



Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797)

By Sylvana Tomaselli

Mary Wollstonecraft is one of the essential contributors to conceptions and discussions of liberty. Influential since the publication of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, she was and continues to be read and cited both within and beyond the English-speaking world (Botting, Wilkerson, and Kozlow, 2014). Frequently seen as the first English feminist, her philosophy is receiving increasing attention, thereby placing her views on the rights of women in the wider context of her economic, social, and political views. Most important in relation to the subject of her reflections on liberty is the close link she maintained between rights and duties, and her insistence that artificial hindrances to the development of all human beings violated natural law and

divine justice. Liberty, for Wollstonecraft, had to be enjoyed by all, regardless of gender and race; it was her belief that gross inequality was incompatible with the well-being not just of the unprivileged, but also of the privileged.

The second of seven children, Mary Wollstonecraft was born in Spitalfields, London, on April 27, 1759, in a house on Primrose Street. Her father, Edward John, mismanaged his share of a sizeable legacy from her paternal grandfather, who had been a successful master weaver. Wollstonecraft's father tried to establish himself as a gentleman farmer in Epping. It was the first of several moves, each of which marked her family's financial and social decline. Only Mary's elder brother, Edward (Ned), was to receive a formal education; he became a lawyer. He had also inherited directly from his grandfather a substantial part of the latter's legacy. This is noteworthy as Mary Wollstonecraft was to have much to say about inheritance, and male primogeniture in particular (i.e., the firstborn male's exclusive or principal inheritance of a family estate).

Wollstonecraft's informal education was not unusual for someone in her position, but she made much of every learning opportunity that came her way. Her published writings show a true command of the Bible and a good knowledge of Plato as well as early modern philosophers. They also draw on a variety of authors most notably Shakespeare and Milton. Through her writing for the *Analytical Review* she was to become widely read in the literature of her period, and she was to translate several works: Jacques Necker's *Of the Importance of Religious Opinions* (1788) from French, Rev. C.G. Salzmann's *Elements of Morality, for the Use of Children; with an Introductory Address to Parents* (1790) from German, and Madame de Cambon's *Young Grandison* (1790) from Dutch. Nevertheless, her prospects were very limited. In relatively rapid succession, she entered the few occupations open to someone of her sex and circumstances: a lady's companion, a schoolteacher, and a governess. In 1784, she established a short-lived girls' school in Newington Green, where she met the leading members of its Dissenting community, including the Reverend Richard Price, whom she defended in a *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) contra Edmund Burke; it was through her connections to members of this community that she gained an introduction to her future publisher, friend, and patron, Joseph Johnson.

After a brief sojourn in Portugal, which partly inspired her first novel, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), she returned to England and, with the help of

an advance from Joseph Johnson, produced her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct in the more important Duties of Life* (1787). It consists of brief discussions on such topics as Moral Discipline, Artificial Manners, Boarding-Schools, The Benefits Which Arise from Disappointments, The Observance of Sunday, and On the Treatment of Servants. She was to return to these and related topics in her more famous works of the 1790s. Following the collapse of her school, Wollstonecraft became a governess to the family of Lord Kingsborough for a brief period. The position took her to Ireland, where she completed *Mary, A Fiction*. Its short chapters tell the tale of its eponymous heroine, who becomes “a mere nothing” following an arranged marriage to “a vicious fool,” and of her friendships, loves, and encounters with a number of characters whose lives are made wretched by ignorance, poverty, illness, and social conventions (Todd and Butler, 1989: 7). These were subjects that Wollstonecraft would continue to explore in her non-fictional works as well as in her last, unfinished novel that was published posthumously, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria. A Fragment* (1798), whose aim it was, in the words its author, to exhibit “the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society,” relating to the status of women in marriage, being chained to an inescapable brute, their inequitable treatment, and dependency (Todd and Butler, 1989: 83).

