

# ‘Breaking the Stereotypical Annotations of Eighteenth Century’: Mary Wollstonecraft

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**Abstract**—Feminism is the ideal that both man and women should have equal rights politically, economically and socially. Feminism had really made its mark in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; however before the word feminist even became part of the English language, Mary Wollstonecraft was already preaching the feminist idea. Mary Wollstonecraft is considered one of the first feminist writers and helped paved the way for radical female thinkers like herself. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mary Wollstonecraft was looked at as a more of philosopher, rather than a feminist. Feminism had not really taken effect until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Women’s Suffrage. Wollstonecraft’s idea of women’s rights were still seen as radical in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and were not looked at as a serious problem, but rather a whimsical idea that was scorned by conservatives and only truly appreciated by radical thinkers of her day. The paper discusses that Mary Wollstonecraft was born into the Age of Enlightenment, but was also considered a first generation romantic writer. The paper will further focus on the complexity inherent in the evolution of Mary Wollstonecraft’s thought necessitates the re-assessment of her relevance to the literary tradition, particularly the female tradition, and the re-evaluation of her place in the educational history of ideas.

Mary Wollstonecraft’s life cannot fail to attract the attention of anyone interested in a good story: the drama and conflict of her family life, the flirtation with Fuseli, the affair with Imlay, the happy ending with Godwin are the stuff popular novels are made of, while the depth and passion of Wollstonecraft’s own reactions to her life supply all the necessary ingredients of a serious novel. Any telling of Wollstonecraft’s life is guaranteed to fascinate, not only by the dramatic compulsion of the events that shaped it, but also by the very forcefulness of her personality which, whether approved of or not, encourages moralizing at the same time as it defies categorization.

The unconventionality of Wollstonecraft’s life makes critics to regard her work as flat, dull and common place in comparison. The truth, however, is that Wollstonecraft was not just a fascinating woman who happened to write, but an eighteenth-century intellectual who would be of little interest today, despite the passionate unconventionality of her life, if she had not written what she wrote.

Besides being a successful writer, Wollstonecraft was a teacher, a translator, the provider for an extended family, a mistress and a mother before becoming a wife. Exceptionally well organized and outspoken, Mary Wollstonecraft was also a defender of the weak, a passionate although partisan, first hand witness to the French Revolution and was well known and admired by some of the leading intellectuals, politicians, polemicists, poets, painters, novelists and historians of the days.

Born on 27th April 1759, Wollstonecraft was the second of the seven children and the eldest daughter of Edward John Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Dixon Wollstonecraft. Edward came from a prosperous family of weavers in Spitalfields, London, and Elizabeth came from a well-placed family in Ballyshannon, Ireland. Mary Wollstonecraft’s grandfather had amassed a fortune as a master - weaver and property speculator, and he sought to pass on his property and his business to his son, Edward. The family was religious and, by eighteenth-century standards, an example of solid middle-class citizenry. Edward was apprenticed to his father at fourteen and spent his adolescence in Spitalfields learning the business. In the year of Mary’s birth, Edward had taken over the family silk-weaving business, and he and his wife of three years already had one child, a male heir, Ned. He was the centre of his parents’ attention and affection and was to be the sole inheritor of his grandfather’s property.

In 1763 Mary Wollstonecraft’s father left London, the silk business, and the life of a middleclass merchant for the more socially prestigious life of a gentleman farmer. When his father died two years later, Edward, inherited ten thousand pounds and control over his son’s inheritance. He purchased a sizeable house and holdings in Barking, about eight miles from London. In the first year of his career as a farmer, Mary’s father appeared to prosper, but over the next ten years the family moved seven times because of his repeated business failures.

Edward Wollstonecraft's extravagant and reckless behaviour plunged his family into increasing debt. With the dwindling of his inheritance, Wollstonecraft's father began to expropriate the money settled upon his son. The family's economic troubles were paralleled by deterioration in Edward's behaviour; Wollstonecraft's mother and brother were often the victims of his uncontrollable fits of rage and violence, usually brought on by drunkenness and a personal sense of despair.

