

Mary Wollstonecraft's "Wild Wish": Confounding Sex in the Discourse on Political Rights

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A wild wish has just flown from my heart to my head, and I will not stifle it though it may excite a horse-laugh. —I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society, unless where love animates the behavior.

—Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Mary Wollstonecraft's "wild wish" to confound the distinction of sex in society required challenging the whole tradition of political writing and transforming the entire discourse of political rights to include women. I suggest that Wollstonecraft would never have written the celebrated *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had she not first authored the little-known *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1989d). The *Rights of Men*, her bold reply to Edmund Burke's attack on the humanist ideals of the French Revolution, underscored the profound exclusion of women from both the discourse and the practice of Enlightenment philosophy. Wollstonecraft's earlier defense of the rights of men proved the necessity of her most recognized work, the *Rights of Woman* (1989e).

This essay will examine how Mary Wollstonecraft disputes the distinctions of sex in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.¹ It is important to consider the connection between the *Rights of Men* and the *Rights of Woman* in order to understand the radical challenge each work posed to the discourse on rights in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Both *Vindications* are significant for contemporary feminist theorists

because they highlight the problem of entering a discourse in which the basic terms of the debate are constructed through the exclusion of women.² Wollstonecraft's theoretical analysis of the meaning of political rights and her exploration of the practice of political writing offer critical insights into the complex relationship of women to politics.

Wollstonecraft confuses and complicates the mark of gender in each of her polemics on rights. Her writing displays an acute understanding of the constraints of gender on political discourse as well as the restraints placed upon women in political communities. The late eighteenth-century woman author is limited by the fundamental assumption that woman's sexual nature is inconsistent with rationality.³ She is also bound by the conventions of female propriety that honor silence. To write is to invite public censure.⁴ For a woman to author a political tract, she must trespass upon a traditionally forbidden discursive space.⁵

In this historical context Wollstonecraft penned the *Rights of Men*. Her text was the first of many replies to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. It was published anonymously, and is particularly noteworthy in that the anonymous female author uses the "manly" language of reason to rebuke the "effeminate" rhetoric of the famous male orator.⁶ This subterfuge is important because it allows her to subvert the privileged position of the masculine in language politics. But her philosophical inquiry on rights disputes more than discursive terrain. She takes on the "gothic pile" of hereditary property and honor which, handed from father to son amid the heraldry of patriarchy and primogeniture, drowns out the voices of mother and daughter (1989d, 58). Wollstonecraft's appropriation of the manly authority of Enlightenment reason, added to her analysis of the tensions between property and equality, provides an immanent critique of the sexual politics of late eighteenth-century political theory.

In the subsequent *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft confounds the rhetorical distinctions of sex in political writing by opposing the fragile "flowery diction" of sentiment to the intellectual strength of rational argument.⁷ Most significant, she challenges the ideology that women are naturally less rational than men by exposing the social prejudices and historical conditions that stunt the growth of reason in women.

Wollstonecraft's literary strategy indicates that her second *Vindication* is built upon the lessons she learned in her first: specifically that authority in rights discourse is opposed to femininity; and, second, that to champion the rights of women one must battle the issue of sexual

difference in order to claim that women are rational subjects. Her analysis exposes the inherent contradiction in the philosophical calls for the revolutionary rights of mankind that rebel against granting these rights to women. The *Rights of Woman* links the textual representation of women as sexual beings devoid of reason to the silence of women in the discourses that shape their lives. Wollstonecraft thus skillfully unites philosophical argument with discursive strategy to articulate a theory of women's rights.

The *Rights of Men* represents Wollstonecraft's introduction to the "conversation" of political theory. This initial confrontation of the anonymous woman with the patriarchy of canonical thought sets the stage for her analysis of women's rights in her second *Vindication*. In the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft challenges the humanist discourse on rights by critically analyzing the construction of femininity in the writings of male authors who claim to derive their portrait of women from nature. Wollstonecraft, the woman author, seeks to deny men the authority of defining womanhood as difference by denaturalizing sex distinctions. She attacks the "boasted prerogative of man," revealed in the writings on female manners, which subjects women to the tyranny of male prejudice in their own homes and in the Houses of Parliament (1989e, 170). Wollstonecraft creates a political theory that calls for a "revolution in female manners," a revolution that will provide the educational, economical, and political means to allow women to create their own complex identities.⁸

Mary Wollstonecraft wrote both of her *Vindications* in response to the French Revolution, which marked the explosive end to the century of Enlightenment. The Revolution indicated a break with the past, a rupture in normal time and space that formed an environment vibrating with conflict and experimentation. In the *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft articulates her understanding of the meaning of the Revolution. This text ultimately seeks to ground political authority in the democratic reason of ordinary men and women instead of the divine right of kings. In arguing for the "sovereignty of reason," Wollstonecraft calls for the creation of a government founded on rational discourse to replace coercive monarchical rule (1989d, 27). To this end, she begins her reply to Burke with the admonishment, "Quitting now the flowers of rhetoric, let us, Sir, reason together" (1989d, 9). Wollstonecraft constructs her defense of natural rights from "the cold arguments of reason, that give

no sex to virtue" (1989d, 46). In making this claim her words find an artery that runs directly to the Platonic heart of political theory. Wollstonecraft extends rationality to women, undermining the foundation of the theoretically separate spheres that restrict the independent movement of women in the political cosmos.