On her return to London, she obtained some literary employment thanks again to Joseph Johnson. In 1787, she also began, but never completed, *The Cave of Fancy, A Tale*. The same year, she wrote her only complete work of children’s fiction, *Original Stories from Real Life; with Conversations, calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (first published in 1788, republished in 1791, and illustrated by William Blake for another publication in 1796). Wollstonecraft’s anthology, *The Female Reader; Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Verse; Selected from the Best Writers and Disposed under Proper Heads; for the Improvement of Young Women* (1789) followed.

For the *Analytical Review* Wollstonecraft reviewed poetry, novels, travel accounts, educational works, collected sermons, biographies, natural histories, and essays and treatises on subjects such as Shakespeare, happiness, theology, music, architecture, and the awfulness of solitary confinement; the

authors whose works she commented on included Madame de Staël, Emanuel Swedenborg, Lord Kames, Rousseau, and William Smellie. Until the end of 1789 her articles were mostly of a moral and aesthetic nature. However, in December 1789 she reviewed a speech by her old friend, Richard Price, entitled *A Discourse on the Love of our Country, delivered on Nov. 4, 1789, at the Meeting-House in the Old Jewry, to the Society for Commemorating the Revolution of Great Britain. With an Appendix, containing the report of the Committee of the Society; and Account of the Population of France; and the Declarations of the Rights by the National Assembly of France* (1789). This address to the Revolution Society in commemoration of the events of 1688 partly prompted Burke to compose his famous *Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event* (1790); Burke feared Price and others would incite a revolution in England that would put an end to its rule of law and liberty.

Burke's attack on Price in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* led Wollstonecraft to leap to Price's defence in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), the first of many responses to Burke's now famous work. Initially published anonymously at the end of November, the second edition of *A Vindication* in mid-December bore Wollstonecraft's name and marked a turning point in her career; it established her as a political writer. In September 1791, Wollstonecraft began *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, which elaborated a number of points made in the previous *Vindication*, not least that in most cases marriage was nothing but a means to maintain or acquire property, and that the education women received ensured that they could not meet the expectations society had of them and almost certainly guaranteed them an unhappy life. They would be kept in perpetual childhood, ignorance, dependency, and forced into marriage whatever their wishes. As they were not educated, they were unable to provide for themselves should they not wish to marry or find themselves in widowhood. Raised to think only of appearances, they were not prepared for the duties that society nonetheless demanded of them as wives, mothers, and neighbours. Wollstonecraft was adamant about the unbreakable link between duties and rights. She thus argued that the duties expected of women had to be conditional on the recognition of their right to the education necessary for them to

be cognisant of the nature of such duties, and for them be able to fulfil them. She also believed that those who did not strive to meet their duties forfeited their rights.

Following the publication of her second *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft was introduced to the French statesman and diplomat Charles Talleyrand on his mission to London on behalf of the Constituent Assembly in February 1792. She dedicated the second edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to him. In December 1792, she travelled to France where she met Gilbert Imlay, an American merchant and author of *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (1792) and *The Emigrants* (1793). While there, she composed *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has Produced in Europe* (1794). As British subjects were increasingly at risk under the Terror, Wollstonecraft passed as Imlay's wife to benefit from the greater level of safety that American citizens enjoyed at the time, though in fact they never married. Imlay was probably the source of Wollstonecraft's greatest unhappiness. Her *Letters Written During A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) were addressed to him. She had gone to Scandinavia in search of ship with which its captain had absconded and in which Imlay had a large investment.

Wollstonecraft travelled with Fanny, her daughter by Imlay, who was born at Le Havre in May 1794. A year after Fanny's birth, Wollstonecraft twice attempted suicide, first in May, then in October 1795. Her relationship with Imlay finally ended in March 1796. In April of the same year, she renewed her acquaintance with William Godwin, whom she had first met in 1791 at a dinner attended by Thomas Paine, which was given by her publisher Joseph Johnson. Wollstonecraft and Godwin were married at St. Pancras Church in March 1797. On August 30th of that year, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, future author of *Frankenstein* and wife of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, was born. On September 10th, Wollstonecraft died of septicaemia.

