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MOTHERHOOD OF FEMINISM

THOMAS H. FORD

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For modern feminism, maternity has often appeared to be a lure or a trap. As mothers, women risk being defined primarily in terms of sexual reproduction in a cultural dynamic that overwhelms the possibility of female autonomy and self-determination. And yet, at the same time, the language of motherhood has been central to the way modern feminism has understood its own history. Twentieth-century feminists set out to locate themselves within traditions inaugurated by “foremothers,” while the relations between one feminist generation and the next have often been represented as those of mothers and daughters. So on the one hand, the rhetoric of motherhood has been a central target in the feminist project of exposing and repudiating the cultural logics that perpetuate the oppression of women. And on the other, feminists have turned to this same rhetoric when reflecting on the development of feminism itself.

The conflict between these two impulses has rarely been as sharp as in the reception of Mary Wollstonecraft. Although celebrated as the mother of English-language feminism, Wollstonecraft increasingly became subject to feminist criticism from the 1970s on. This second-wave reappraisal of Wollstonecraft culminated in 1994, when literary critic Susan Gubar charged Wollstonecraft with “feminist misogyny” (1994, 454). What gave this and similar criticisms of Wollstonecraft particular bite was their acceptance of Wollstonecraft as a vital source of inspiration for modern feminism. Gubar, for instance, writes that Wollstonecraft is “the aesthetic foremother of feminist expository prose” and that the latter’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman is “quite rightly regarded as the founding feminist text in English” (454). It is precisely because of this foundational role that she warns Wollstonecraft’s philosophical daughters against their foremother’s influence.

Gubar’s account of Wollstonecraft effectively completes a critical consensus established through the 1980s and 1990s. Mary Jacobus, for instance,
understood Wollstonecraft’s two novels to be “fictions which, even as they anatomicize the confines of ‘sensibility,’ cannot escape its informing preoccupations and literary influence” (1986, 59). Mary Poovey similarly criticized Wollstonecraft for “remaining a prisoner of the category she most vehemently tried to reject” (1984, 81), and Janet Todd likewise argued that Wollstonecraft and fellow radical writer Mary Hays often remained ‘trapped in the ideology of femininity’ (1989, 237). More recently, Angela Keane has argued that Wollstonecraft “could only reproduce the logic of the system she sought to eradicate” (2000, 109). The same phrases recur in Timothy Reiss’s reading of Wollstonecraft: “She argued within Enlightenment rhetoric . . . a matter of the right to participate in the system, not of the need to change it” (1989, 14). And, again like Gubar, Cora Kaplan understood Wollstonecraft to exemplify the fate of feminist thought more generally, for “all feminisms give some ideological hostage to femininities and are constructed through the gender sexuality of their day as well as standing in opposition to them” (Kaplan 1986, 49). It is this general pattern, in which the feminist text often unwittingly reinforces the patriarchy it sets out to combat, that Gubar dubs “feminist misogyny”—a paradoxical structure of self-animus, passed on from mother figures such as Wollstonecraft to her feminist daughters of today.

In these readings, the contradictions within Wollstonecraft’s ideas are often ascribed to her allegiance to bourgeois ideology. This emerging set of ideas allowed a new women’s world to be imagined in the late eighteenth century, but, as Mitzi Myers writes, it also ordered that world according to the values of “modesty for both sexes, serviceable work, education, and, above all, mothering” (1982, 206). In this way, the paradoxical limitations of Wollstonecraft’s feminism tend to be traced back to her commitment to the middle-class family, and specifically to her belief that motherhood should form the vital center of female cultural identity, with motherhood usually understood in these arguments in opposition to embodied feminine sexuality. Myers writes of Wollstonecraft that “the core of her manifesto remains middle-class motherhood, a feminist, republicanized adaptation of the female role normative in late eighteenth-century bourgeois notions of the family” (206). Joan Landes similarly claims that “even as she resists the most inequalitarian implications of republican doctrine, her own rhetoric implies that the home and women’s role within it can be given a civic purpose; and, consequently, that women may come to be satisfied with a domestic rather than a public existence” (1988, 129). Following this reading, the principal political task of women in Wollstonecraft’s view was to raise dutiful citizens,
with female agency restricted to the nursery and female political representa-
tion possible only as mediated by the male child.

More recent interpretations, such as those of Barbara Taylor (2003),
have undermined this critical orthodoxy. By reading Wollstonecraft in closer
juxtaposition to the works of her historical contemporaries, these interpre-
tations have generated both a new sense of the relative novelty of Wollstone-
craft’s writing within late eighteenth-century British literary culture, and a
revised understanding of that culture itself as one in which female experi-
ence, refracted through such terms as “sensibility” and “motherhood,” was
newly central. In both these ways, this historicist revision has identified ele-
ments once thought to be symptoms of Wollstonecraft’s “feminist misogyny”
as in fact the preconditions for her feminist breakthrough.