This first *Vindication* celebrates the innovation of Enlightenment reason and the emancipation of the French Revolution. It is here that the mind of Mary Wollstonecraft, the "mind of a woman with thinking powers," was first displayed to the readers of contemporary political thought (1989b, 5). Wollstonecraft transposes the humanist tradition of Enlightenment political discourse to Burke's evocation of British tradition. Burke argues that political legitimacy arises from a people's reverence for their ancient constitution. Wollstonecraft contends that just rule is the product of a government's respect for the rights of the living community. This text is truly radical because Wollstonecraft, a propertyless woman, pits property rights against individual liberties, in an analysis that attacks the differentiation of sex and status through primogeniture and rank. She tries to universalize what she has previously labeled woman's "situation," as the position of all rational individuals denied political rights by an atavistic constitution that protects aristocratic property and privilege.⁹

However, Wollstonecraft's own attempt to create a universal subject who transcends class and gender, is itself confounded by her recognition that Enlightenment philosophy reflects a reified masculine model of subjectivity. The *Rights of Men* reveals a tension between Wollstonecraft's belief in the theoretical universality of Enlightenment rationality, and her practical experience of the prejudices that deny English women political subjectivity. The revolutionary power of democratic reason is the promise that each man can be his own legislator; but by denying that women possess reason, the rebellion stopped far short of allowing individual women to govern themselves. In eighteenth-century England, the male head of the household exercised full legal control over the lives of his wife and their children. Undoubtedly, this unenlightened philosophy limited the subjective expression of the female author. It is a telling commentary on the centrality of gender to political discourse and the marginality of women in political practice, that Wollstonecraft refuses to identify herself as a woman in a text in which she refutes Burke's representation of women as passive, private, and, most important, silent. Wollstonecraft's own claim of the universality of rights is

challenged and fragmented by her historical experience of outsidership, as well as by the misogynistic content and highly stylized form of late eighteenth-century political writing.

Thus, it is of great significance that Mary Wollstonecraft's defense of political rights is addressed to Edmund Burke. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* aims at denying a voice to those individuals who would revolt against the patriarchal standards of generation and gender. A central theme of the *Reflections* is the importance of the dual spirits of chivalry and religion in maintaining the distinctions among men and women that are the foundation of social order. Burke draws his gender framework from his earlier work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. In this text, he creates an epistemology grounded in the traditional binary opposition of an active, or sublime, masculinity, and a passive, or beautiful, femininity. Vivien Jones (1990) claims that Burke's categorization of the sexes had a critical impact on the construction of femininity at the end of the eighteenth century. More important, she argues that Burke's "apparently complementary oppositions" between the masculine and feminine reveal "social and moral inequalities" among men and women. She asserts that in this manner, the "'softer virtues' become the 'subordinate virtues'; complementarity gives way to hierarchy" (4).¹⁰

For Burke the French Revolution represents an open assault on sexual hierarchy, as well as upon monarchical politics. He squarely places the blame for democratic rebellion upon Enlightenment philosophers who preach the rights of men to a mob composed of both men and women. Certainly, the volatile mix of individuals, ideas, and poverty that had erupted in France threatened to produce a bloody conflict in England. In these tumultuous times, Burke was outraged by the support the Revolution was receiving in London. He reserved a special contempt for Dr. Richard Price, of the Revolution Society, whose sermon "Discourse on the Love of our Country" inspired Mary Wollstonecraft to expound upon the rights of men.¹¹

In the *Reflections*, Burke angrily purports that the Revolution in France threatens to turn the European world upside down. He describes the Revolution as revelry, as saturnalia; men and women moving in a bloody masquerade in which gender and class boundaries are transgressed and subverted.¹² In the National Assembly, the legislators and the people become one; joining forces to attack the very foundations of religion and chivalry by dividing among themselves church lands and feudal estates.

He describes this revolutionary Congress as a "profane burlesque." The government becomes the site of violence and sexual perversion. Burke (1984) accuses the legislators of responding only to the cries of a "mixed mob of ferocious men, and women lost to shame, who, according to their insolent fancies, direct, control, applaud, explode them; and sometimes mix and take their seats with them; domineering over them with a strange mixture of servile petulance and proud presumptuous authority" (161).¹³ This passage demonstrates that for Burke gender uncertainty is the true horror of revolution.¹⁴ Women, once the servile subjects mastered by men, can become sublime actors themselves. When women renounce feminine passivity and loveliness, they explode the religious and chivalric structure and symbols of the French nation.¹⁵

It is this spectacle of gender parody and class mockery that heralds the destruction of Burke's golden age of order and honor. He powerfully describes the capture of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette at Versailles, the queen awakened from her sleep by the murderous screams of a throng outside her bedchamber. The "celestial dauphiness," the intimate symbol of the French nation, is defiled by the public procession from Versailles to Paris, jeered by a crowd composed of the "furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest women" (1984, 165). Monarchy and patriarchy are trampled underfoot; even the gates between heaven and hell cannot hold back the rebellious energy that had been released when the drawbridges that secured the Bastille were forced open.

Indeed, in the few months that elapsed from the fall of the Bastille on 14 July, to the capture of Louis XVI, on 6 October, the sovereignty of the French nation had passed from the monarch to the people.¹⁶ The Declaration of the Rights of Men proclaimed all men equal and free. It was this proclamation that Dr. Richard Price celebrated from the pulpit of the Old Jewry in London, and to which Edmund Burke responded vociferously in the *Reflections*. But in condemning the rights of men, and in taking aim at Dr. Price in particular, Burke had provoked a powerful reply from a person who strongly supported the rights of the democratic masses, as well as those of the specific individual. Dr. Price had befriended Wollstonecraft years earlier when she was a schoolmistress in the Dissenting corner of London known as Newington Green. In this radical community, women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Barbauld were educated and encouraged to take part in the broad discussion of political rights because many of these rights were denied to Nonconformist men by the Test and Corporation Acts.¹⁷ Soon however, Wollstone-

craft's contribution to this public debate would move beyond the radical positions advocated by the Reverend Price to include the revolutionary call for a civil existence for women.

