, 93–95), Virginia Sapiro emphasizes equality as precondition for social virtues (Sapiro 1992, 90–96), and Gunther-Canada the link between gender and class exploitation (Gunther-Canada 2001, 151).

4. “In this land of liberty what is to secure the property of the poor farmer when his noble landlord chooses to plant a decoy field near his little property?” (Wollstonecraft 1989c, 16). See also “Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty. And to this selfish principle every nobler one is sacrificed”; “it is only the property of the rich that is secure” (14–15).

5. Despite her support for the French cause, Wollstonecraft never advocated revolution (except a revolution in manners [Wollstonecraft 1989d, 265; O’Neill 2002; O’Brien 2009, chapter 5]) and cautioned against hasty alterations. See 1989f, 346; 1989e, 45, 61f, 159.

6. The consequentialist focus on reform comes across in Wollstonecraft’s readiness to embrace certain useful effects of hierarchies of rank, though not of wealth (Wollstonecraft 1989f, 286, 309). On the psychological importance of political circumstances for moral development and free agency, see Halldenius 2013.

7. On Wollstonecraft’s flexible and instrumental approach to natural-rights theory as a weapon for egalitarianism rather than a philosophical commitment, see Taylor 2003, 213–14.

8. “Though the Earth, and all inferior Creatures be common to all Men, yet every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*. This no Body has a Right to but himself. The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his” (Locke 1988, 287–88 §27; see also 329 §94; 323 §87; and Gunther Canada 2001, 85). James Tully claims that Locke saw property as a political construct (Tully 1980). See Waldron 1988; 2012; and Wood 2012 for opposing views, and Pierson 2013 on Locke and Rousseau.

9. See Wood 2012, 262–63 and 266–73, on Locke’s use of the Leveller concept of self-propriety in a non-Leveller defense of property and unequal holdings. Laura Brace discusses Locke’s concept of property in the context of ideas of improvement (Brace 2004, 27–35).

10. Carole Pateman argues that the denial of natural subordination paved the way for a new kind of civil subjugation (Pateman 1988, 55–56). An analysis of Locke on women and conjugal society in relation to Wollstonecraft and Astell is in McCrystal 1993.

11. On Wollstonecraft’s theory of rights, see Halldenius 2007. See Tully on how “Locke uses the term ‘property’ for both a right and the referent of the right” (Tully 1980, 61).

12. Wollstonecraft does not use the social compact in a contractarian sense, does not link political legitimacy to consent, and shows no interest in the origin of government. In line with her evolutionary approach to society, legitimation cannot be historical (Wollstonecraft 1989e, 17 compared to 20).

13. Hume represents the flip side of Wollstonecraft’s view: Society is artificial for the same reason that justice is artificial; it arises out of human conventions (Hume 1992, 483–84). Her view is different from and simpler than Rousseau’s complex dynamic between a natural and an artificial state—which is an ontological distinction—and a natural and an artificial order—which is a moral distinction; see Rousseau 1984, 87–107, and, for example, Viroli 1988, chapter 2.

14. Contrary to Hume, Wollstonecraft does not distinguish between artificial and arbitrary.

15. Since duties correspond to rights, a being who is denied rights can have no duties either (Wollstonecraft 1989d, 217; Halldenius 2007; Taylor 2003, 219–21).

16. The moral depravity produced by excess and inequality is reminiscent of Rousseau (Rousseau 1984, 84–85; see Pierson 2013) but also indicates Wollstonecraft's debt to Adam Smith: "the great never look upon their inferiors as their fellow-creatures" (Smith 2002, 67, also 72–73). This destructive dynamic is sharpened by charity: "I have always been an enemy to what is termed charity, because timid bigots endeavouring thus to cover their sins, do violence to justice" (Wollstonecraft 1989f, 337; compare 1989d, 140). On envy and hate, see 1989c, 58.

17. See Bahar 2002, 141–43 and 153–54, on Wollstonecraft's reluctance to depict poverty and suffering for fear of turning misery into a theater.