In 1768, when Mary was nine, the family moved from Barking to a farm at Walkington in East Yorkshire, outside the town of Beverley. Here the seventh and last child was born to the Wollstonecraft family in 1770. Mary Wollstonecraft was to live in Yorkshire from the age of nine until the age of sixteen, longer than she was to live in any one place throughout her childhood. Her later accounts of this period are quite happy, as long as she could be outside her home. But at home she saw her father's brutal tyranny. Wollstonecraft attended the country school and was instructed by the father of a close friend, Jane Arden. He gave her lectures on scientific and literary subjects, which comprised her only formal education.

In 1774 the family moved to Hoxton, on the outskirts of London. Here Mary began to develop a circle of friends and mentors who were to be instrumental in her drive for independence. They included Frances (Fanny) Blood, who exerted a powerful influence on Mary. Their developing friendship was interrupted in 1776 when Mary's family moved to Langhorne, Wales. In the summer of 1777, after the attempt of farming in Wales failed, the Wollstonecraft family moved yet again, to Walworth, South London. Their house was close to the Bloods', and they remained there as a family for a year, until Mary, at the age of nineteen, took the audacious step of defying parental authority by accepting employment in Bath as a "lady companion" (Sunstein 57). She was a live-in companion to a rich and demanding widow.

When her mother died in 1782, Wollstonecraft was unwilling to remain with her father and his housekeeper, whom he was soon to marry. She moved in with the Blood family, who had almost no money, at Walham Green. Again she encountered a family in acute distress because of paternal irresponsibility. She contributed to the Blood family income by doing needlework and sewing. In 1782 Mary's sister Eliza married Meredith Bishop, and within months of her marriage she became pregnant. In August 1783 Eliza gave birth to a daughter. All appeared to be fine, but, by the fifth month after the child's birth, Eliza suffered a postpartum nervous collapse and called upon Mary to nurse her. Wollstonecraft, with the assistance of her other sister, Everina, and Fanny Blood, kidnapped Eliza. The result was that Eliza lost custody of her child, who died a year later.

Both in the case of her mother and her sister, Wollstonecraft had stepped between husbands and the dependent status of wives. When called upon to take decisive

action to protect her mother and her sister, Wollstonecraft intervened and was willing to sacrifice herself for the other. Such selfless involvement in the affairs of others became a dominant trait in her personality throughout her life. However, when her mother and her sister did not immediately show their gratitude, she became disappointed and resentful. In the words of her husband and biographer, William Godwin, she "engaged herself too minutely and too deeply in the care of their welfare; and she was too much impressed by an seeming want of ingenuous and honourable feeling on the part of those she benefitted" (*Memoirs* 132).

Wollstonecraft was now faced with the need to support herself and her sisters, Eliza and Everina. With the help of Fanny Blood, the four women opened a boarding school for private pupils. They rented a large house in Newington Green, north of London, and were able to attract enough pupils to make the venture self-supporting. Additionally, Wollstonecraft joined a group of Dissenting intellectuals founded, by Dr. Richard Price, who lived near the Green. Within this group there were discussions of politics, religion, and education. Price had written several books including the very influential *Review of the Principal Question of Morals* (1758) where he argued that individual conscience and reason should be used when making moral choices. Price also rejected the traditional Christian ideas of Original Sin and Eternal Punishment. As a result of these religious views, some Anglicans accused Rational Dissenters of being atheists.

Although Mary had been brought up as an Anglican, she began attending Richard Price's Chapel. Price had radical political views and had encountered a great deal of hostility when he supported the cause of American Independence. At Price's home, Mary Wollstonecraft met other leading radicals including the publisher, Joseph Johnson. Some of the other members of this group included Samuel Rodgers, James Sowerby, the Reverend John Hawlett, and Mrs James Burgh. The group was often visited by Joseph Priestley. Here Wollstonecraft was to encounter an alternative to the dominant ideology of her childhood and to find support for her developing intellectual curiosity.

Within the Price circle, Wollstonecraft was exposed to the ideas and values that descended from the English empirical tradition in philosophy and English religious dissent. The basic tenets of this philosophy were: experience is the basis of all knowledge; environment shapes character, men and women are innately good and potentially perfectible; and truth is something knowable, both through self-examination and through education in the widening social contexts of family.