Mary Wollstonecraft's analysis of the *Reflections* begins by "attacking the foundation of [Burke's] opinions" (1989d, 9). She refutes his arguments about liberty and property, undermining the patriarchal principles that structure the relationship between men and women. For Wollstonecraft, the French Revolution signifies more than the fall of a crown. It represents a displacement of authority and a reassessment of the meaning of political rights for all citizens. She claims that liberty is the God-given right of all rational beings, a natural right that distinguishes human beings from beasts (1989d, 14). 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." Unlike Locke, however, she claims that the protection of individual freedoms, not the protection of property, is the primary function of government. Wollstonecraft powerfully asserts that the two functions are largely incompatible in a democratic community. The "demon of property has ever been at hand to encroach on the sacred rights of men, and to fence round with awful pomp laws that war with justice" (1989d, 9). Through the redistribution of church lands and aristocratic wealth, the French government had heralded a new day of equality and equity for the citizens of the Republic. Merit not money would distinguish citizens, and ability not nobility would characterize the leaders of the French nation.

It is in the spirit of these radical democratic changes, that Wollstonecraft offers her own reading of the march from Versailles. She, too, notes both monarch and mob; but she frames a different portrait of liberty, property, and gender politics. Burke's hellish furies become "women who gained a livelihood by selling vegetables or fish, who never had the advantages of education; or their vices might have lost part of their abominable deformity, by losing part of their grossness."¹⁸ Wollstonecraft repositions herself within Burke's text and reflects upon a new vision of a queen deformed by luxury. She contends that the "sentimental jargon" with which Burke adorns Marie Antoinette does not bear the "regal stamp of reason." She democratically argues that "The queen of France—the great and small vulgar, claim our pity . . . still I have such a plain downright understanding that I do not like to make a distinction without a difference" (1989d, 30). It is these "distinctions without

differences" that are at the center of her disagreement with Burke, and are the core of her argument for political rights for both men and women. Wollstonecraft simply cannot understand how the contrivances of hereditary wealth, or the chance determination of biological sex, can be asserted as providing a natural framework for economic, social, and political difference. She chastises Burke for differentiating Marie Antoinette from the chandlers and fishmongers who share as women "almost insuperable obstacles to surmount in their progress towards true dignity of character" (1989d, 30). It is the critical consideration of the man-made obstacles to women's rational improvement and political empowerment that are the subject of Wollstonecraft's second *Vindication*.

The French Revolution was fought over just these sorts of class distinctions among men; but Wollstonecraft repeatedly points to the distinctions between the sexes and among women of different rank. Burke (1984) laments the democratic leveling in France. "On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman, a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order" (171). Wollstonecraft confirms this new order by writing, "All true, Sir; if she is not more attentive to the duties of humanity than queens and fashionable ladies in general are," but suggests that this leveling has important civic consequences for women that will raise them above brute creation (1989d, 25).¹⁹ She takes aim at the outmoded code of chivalry, and redefines the masculine and feminine by duty to country and responsibility to self. Kings and queens, farmers and chambermaids, simply become men and women, to be judged by their humanity and reason like everyone else.

Yet, in this revolutionary age, could a woman expect that her polemic on political rights would be judged by the rational and humane standards that her work espoused? Wollstonecraft begins the *Rights of Men* with the challenge "I war not with an individual when I contend for the rights of men and the liberty of reason" (1989d, 7). Indeed, she is engaged in a battle of meaning, from which women have been excluded too long. It is surprising, given the gendered structure of rights discourse, that so few scholars have commented on the fact that the first answer to Burke's polemic was from a woman.²⁰ The anonymous Wollstonecraft subverts Burke's gender categories by giving a "manly definition" to her words in the *Rights of Men* (1989d, 7). This text can be interpreted as a radical struggle for power in language. Her literary strategy confuses gender identities and thus transcends the literary boundaries that exclude

women from political writing. She is not simply a woman writing behind the mask of anonymity. Wollstonecraft takes on the gendered mantle of political authority, becoming the voice of reason, and thereby confounding Burke's construction of female subservience and silence by loudly addressing her reading audience as a man.²¹

The anonymous publication of the *Rights of Men* requires us to recognize the troubled relationship between sex and significance in the history of political discourse and becomes an important departure for feminist political theory. Ultimately, the fundamental problem of political discourse is a politics that denies women a language to express visions of self. Historically, women have not been represented in the stories of the democratic struggle for power, or represented in the institutional seats of democratic governments. Misrepresentation and underrepresentation are inherently related, interacting to create a political discourse that materially and spiritually limits women's lives.

I suggest that the *Rights of Men* is a product of double vision. Wollstonecraft masters the illusion of masculine authority through anonymity and thus enters the patriarchal discourse of political thought. Yet she fractures the philosophical looking-glass by consciously turning gendered language upon itself, distorting the terms and markers of sexual difference. Her appeals to manly authority are used to legitimate an argument that calls into question the meaning of human rights. Her discursive strategy plays on gender uncertainty: Who is the author of the *Rights of Men*? Certainly within the discursive context of the late eighteenth century, the gender identity of this anonymous author would prove to be of enormous importance to the debate about political rights. For the anonymous defender of the rights of men became the public spokesperson for the rights of women.

In Wollstonecraft's own lifetime, her work opened up a debate about the social expectations and political exclusions that restrict women's public participation. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* represents a first and necessary step in the development of a political theory that could encompass new and diverse models of female citizenship.

A Vindication of the Rights of Men was so successful that merely a month after the publication of the first anonymous edition, a second edition was issued revealing the author to be Mary Wollstonecraft. Immediately following the publication of the second edition of this controversial text, a reviewer for the conservative monthly the *Gentlemen's Magazine* wrote,

"We should be sorry to raise a horse-laugh against a fair lady; but we were always taught to suppose that the rights of women were the proper theme of the female sex" ("A Vindication" 1791, 151).²² The reviewer raises the critical question of how a woman could write a defense of the rights of man? Women simply do not write about rights. If a woman should be rash enough to pen a treatise about the rights of mankind, she must restrict herself to the rights of women, which are mockingly referred to as the "proper theme of the female sex."