Wollstonecraft's first overt intervention on the subject of liberty was in her attack on Burke in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Reading his *Reflections* one could not but come to the simple conclusion, she claimed, that far from being the self-declared "friend of liberty," Burke was in fact "the champion of property" (Tomaselli, 1995: 12). She further accused him of being

a client of his Whig patrons, the beneficiary of a pension, and therefore that his pen was effectively up for sale. As is uncontested within Burke scholarship, such accusations were neither true nor fair of Burke; one need only recall his efforts to open free trade with Ireland (which cost him his parliamentary seat), his support for the American pleaders for representation and fair taxation, his stance on the Quebec Bill, his prolonged campaign to have Warren Hastings impeached, and so forth, and it is clear that Wollstonecraft's portrayal fits very ill. Nor was Burke in receipt of a pension at the time of her writing so in *Vindication* (Bourke, 2015). But Wollstonecraft was not in the business of doing justice to Burke, and the important points to note in this work is Wollstonecraft's conception of liberty and the importance she placed on financial independence. To be financially dependent was to be liable to be corrupted, to be unable to think for oneself, and thus to cease being one's own person. She wanted all men and women to be freed from such dependence.

In her self-representation in her first *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft was eager to emphasize the contrast between herself and Burke as she depicted him: she was the clear-headed, rational, independent thinker. Burke, in her view, cared only about the maintenance of the status quo, the preservation of property, and the social and political inequality that came with it. Not being in anyone's pay, she could see the world as it was and the shallowness of his critique of Price for the latter's enthusiasm for the earlier stages of the revolution in France. In denying the rights of men, as she believed he was, Burke was arguing against divine justice. Natural rights were God-given at birth to each and every human being "as rational creatures, who were raised above brute creation by their improvable faculties" and, she contended, nothing could legitimately undermine them (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 12-13).

Like many of her contemporary intellectuals, such as Immanuel Kant, and thinkers in the next century, such John Stuart Mill, Wollstonecraft saw liberty and self-development as intrinsically linked. Indeed, the essential marker of freedom for all these authors was being able to develop oneself and to achieve one's full potential. For Wollstonecraft, this was not only a matter of learning to read, write, and count, or even of acquiring wider knowledge about all the arts and sciences. Important though the expansion of the mind and the unfolding of mental faculties was for her, liberty also had to extend to exercise and the

strengthening of the body. Mind and body both had to be allowed to thrive. To be free, in Wollstonecraft's conception, was to be free to flourish physically as well as mentally. Education thus had to attend to mind and body from childhood (Tomaselli, 2021). It had to prepare individuals for life's vicissitudes. Resilience was necessary to freedom.

The first condition for personal freedom to be even conceivable was to be literally free, legally free—in other words, not to be a slave. Slavery was, for Wollstonecraft, an abomination. She decried its practice repeatedly. In this she was not alone. The French playwright Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793), who also called for the rights of women and a variety of social reforms, vehemently denounced slavery, as did many Dissenters and members of the Newington community, such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825), who authored *An Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade* (1791).

While abolitionism was a growing movement and Wollstonecraft's condemnation of slave trade and slavery is now widely acknowledged (Ferguson, 1992; Howard 2004; Brace 2016), what remains to be emphasised is the way it shaped her understanding of the condition of women and the language she uses to deplore it. She flatly rejected any division of humanity based on colour. Notwithstanding the differences in talents and aptitudes between individuals, what divided mankind, she made clear in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* and other works, was privilege, wealth, legal and political rights, and education. No human being should be seen as a thing that could be owned and bartered by another. To do, she asserted, was to defy divine creation.