In January 1785 Fanny Blood left the group of women to marry and live in Lisbon. She soon became pregnant and sent for Wollstonecraft to be with her at the birth. Wollstonecraft left for Lisbon in November hoping to be there for a portion of confinement and birth. Unfortunately, however due to premature labour Fanny died within a few days. After Wollstonecraft returned to England from Lisbon in December,

she discovered that the school, under her sisters' management, was disintegrating into chaos: pupils were leaving, and bills had been left unpaid. Her sisters seemed unable to cope with the responsibility. Mary asked them to live "with rigid economy" hoping to start over again (Sunstein 220). However, they could not revive the school.

The spring of 1786 was an important period for Wollstonecraft; she spent March and April writing her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787). The book was published by Joseph Johnson, a publisher in Saint Paul's Churchyard, upon the recommendation of the Reverend John Hawlett. The book is a collection of essays on education for parents, detailing a need for moral, social, and intellectual improvement of their daughters. The book followed existing patterns for such manuals by focusing on Lockean rationalism and Christian morality. Mary made ten guineas for this writing but this did little to improve her financial situation. In the summer of 1787 she wrote her first novel, *Mary A Fiction*. Wollstonecraft's first novel is overtly autobiographical and, following Jean-Jacques Rousseau's inspiration, she focuses on the personal and social development of the heroine's sensibility.

Wollstonecraft afterwards moved to London where she helped Joseph Johnson to start the journal *Analytical Review* (1788). Here, she met William Godwin, a radical political philosopher and novelist; Godwin's close friend Thomas Holcroft, a playwright, translator, and political activist; Henry Fuseli, a Swiss painter and writer; William Blake, a visionary painter, poet, and printmaker; Anna Laetitia Barbauld, an educator and author; Dr. George Fordyce, a physician; Thomas Paine, a radical political pamphleteer from North America; and Thomas Christie, a cofounder of the *Analytical Review*. Over the next two years Wollstonecraft was to move from relative obscurity in this community to become one of its central figures. As with the Price circle in Newington Green, Wollstonecraft was again surrounded by a circle of friends outside her family who accepted her on her own terms as a writer and independent thinker, who provided her with a steady diet of the leading radical political ideas of the day, and who challenged her religious idealism.

Wollstonecraft continued her writing and in 1788 she completed her *Original Stories from Real Life*, and Johnson agreed to publish it. This educational book is much different from her first because of her experience in the Kingsborough household, where she had worked as a governess and because of her reading in the works of Rousseau and Thomas Day. *Original Stories from Real Life* features a mentor figure who teaches by example, providing the stimulus that is necessary for students to find rational solutions to daily problems. The book is a series of conversations between two motherless girls and an older female relative blessed with flawless discernment and moral probity. The two girls, one too vain about her own beauty and the other too quick to ridicule others are modelled upon the Kingsborough children, while the virtuous teacher;

Mrs. Mason, seems to be based on Mrs. James Burgh of Newington Green.

During the year 1788 Johnson also asked Wollstonecraft to begin two projects: one was a translation from the German of Joachim Heinrich Campe's *New Robinson Crusoe* (1779-1780), which was abandoned when another translation was published in that year; the second was a more interesting but time-consuming project, the anthology *The Female Reader*. At the age of thirty-one she was a self-educated spinster who had, thanks to her pen, achieved financial independence. Unusual, perhaps, for the eighteenth century, but not extraordinary. Mary Wollstonecraft, the intellectual genius, the daring fighter of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century, Mary Wollstonecraft, the woman and lover, was doomed to pain because of the very wealth of her being. With all her affairs she yet was pretty much alone, as every great soul must |

In November 1789, Richard Price preached a sermon praising the French Revolution. Price argued that British people, like the French, had the right to remove a bad king from the throne. Edmund Burke, was appalled by this sermon and wrote a reply called *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), where he argued in favour of the inherited rights of the monarchy. Wollstonecraft was upset by Burke's attack on her friend and she decided to defend him by writing a pamphlet, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). In her pamphlet Wollstonecraft not only supported Price but also pointed out what she thought was wrong with society. The publication of *The Rights of Men* brought Wollstonecraft into limelight.

Wollstonecraft was also influenced by the Enlightenment thought that put reason at the center of human identity and as the justification for rights. But, these ideas seemed in stark contrast to continuing realities of women's lives. Wollstonecraft could look to her own life history and to the lives of women in her family. Abuse of women was close to home. She saw little legal recourse for the victims of abuse. For women in the rising middle-class, those who did not have husbands – or at least reliable husbands – had to find ways to earn their own living or a living for their families.