Ironically, the reviewer goes further to suggest that the strongly worded text is the product of a man masquerading as a woman, given that the author attempts to defend the rights of men against the "demon of property." By writing about property and class, Wollstonecraft had certainly crossed the boundaries of both gender and genre. Joanna Russ (1983) comments in *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, that these transgressions by a woman author often provoke reactions of denial or dismissal. "What to do when a woman has written something? The first line of defense is to deny that she wrote it. Since women cannot write, someone else (a man) must have written it" (20). Thus, the reviewer for the *Gentlemen's Magazine* asserts in the concluding paragraph of his lengthy analysis of the *Rights of Men*:

Mrs. W., if she be a real and not a fictitious lady, is engaged in a service wherein the great leaders have run themselves aground. Malcontents, who have nothing to lose, may lend their names, and offer their hands, for any mischief. But reflecting minds will see through their stale and shameful tricks and not involve themselves in the ruin of their country. Why will not these devotees of reason give an example of the dispossession of the demon of Property, by dividing their property (if they have any) into aliquot parts between their children and the first beggars who present themselves to ask alms of them? Every experimental philosopher should first try the experiments on himself before he electrifies a whole kingdom. ("A Vindication" 1791, 154)

This review is significant because it demonstrates a key assumption about the relationship of women to political writing in the late eighteenth century: that the analysis and debate of political rights is restricted to men.

Wollstonecraft argues in the *Rights of Woman* that "[T]he rights of

humanity have been thus confined to the male line from Adam downwards" (1989e, 157). Political writing and political rights have been the precious patrimony of the sons of liberty. The importance of this hereditary connection cannot be overestimated. The poverty of philosophy, in this case meaning women's absence from the eighteenth-century discourse on human rights, is inherently related to the material conditions of women's lives. The political consequence for women in primogeniture and patriarchy is a form of powerlessness in which women are often treated as property themselves. In the *Rights of Men* Wollstonecraft asserts "Security of Property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English Liberty" (1989d, 14). She is well aware that at the end of the eighteenth century, English women were among the least secure and the least free of the king's subjects. The real Mrs. W., as an unmarried woman in George III's England, had property only in her name, her hand, and her reflecting mind. Indeed, as a woman without property, it is questionable whether she is at liberty to comment about the political rights of her countrymen. Mary Wollstonecraft is simply one of the many disinherited daughters of freedom's founding fathers.²³

It is evident from the confusion of the gentleman reviewer of the *Gentlemen's Magazine* that the *Rights of Men* did much to confound the distinction of sex in political writing.²⁴ But Wollstonecraft's subsequent text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, did even more to electrify a whole kingdom of political rights. As a philosopher, Mary Wollstonecraft was certainly the subject of her own experimentation, and her theory reflects the development of a new form of political subjectivity. Most important, the citizen who emerges from her texts is the embodiment of another woman's political thought and experience. She is not a "Clarissa or Sophie" (1989b, 5). She is a citizen in her own right, not merely a reflection of her father or husband. Wollstonecraft claims a radical subjectivity for women by arguing against the patriarchal code created by Blackstone in the seventeenth century—which categorized women as dead in a civil sense upon marriage. She explores the terrain between the public and private, declaring that the designated spheres cannot contain the historical experience of women's lives. The publication in 1792 of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* signals a pivotal moment in the creation of Wollstonecraft's political theory.

Mary Wollstonecraft's second *Vindication* contests the discourse of sexual difference, and creates a political theory that moves women from silent

objects to speaking subjects. She disputes the natural origin as well as the social significance of sex differences among men and women in the *Rights of Woman*. Her analysis confronts the textualization of woman's nature within eighteenth-century writing ranging from polemics to novels. Her task has largely been dictated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who ambiguously states in *Emile; or, On Education* that "woman is man" in all things but sex (1979, 357).²⁵ He uses the category of sex to determine both the physical and behavioral traits of the individual. Gender becomes the demarcation by which the political community is divided and ruled according to sex rules. Wollstonecraft argues that Rousseau's complex theorizing about sexual difference in *Emile*, and in his earlier work, *Julie; or, the New Héloïse*, belies his simple reductionism, which conflates the minor physical differences between anatomically similar beings, with the major social differences that structure our understanding of both our common bodies and different destinies.

No philosopher did more to reinvent the nature of both sexes than Rousseau. If the *Rights of Men* is Wollstonecraft's reply to Burke's attempt to locate sexual distinctions in the ancient constitution, the *Rights of Woman* is Wollstonecraft's response to the tutor Jean-Jacques's claim to draw the image of Sophie from nature. Rousseau advocates sexually differentiated education on the basis that men and women have opposing but complementary natures. Wollstonecraft argues that Emile and Sophie share the same rational nature and thus transposes the founding principles of Rousseau's pedagogy to create a model of female education that empowers women. She asserts that Sophie is the product of lust rather than logic. "He did not go back to nature, or his ruling appetite disturbed the operations of reason, else he would not have drawn these crude inferences" (1989e, 151).

In the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft attempts to disentangle the female body from the restrictive clothing of a political system of subjection and a culture of control. Her effort is much the same as Rousseau's attempt to free the infant Emile from the swaddling fabric that deforms the body over time. She removes layer after layer of social cloth and studies the texture of this weave that throughout history has so tightly bound and restricted women's physical and psychic independence. Wollstonecraft argues that the textual representations of female nature binds femininity to difference. Woman born free, is everywhere enchained by a discourse that posits the equality of all men in reason while prescribing the slavery of all women to exploitation.²⁶

Wollstonecraft begins her analysis with the thesis that men and women share a rational nature derived from God. She claims that except for physical strength, all distinctions between the sexes are socially constructed. Wollstonecraft's project entails the critical and comparative examination of the construction of sexual difference in treatises by Rousseau, the conduct books of Dr. Fordyce and Dr. Gregory, and in various eighteenth-century novels. "As these volumes are so frequently put into the hands of young people . . . and enervate the understanding of many of my fellow creatures . . . I could not pass them silently over" (1989e, 166). She protests that these books provide females with an education that is "worse than Egyptian bondage" (1989e, 187).²⁷ Wollstonecraft is particularly troubled that these texts reward female servility in the guise of feminine sensibility, and that the male authors of these tracts reify the opposition of female sensibility to human rationality.