In Wollstonecraft's view, the unqualified reverence for private property was the root cause of maintaining such barbarous practices. In her harangue against Burke, whom she portrayed as the unabashed defender of property, she argued:

because of our ignorant forefathers, not understanding the native dignity of man, sanctioned a traffic that outrages every suggestion of reason and religion, we are to submit to the inhuman custom, and term an atrocious insult to humanity the love of our country,

and a proper submission to the laws by which our property is secured. (in Tomaselli, 1995: 13)

She made extensive use of the register of enslavement and emancipation in speaking of the condition of women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, referring to them as “convenient slaves,” “coquettish slaves,” or “abject slaves,” and writing of “their slavish dependence,” to cite but some examples (Tomaselli, 1995: 69, 91, 93, 105, 106.) This vocabulary partly reflects the fact that she had written on race and slavery before she penned her most famous work. What is more, she did not silently pass over women’s participation in the horrors of slavery: “Where is the dignity, the infallibility of sensibility, in the fair ladies, if the voice of rumour is to be credited, the captive negroes curse in all the agony of bodily pain, for the unheard of tortures they invent? It is probable that some of them, after the sight of a flagellation, compose their ruffled spirits and exercise their tender feelings by the perusal of the last imported novel” (in Tomaselli, 1995: 46). For liberty to be enjoyed by anyone, according to Wollstonecraft, the world had to be freed of slavery—the treatment of others as property—in all its insidious forms.

Wollstonecraft’s arguments applied every bit as much to children as to adults. Children were entrusted to parents, not owned by them, Wollstonecraft argued. Both parents, fathers no less than mothers, had a duty to provide for their children’s needs and prepare them for life, but that life was their own (Tomaselli, 1995: 246). Their eventual marriage was not to be seen as the means of the enrichment of their families. Freedom or unfreedom began in the home. Blind obedience induced by fear of violence or disinheritance was degrading of the human character, she asserted (Tomaselli, 1995: 246). Thus, one’s liberty to be and to flourish as a human being greatly depended on the nature of the upbringing one happened to have received.

The extent of one’s liberty was, however, not just liable to be curtailed by others, be they parents in relation to children, husbands in relation to wives, men in relation to women more generally, and slave-owners in relation to slaves. Arbitrary government and irrational laws posed another great threat to liberty. Wollstonecraft denounced “penal laws [that] punish with death the thief who steals a few pounds” as well as pressganging (forcible enlistment in the

military) (Tomaselli, 1995: 14-15), and other abhorrent punishments and practices. Although she thought government had a duty to attend to inequity and lessen inequality, she was wary of centralized administration and hoped for a future in which women and men were politically well-informed and enjoyed a greater level of representation and participation (Tomaselli, 2021).

Had Wollstonecraft's life not been cut short, she might have written in greater detail about her political vision for humanity, but her publications make abundantly clear her determination to expose the most deceptive limitations of individual and collective liberty, namely, ignorance and false beliefs. To live to shine in the opinion of others, to make material acquisition the meaning of one's existence and particularly to do so through the subjugation of others, and to measure one's sense of self and self-worth through the admiring gaze of others was, for Wollstonecraft, slavery. Here again, she was not unique in her time to think this way. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith, both of whose works she knew well, thought likewise. Her contribution was to show that emancipation from such delusions could only come with a revolution in morals that included both the sexes:

It appears to me necessary to dwell on these obvious truths, because females have been insulated, as it were; and, while they have been stripped of the virtues that should clothe humanity, they have been decked with artificial graces that enable them to exercise short-lived tyranny. Love, in their bosoms, taking place of every nobler passion, their sole ambition is to be fair, to raise emotion instead of inspiring respect; and this ignoble desire, like the servility in absolute monarchies, destroys all strength of character. *Liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women be, by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish like exotics, and be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature.* (Tomaselli, 1995: 107 [my emphasis])

Liberty and virtue were as mother to daughter, in Wollstonecraft's view. As the daughter of liberty, virtue was nursed by her and, in due course, virtue herself

was called to care for her mother, liberty. Virtue and liberty were dependent on each other.

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