The contrast of the heady talk of rights of man with the realities of the life of women motivated Mary Wollstonecraft to write her 1792 book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. This book in one stroke made her reputation permanent and irrevocable and carried it not only beyond England, to the continent but beyond her own time into history. In this book she attacked the educational restrictions that kept women in a state of ignorance and slavish dependence. She was especially critical of a society that encouraged women to be docile and attentive to their looks to the exclusion of everything else. Wollstonecraft described marriage as legal prostitution and added that women may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the object

dependent. The ideas in Wollstonecraft's book were truly revolutionary and caused tremendous controversy.

In June 1793, Mary decided to move to France with the American writer Gilbert Imlay. Her visit to France challenged her own earlier arguments and resulted in more reserved optimism. She published *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794), an attempt to reconcile her horror at the blood of the Revolution with her faith in perfectability. The same year Mary gave birth to Fanny, her daughter by Imlay.

When Wollstonecraft's relationship with Imlay came to an end, she returned to London. Here she married William Godwin in 1797 and soon afterwards, her second daughter, Mary was born. Tragically, Wollstonecraft died within two weeks of delivery of the baby. She died of septicemia. This daughter, later married the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and is known to history as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.

Shortly after Mary Wollstonecraft's death, Godwin published *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798), the Memoirs of Wollstonecraft as well as her unpublished and unfinished novel *Maria: or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798). The novel begins with a young wife, Maria Venables, imprisoned in an insane asylum by her husband. Wollstonecraft in *Maria* creates a special bond of friendship between Maria and Jemima. This friendship, which was based on a sympathetic bond, between an upper-class woman and a lower-class woman is one of the first moments in the history of feminist literature that hints at cross-class arguments, that is, that women of different economic positions have the same interests because they are women.

Wollstonecraft expanded her writings not only with novels and treatises but she also wrote letters. She wrote *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), which was a deeply personal travel narrative. These twenty-five letters cover a wide range of the topics, from sociological reflections on Scandinavia and its people to philosophical questions regarding identity to musings on her relationship with Imlay.

In her early writings, Wollstonecraft shared the typical assumptions of her day about women, education, and society. Later on, however, she rejected these values and re-defined herself as a revolutionary; and finally, she moved into a stage of integration which for want of a better word may be called a pre-romantic. And it was precisely those romantic themes that twenty first century thought and literature have adopted that Wollstonecraft emphasized. In her concentration on self-analysis, psychological integration, and personal identity she dealt with concerns—feminist, educational, and literary—which tend to be thought of as distinctly “modern.” As well, in the expression of her contempt for what she refers to as “Fat contented ignorance” (Wardle *Biography* 149), she consciously developed a personal and powerful rhetoric and in

so doing experimented with structure, style, and narrative subjectivity again in a striking manner.

Throughout the drastic upheavals in her social and political thought, her faith in education as the means to regenerate both the individual and the society as a whole remained constant, thus unifying, and to some extent complicating, the development of her thought. It is tempting, but ultimately misleading, to see Wollstonecraft as a religious conservative who upon losing her faith became a political radical and then, disillusioned by the failure of the French Revolution, retreated to the individualism of romanticism. Mary Wollstonecraft's work does go through these stages, but in her work such stages are neither discrete nor easily identifiable; nor do they follow in a simple linear or chronological progression. The complexity inherent in the evolution of Mary Wollstonecraft's thought necessitates the re-assessment of her relevance to the literary tradition, particularly the female tradition, and the re-evaluation of her place in the educational history of ideas.

Mary Wollstonecraft aimed for the highest summit of human possibilities. She was too wise and too worldly not to see the discrepancy between her world of ideals and her world of love that caused the break of the string of her delicate, complicated soul. Perhaps it was best for her to die at that particular moment. For he who has ever tasted the madness of life can never again adjust himself to an even tenor. But we have lost much and can only be reconciled by what she has left, and that is much. Had Mary Wollstonecraft not written a line, her life would have furnished food for thought. But she has given both, she therefore stands among the world's greatest, a life so deep, so rich, so exquisitely beautiful in her complete humanity.

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