Wollstonecraft attacks the argument that women's biology essentially limits women's capacity for reason and moral judgment, contending that differences ascribed to sex, can often be traced to the self-interests of male writers in perpetuating a system of sexual subjugation.

Hapless woman! what can be expected from thee when the beings on whom thou art said to depend for reason and support, have all an interest in deceiving thee? This is the root of the evil that has shed a corroding mildew on all thy virtues; and blighting in the bud thy opening faculties, has rendered thee the weak thing thou art! It is this separate interest—this insidious state of warfare, that undermines morality, and divides mankind! (1989e, 166)

Wollstonecraft argues that woman's access to universal truth must not be mediated by man. Male authors have perpetuated the myth that women's rationality is dependent upon male desire. Wollstonecraft returns to the story of Abelard and Héloïse to suggest that male desire will always interfere with the transfer of reason. She seeks to break the dependence of women on men by arguing that reason common to both sexes should be the guide for female behavior. "[I] throw down my gauntlet, and deny the existence of sexual virtues, not excepting modesty. For man and woman, truth, if I understand the meaning of the word, must be the same" (1989e, 120). For each sex, truth must be the foundation of

judgment. She asserts, “ ‘Educate women like men’, says Rousseau, ‘and the more they resemble our sex the less power they will have over us.’ This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves” (1989e, 131). Wollstonecraft argues that rational women have the power to govern themselves. She offers women the promise of democratic revolution; that as reasonable beings they can be their own legislators, answering to no laws except the ones they create for themselves through reason. Thus, women can take part in the grand Enlightenment project of human perfectibility, benefiting their families and their fellow citizens. When women are educated to become the rational companions of men, the society of the sexes will enter a new harmonious era of equality.

Mary Wollstonecraft’s analysis within the *Rights of Woman*, much as her earlier reply to Burke, confounds the distinctions of sex by contesting the discourse of natural difference. She complicates the multiple readings of “nature” that have represented women as irrational and dependent beings. She thoroughly dismisses the “fanciful female character, so prettily drawn by poets and novelists” (1989e, 120). Angered by these images of fragile femininity, she remarks, “I must relieve myself by drawing a different picture” (1989e, 119). Wollstonecraft turns the rhetoric of natural attribute and aptitude upon the male authors themselves to emasculate their arguments about sexual difference and blur the boundaries between nature and art. She comments on Dr. Gregory’s *Legacy to Daughters*, “Fondness of dress, he asserts, is natural to them. I am unable to comprehend what either he or Rousseau mean, when they frequently use this indefinite term” (1989e, 97). It is Wollstonecraft’s failure to comprehend definite differences between men and women that allows her to succeed in introducing the ambiguity necessary to undermine the naturalness of difference claims. She notes that aristocratic gentlemen often display an inordinate attention to finery and personal costume. Wollstonecraft herself often labeled these actions “effeminate,” but certainly if men of rank can dress the dandy they are following the dictates of custom not nature. Wollstonecraft’s intellectual cross-dressing disrupts political discourse, and enables her to create and champion a new understanding of political rights and citizenship.

Mary Wollstonecraft grounds her political theory in the claim that women, like men, are gifted by God with the power of reason, and as rational beings their first duty is to themselves. She defends her sex, claiming that barred from the institutions of learning, they have been

subjected to a "slavery which chains the very soul of woman, keeping her forever under the bondage of ignorance" (1989e, 215).²⁸ In the struggle for mastery she claims that men have been motivated by their own desire to bind women ever tighter to the body, forsaking the mind. "Man, taking her body, the mind is left to rust; so that while physical love enervates man, as being his favorite recreation, he will endeavour to enslave women" (1989e, 145). But Wollstonecraft's political theory aims at creating autonomous women who can act as helpmates by choice, not playmates by chance. She boldly asserts that the primary goal of a woman's education is to enable her to fulfill the duties she has to herself. "[T]he most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits as will render it independent" (1989e, 90). It is this independence and strength that transforms the sensual and silent objects of male desire into thinking and speaking subjects of feminist politics.

Wollstonecraft demands autonomy and independent thought for women. She radically challenges the discourse of political theory by uniting femininity and rationality, creating what I would call the political theory of the thinking woman. The perfect education for women is an education that allows the woman to provide for herself intellectually and spiritually. "The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that, which includes so many, of a mother" (1989e, 216).²⁹ She extends the claims of Enlightenment humanism to women and begins a debate about the relationship of sex to citizenship that challenges male authors' representations of women in writing and male representatives of women in political and economic life. Wollstonecraft's "wild wish," to confound the "distinction of sex in society," gives rise to the even more ambitious call for women to represent themselves in government (1989e, 217).

Mary Wollstonecraft's theory and discursive strategy in both *Vindications* are founded on a humanist appeal to reason that denies sexual difference. Most important, she refuses to concede reason to men. In doing so her own femininity was openly questioned.³⁰ This thinking woman answers the "exclamations against masculine women" by arguing that if the virtues that make us human are defined as manly, she would wish that

woman "may every day grow more and more masculine" (1989e, 74). Recently, Joan Landes has accused Wollstonecraft of male identification and mimicry in the *Rights of Woman* (1988, 131): "She shares the implicitly masculine values of the bourgeois public sphere, worrying over woman's willful, artificial, and unnatural control over language. Repudiating the female position, she orients herself almost exclusively toward the male logos" (135).³¹ The only position that Wollstonecraft repudiates is that of woman as silent victim. I would argue that a comparison of the *Rights of Men* and the *Rights of Woman* complicates the relationship of women to language. Landes comments on the "active textualization of life" in the late eighteenth century, an era in which both sexes modeled their behavior upon the suggestions of a treatise or novel (1988, 65). Wollstonecraft's efforts to confound the distinctions of sex within writing makes problematic Landes's characterization of Wollstonecraft as a female writer seduced and co-opted by the gendered categories of eighteenth century discourse. A study of Wollstonecraft's writings indicates that the textualization of life, which Landes evokes, was not totalizing. The author of the *Rights of Woman* did not reflect the graces of Rousseau's Sophie, securing a space to exist by acquiescing to the will of the stronger. Wollstonecraft struggled to distance herself far enough outside of republican discourse to assert that her life was not reflected in these texts.