18. See Ferguson 1999; Brace 2000. For a rereading of Wollstonecraft and female agency in the public sphere, see Ford 2009.

19. A downtrodden people will "avenge themselves with blood" (Wollstonecraft 1989e, 40), rising "like a vast elephant, terrible in his anger" (28); "The bent bow recoils with violence" (1989d, 152).

20. On Wollstonecraft's conception of freedom as independence, see Halldenius 2007 and Coffee 2012. Catriona Mackenzie rightly stresses that independence for Wollstonecraft is "not defined in opposition to a mutually supportive dependence on others" (Mackenzie 1993, 45). Here is a significant difference from Rousseau, whose emphasis on self-sufficiency she does not share.

21. See Gunther-Canada 2001, 101, 126–27, 138. On the classic Roman heritage in early modern England, see Skinner 2002. On Wollstonecraft's republicanism, see Phillips 2000 and Taylor 2003, chapter 8.

22. See Pateman 1989, 27; Brace 2000; Phillips 2000; and Neill 2001. Compare Gunther-Canada who, even though she lays more analytical stress on women's lack of legal status, acknowledges the centrality of the property critique (Gunther-Canada 2001). A fine discussion of Wollstonecraft on the material conditions of women's independence is in Mackenzie 1993, 47–51, and a subtle treatment of the ambiguities of the domestic and the public in her account of independence is in Taylor 2003, 227–29. An interesting analysis of women's lack of civil protection illustrated by the court case in *The Wrongs of Woman* is in Jordan 1997.

23. See Kant 2006, 49–50 (Academy pagination 8:294–96) and 1996, 91–92 (Academy pagination 6:314).

24. See Natalie Taylor on Rousseau's critique of the aristocracy in *Émile*: "To live by the riches of another is to diminish that other person's means of self preservation and degrade oneself" (Taylor 2007, 30).

25. Locke 1988, 322, §85 and 289, §28. Wood analyzes Lockean labor as production of profit (Wood 2012, 273–75). Cf. Brace on how labor for Locke lay in the property of the person (Brace 2004, 30).

26. Sapiro 1992, 93. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, Maria writes to her daughter: "choose a situation for yourself, or submit to be classed in the lowest, if it be the only one in

which you can be the mistress of your own actions" (Wollstonecraft 1989b, 141). See also *Mary: A Fiction*: "I will work . . . do any thing rather than be a slave" (1989a, 55).

27. See also Kramer 2009, 1146–47. On the legal intricacies of the woman as a separate human being and the unit of the married couple, see Todd 1998 and Jordan 1997.

28. In an implicit reference to Adam Smith, the status of women is compared to factory workers, whose minds are made "entirely inactive" only to "enrich the proprietor" (Wollstonecraft 1989e, 233–34).

29. "Considering the length of time that women have been dependent, is it surprising that some of them hug their chains, and fawn like the spaniel?" (Wollstonecraft 1989d, 152). Compare the description of the mother in *Mary: A Fiction*: "she had, to complete her delicacy, so relaxed her nerves that she became a mere nothing. Many such noughts are there in the female world!" (1989a, 7).

30. "Every woman was a nobody. . . Born female, no woman could claim the authority of political experience or the right to property in her own body" (Gunther-Canada 2001, 79).

31. Gunther-Canada rightly points out the significance of how "*The Wrongs of Woman* explores the relationships between females without the mediation of males" (Gunther-Canada 2001, 147).

32. Kaley Kramer also makes the point that Maria is private property whereas Jemima is common property, but I cannot agree with Kramer that they "unconsciously conjure up their owners and the conditions of their possession" (Kramer 2009, 1155). In fact, they do it most consciously.

33. Wollstonecraft concludes that a "woman who has lost her honour, imagines that she cannot fall lower. . . no exertion can wash this stain away" and that "prostitution becomes her only refuge," adding that "[n]ecessity never makes prostitution the business of men's lives" (Wollstonecraft 1989d, 140).

34. Compare Wollstonecraft 1989d, 234.

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