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* provide the basis for a radical examination of the relationship between theory and practice, revealing the contradictions between gender and authority. The woman author argues that reason is not gendered, yet she continually returns to gendered language to support her argument. These texts demonstrate the constraints of gender and genre that Wollstonecraft encountered upon entering the conversation of eighteenth-century political theory. Very significant, they also highlight possible strategies for subverting gender categories through a critical examination of the central role that gender plays in political thought. Wollstonecraft at once opposes and participates in a debate in which women have been absent as authors as well as citizens. She attempts to create a literary space to expound her theory of political rights by confounding the distinctions of sex in discourse. Her need to transcend the limitations of gender speaks to the genre boundaries that have silenced women writers. Wollstonecraft transforms the discourse of political theory as a woman writing about the political rights of women.

Ultimately, her *Vindications* explode eighteenth-century social constructions of authority and femininity. Mary Wollstonecraft's "wild wish" and the intellectual efforts it provoked, continue to have enormous implications for women's political writing as well as women's political rights.

Notes

1. Wollstonecraft distinguishes biological sex from the system of gender representation and practice of the late eighteenth century. She "confounds" the social distinctions of sex in two ways. First, she uses gendered language and the guise of anonymity to conceal her sex as an author. Second, she deconstructs the textual representations of women in selected polemics and conduct books to reveal the gender biases behind the portraits of femininity created by male authors. Thus she disputes the natural origin of sexual difference.

2. Linda Zerilli (1991) recently discussed the implications of the exclusion of women from the discourse of political theory. Wollstonecraft's writings suggest that women were not entirely absent from the debates of their age. What is problematic is that the contributions of these "sisters" have not been included by the "brothers" in forming the canon that educates future generations.

3. Wollstonecraft writes that the power of reason "has not only been denied to women, but writers have insisted that it is inconsistent, with a few exceptions, with their sexual character" (1989e, 123).

4. William Godwin (1987) claims that Wollstonecraft did not want to be known as an author. "At the commencement of her literary career, she is said to have conceived a vehement aversion to being regarded, by her ordinary acquaintance in the character of an author, and to have employed some precautions to prevent its occurrence" (226). Mary Poovey (1984) examines the constraint of public opinion on women's writing in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft, her daughter, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen.

5. Wollstonecraft scholar and biographer Ralph Wardle viewed the *Rights of Men* as a trespass. He repeatedly remarks on the shortcomings of the text, arguing that these failures arise from Wollstonecraft's unsuitability as a woman for the task of writing political theory. Wardle criticizes Wollstonecraft for "abusing Burke," but apologetically explains away her rhetorical attacks as the result of her limited knowledge of politics. "Probably Mary resorted to such tactics when she was unsure of herself. She must have realized that she had, after all, nothing new to say about the theories on which governments are based" (1966, 117). I strongly disagree with Wardle's assessment that Wollstonecraft "had probably not studied the authorities on the subject," and his characterization of her text as the product of "scraps" of overheard conversations (1966, 118). The anonymous Wollstonecraft draws her analysis from the works of Plato, Machiavelli, Locke, and Rousseau in a systematic manner that belies Wardle's thesis about the random nature of her thoughts. Wollstonecraft's innovative attempt to use these philosophical fathers to dispute patriarchal politics truly displays her intellectual engagement with political theory. Mary Poovey (1984) notes that the *Rights of Men*, as a "political disquisition," represents a radical departure for a woman author. "Wollstonecraft's choice of a project, then, signals her determination to transcend the limitations she felt her sex had already imposed on her. In this first expression of her professional self, Wollstonecraft actually aspires to be a man, for she suspects that the shortest way to success and equality is to join the cultural myth-makers, to hide what seemed to her a fatal female flaw beneath the

mask of male discourse" (57). My reading of the text is not that Wollstonecraft wants to be a man, but that she desires a form of authority that has been historically opposed to femininity.

6. For many eighteenth-century authors, both men and women, anonymity provided the opportunity for publication without public knowledge of the author's identity. It has been frequently noted that anonymity was of greater importance for women authors because it protected them and their work from the ridicule that popularly greeted women writers. In the early part of her career, Mary Wollstonecraft often wrote anonymously. Moira Ferguson (1983) investigates the mystery man "Mr. Cresswick" whose name appears on the title page of Wollstonecraft's work *The Female Reader*.

7. Cora Kaplan (1986) argues that Wollstonecraft's literary strategy in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* opposes reason to sentiment and thus represses female sexuality (37). Mary Jacobus also offers a provocative discussion of the implications of Wollstonecraft's desire to ground the argument in the *Rights of Woman* upon "things" and not "words" (1986, 34).

8. Wollstonecraft's call to rebellion incites women to reform themselves and to resist the dogma of paternalism. "It is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore their lost dignity—and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world. It is time to separate morals from local manners. —If men be demi-gods why let us serve them!" (1989e, 114).

9. In her first text, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1989c), Wollstonecraft devotes a chapter to the "Unfortunate Situation of Girls Fashionably Educated and Left Without a Fortune." It is here that she first confronts the irrationality of the exclusion of reasonable beings from everyday interaction with the world because of their sex and class.

10. These lessons were not lost on Wollstonecraft. She chastised Burke's valorizing of beauty in the place of moral virtue arguing that his message masks his method of securing female subservience. She suggests that the female readers of Burke's *Sublime and Beautiful* may have been "convinced . . . that littleness and weakness are the very essence [sic] of beauty; and that the Supreme Being, in giving women beauty in the most supereminent degree, seemed to command them, by the powerful voice of Nature, not to cultivate the moral virtues that might chance to excite respect, and interfere [sic] with the pleasing sensations they were created to inspire" (1989e, 45). Wollstonecraft clearly articulates a vision of rational women formed for futurity in opposition to Burke's "lispering creatures" made only for love.

11. Wollstonecraft favorably reviewed Dr. Price's "Discourse on the Love of Our Country" in the December 1789 volume of the *Analytical Review*. Here, eleven months before she penned her reply to Burke, Wollstonecraft already opposes the "unequivocal language" of the heart that champions the rights of men to the vain, "sophistical arguments" that deny these "obvious truths" (*Analytical Review* 7 [1989]: 185). In the *Rights of Men*, she would accuse Burke of no more.

12. Terry Castle (1986) writes in her study of the masquerade that "at the deepest level the masquerade's work was that of deinstitutionalization. Eighteenth century English culture was founded on a set of institutionalized oppositions: European and Oriental, masculine and feminine, human and animal, natural and supernatural. . . . At the masquerade, however, counterposed institutions everywhere collapsed into one another, as did ideological categories: masculinity into femininity, 'Englishness' into exoticism, humanity into bestiality. Without the principle of opposition, the ordering principle of civilization itself, the classification of entities became impossible" (78).

13. Burke (1984) continues, "As they have inverted the order of all things, the gallery, [sic] is in the place of the house" (161).

14. Virginia Sapiro (1992) argues that Burke effectively employs the language of the sublime to evoke his powerful reaction to the class-mixing and gender-bending of the French Revolution. "Burke relayed his moral and political message as a nightmare teller would: not

merely through a chronological story or a logical argument but by invoking the horror of it all through tone and imagery" (189).

15. For Burke (1984), democratic philosophy threatens to disembody the institutions of French society by overturning the relationships between the sexes. Marie Antoinette is more than a monarch; she is the symbol of patriarchal order and patriotic loyalty. Burke states, "To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely" (172). Wollstonecraft throws Burke's argument off its ideological axis by portraying the queen as vulgar. Gary Kelly (1992) correctly argues that both authors use gender as a template by which to measure the progress of a nation. "In both Burke and Wollstonecraft the condition of women represents the values of an entire society and culture" (95). In the later *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft reveals the full extent of her philosophical differences with Burke, by breaking the gender template in order to create new forms of citizenship that can embody women as political subjects.

16. Wollstonecraft would later chronicle the events surrounding the revolution as a witness to the Terror in Robespierre's Paris in 1794. She wrote of the meaning of the fall of the Bastille. "This was a nation saved by the almost incredible exertion of an indignant people; who felt, for the first time, that they were sovereign, and that their power was commensurate with their will. This was certainly a splendid example, to prove, that nothing can resist a people determined to live free; and then it appeared clear, that the freedom of France did not depend on a few men, whatever might be their virtues or abilities, but alone in the will of the nation" (1989a, 100).

17. Isaac Kramnick (1990) details the critical importance of dissenting communities such as Newington Green to the struggle for political rights (209–10).

18. Sapiro (1992) claims that Wollstonecraft plays with Burke's representation of women and suggests in the above quote that "She contrasted his nightmare women with his dream women: the queen, whom he envisioned as immaculate beauty and domesticity. Wollstonecraft noted that this woman, too, had a real existence different from his portrayal" (203).

19. Wollstonecraft (1989d) denounces the romantic valorization of women noting that "such homage vitiates them, prevents them from endeavouring to obtain solid personal merit; and in short, makes those beings vain inconsiderate dolls, who ought to be prudent mothers and useful members of society" (25). Wollstonecraft's analysis provides a vivid contrast to Rousseau's (1979) commentary on girls and their toys, in which he states that the little girl "awaits the moment when she will be her own doll" (367). Thus we see the beginnings of the theoretical argument of Wollstonecraft's second *Vindication*. Rational women should be the helpmeets not the playthings of men.

20. Virginia Woolf (1957) claims, "Anon . . . was a woman" (51). For many Wollstonecraft scholars the anonymous first edition of the *Rights of Men* has gone with little or no notice. Ralph Wardle (1966) comments in passing that several contemporary reviews of the controversial text remarked on the fact that the author was a female when Wollstonecraft's identity was revealed with the publication of the second edition. Virginia Sapiro (1992) echoes the suggestion of the reviewer from the *Critical Review* that Wollstonecraft had "disguised herself as a man" within her work. Sapiro claims that the "disguise" is not a matter of anonymity but of a woman authoring political theory (24). Gary Kelly's (1992) skillful rhetorical analysis of Wollstonecraft's text, curiously discounts her anonymity. He remarks that for "tactical reasons" Wollstonecraft "uses masculine pronouns throughout, nowhere indicating that she is a woman or that the masculine gender assumed for humanity by such language is an issue for her" (90). But this logic seems to refute Kelly's own discussion of the limitations of gender and genre in political discourse. Indeed, Kelly notes that Wollstonecraft's name was not her only addition to the second edition of the *Rights of Men*. Wollstonecraft revised her concluding paragraph to include a sentence in which she again credits the rights

of men to a benevolent God. Kelly (1992) writes, "As a 'mere' woman author writing on politics she had need to invoke divine validation" (99–100).

21. Wollstonecraft wrote to her sister Everina that she had attended a masquerade ball in Dublin while she was a governess within the household of Lord and Lady Kingsborough. She accompanied Lady Kingsborough and an acquaintance to the ball dressed in a domino. Terry Castle (1986) notes that the domino was a full body covering that, when worn with a mask, entirely disguised the sex of the partygoer (59). This incident is especially intriguing because Wollstonecraft (1979) claimed to act as an "interpreter" for the other young woman of the party, who in taking on the garb of a woodland sprite, could not converse with others outside of the state of nature (Letter to Everina Wollstonecraft, dated 1788).

22. I am fascinated by the threat of the "horse laugh." Wollstonecraft (1989e) asserts in the opening paragraph of the *Rights of Men*, "Reverencing the rights of humanity, I shall dare to assert them; not intimidated by the horse laugh that you have raised" (7). The reviewer apologizes for laughing at a lady but is overcome by the joke of a woman claiming to defend the rights of gentlemen like himself. It appears that laughter has often ended discussions about women's role within the political community. Plato tells us in Book V of the *Republic* that Socrates heard the roar of laughter when he proposed that both women and men be educated for leadership of the just republic. Allan Bloom, who dismissed feminist teachings within academe as a farce in his best-selling book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, wrote in his interpretive essay of *The Republic of Plato* that "Book V is preposterous, and Socrates expects it to be ridiculed. It provokes both laughter and rage in its contempt for convention and nature, in its wounding of all the dearest sensibilities of masculine pride and shame, the family, and statesmanship and the city" (1968, 380). Bloom's linkage of laughter and rage suggests that for women to share in the good society men will have to sacrifice much of what they value of the well-lived life. Feminist scholars know only too well that there is nothing funny about the historical struggle of women for an independent and equitable civil existence.

23. Abigail Adams (1972) echoed Wollstonecraft when she too denounced the "stale and shameful" tricks of Revolutionary men who denied women their individual freedoms in the newly constituted American democracy.

24. It is interesting to note that once the question of whether Mrs. W. was a "real or fictitious lady" was resolved, perhaps by the publication the following year of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft's work was no longer critically examined within the pages of the *Gentlemen's Magazine*. Godwin (1987) tells us that the "applause" she received for the *Rights of Men* encouraged her to write her second *Vindication* (230). In celebrating the bicentennial of the *Rights of Woman* we should also question why her earlier *Vindication* has been forgotten. Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Men* predated Thomas Paine's famous polemic, the *Rights of Man*. It had a significant impact on the radical community of which they were both controversial members.

25. "In everything not connected with sex, woman is man. She has the same organs, the same needs, the same faculties. The machine is constructed in the same way; its parts are the same; the one functions as does the other; the form is similar; and in whatever respect one considers them, the difference between them is only one of more or less. In everything connected with sex, woman and man are in every respect related and in every respect different" (Rousseau 1979, 357). Ultimately the political project for Rousseau in forming his social contract was to assert that sexual difference was a matter of *more* not less. Sexual difference became the foundation for completely distinct social and political roles for men and women within the polity. As the tale of Rousseau's Sophie attests, even if a woman has the same needs and faculties as man, her position as woman within the political community will greatly proscribe her ability to use her faculties to meet her needs.

26. Carole Pateman powerfully exposes this contradiction within social contract theory in *The Sexual Contract* (1988).

27. Wollstonecraft decried the weak and foolish representations of femininity in the novels that often provided the poor substitute for education in the life of the eighteenth-century female reader. The political consequences these representations have had upon the relationship of women to the state as well as to philosophy were discussed by another feminist theorist, Simone de Beauvoir (1988): "Women are conditioned, let me repeat it, not only by the education which they receive directly from their parents and teachers, but also by what they read, by the myths communicated to them through the books they read—including those written by women—they are conditioned by the traditional image of women, and to break from this mould is something which they find very difficult indeed" (29).

28. In a subsequent paragraph, Wollstonecraft (1989e) links the slavery of women to notions of female propriety. "[F]or Rousseau, and a numerous list of male writers, insist that she should all her life be subjected to a severe restraint, that of propriety. Why subject her to propriety—blind propriety, if she be capable of acting from a nobler spring, if she be an heir of immortality? Is sugar to be produced by vital blood? Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them, when principles would be a surer guard, only to sweeten the cup of man? Is not this indirectly to deny women reason? for a gift is a mockery, if it is unfit for use" (215).

29. I believe that it is important to stress the radical nature of Wollstonecraft's ordering of a woman's civic duties. Many readings of the *Rights of Woman* collapse the primary duties that Wollstonecraft leaves undefined as the duties a woman has to herself as a rational adult with the duties a woman has to her children as a mother. Thus Wollstonecraft the advocate of woman's independence becomes the champion of "Republican Motherhood." Wollstonecraft challenged functionalist arguments that conflate all women with mothers in order to claim a new form of political subjectivity for women. She understood the need for a political theory that could encompass the many relationships that women have with family and community while privileging individual autonomy in relation to the state.

30. In the late eighteenth century, femininity was so opposed to rationality that a woman who argued from reason risked losing her humanity entirely. Wollstonecraft became for Horace Walpole a ferocious beast; he famously described her as a "Hyena in petticoats." The Reverend Richard Polwhele went so far as to claim that Wollstonecraft represented a new being, the "unsex'd woman." It is interesting to note that after two centuries of commentary, the distinctions of sex, which she so fervently wished to confound, are still the basis on which her work is often evaluated. Wollstonecraft's radical approach to sexual difference in discourse has led one writer to claim that the *Rights of Woman* was written for men; see Anca Vlasopolos (1980: 462–71).

31. I have argued in this essay that Wollstonecraft was fundamentally concerned with, in Landes's (1988) terms, the "willful, artificial and unnatural control" of men, not women, over language and political discourse (135). Wollstonecraft repeatedly condemns the self-interested claims of male poets and philosophers, who in representing the artificial mannerism of femininity as natural, render women irrational weaklings. Indeed, it is Wollstonecraft's subject position as a woman that leads her to repudiate the male logos (male discourse) and is at the heart of her reply to Burke as well as at the center of her analysis of Rousseau.

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