But this reappraisal has not yet entirely superseded the second-wave
critique of Wollstonecraft, and echoes of the charge of feminist misogyny
can still be heard. That may in part be a result of Wollstonecraft’s symbolic
position as foremother of feminism. Because her influence has been more
familial than historical, it has proved peculiarly resistant to historicist reeval-
uation. But it also reflects a sense in which the paradoxes identified by the
second-wave critique are indeed critical in Wollstonecraft’s writing, marking
her theory of motherhood with particular force. For if the paradox of femi-
nist misogyny is that of a discourse turned against itself—of a speech that
seeks to vindicate the rights of women, but that undermines the conditions
of its own enunciation, and by doing so places in question the possibility of
any feminist speech at all—then this is a paradox dramatized by Wollstone-
craft, who rehearses it in her writing, thematizing it literally rather than
falling victim to it unwittingly or passively. She does this, characteristically, in
statements addressed by a mother to her daughter. And in this same address
of mother to daughter, Wollstonecraft articulates an alternative and nonma-
ternal form of female solidarity, of a cross-generational feminist community
lying beyond shared biology.

Wollstonecraft’s engagement with this paradox can be seen in her last, un-
finished novel, The Wrongs of Woman: Or, Maria. The novel begins gothically,
with the main character, Maria, imprisoned in an asylum by her vindictive
husband, George Venables. The extant primary narrative concerns Maria’s
struggle for freedom and her effort to separate legally from Venables. Within
this narrative frame, other stories are interpolated—principally, Maria’s memoirs to her daughter, forcibly taken from her by Venables, in which she writes of her life before imprisonment, but also the story of Jemima, Maria’s keeper and subsequent friend. Protofeminist arguments are developed on all these narrative levels that in many ways echo and extend the case Wollstonecraft herself advanced in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. But while the novel was incomplete at the time of Wollstonecraft’s death in 1797, enough remains for us to find it probable that Maria’s struggle was to end tragically. Four of the five fragments with which Wollstonecraft’s manuscript ends give progressively more complete variations of a story of renewed betrayal, failures, and decline. In the fifth fragment, conversely, Maria is restored to life by the sudden reappearance of her daughter, long understood to be dead. These alternatives no doubt suggest very different readings of the novel. But the *deus ex machina* character of the happy ending renders it difficult to construe it as an effective resolution or conclusion to the tension between the two main levels of narrative identified above—the story of Maria’s struggle, and her narration of that struggle’s past history. For it is through the interplay of these two levels of narrative that Wollstonecraft identifies the cultural logic responsible for Maria’s predicament: Maria’s use of language, writing or speaking as a mother, effectively precludes her from becoming a feminist agent. Paradoxically, her efforts to educate her daughter to a feminist future entrap Maria herself in a repetition of her own past repression.

The novel understands the repression of women to be a structure of feeling as well as a system of violence. In large part, the “wrongs of woman” announced in the title are inflicted through the physical and legal force exercised by men. The daughter of an insipid mother and an authoritarian father, Maria accepts a marriage proposal to escape her father’s “absolute authority” and to provide a home for her sisters (Wollstonecraft 1989, 1:124). Although Venables soon proves to be an untrustworthy bully, Maria nonetheless conceives a daughter with him: “My husband’s renewed caresses then became hateful to me. . . . Still, compassion, and the fear of insulting his supposed feelings, by a want of sympathy, made me dissemble, and do violence to my delicacy. . . . To this cruel act of self-denial, when I wished the earth to open and swallow me, you owe your birth, and I the unutterable pleasure of being a mother” (1:144–45). The complicated syntax here reflects Maria’s difficulty in disentangling responsibility for this sexual act, which seems to border on marital rape. For in this passage it is the normatively feminine virtues of compassion and sympathy that lead Maria to
submit to her husband's advances, and the only violence she allows to have occurred is self-inflicted. In this and other ways, the novel addresses female participation in a regime of male terror, the violence women do to themselves and to one another. Crucially, the novel shows how elements of Maria’s protofeminist principles can be included in this participation, and in this sense *The Wrongs of Woman* takes what Gubar terms feminist misogyny to be one of its central themes.

In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft focuses her analysis of the way women have been enrolled in their own subordination through two keywords: “cunning” and “partial.” Her argument begins with the premise that “the civilization of the bulk of the people of Europe is very partial”—both in that it does not extend to all members of society, and in that it benefits some members of society at the expense of others (5:82). For Wollstonecraft, of course, the most significant social partition is that dividing men from women, whereby women are “excluded, without having a voice, from a participation of the natural rights of mankind” (5:68). One aim of the *Vindication* is to address and summon into being the subject of “woman as a whole, let it be what it will, instead of a part of a man” (5:122).

Maria sets out to challenge this exclusion of women from civil and political life, but the mode of her challenge is shown to help perpetuate that exclusion. She writes to her daughter, for instance, that “men, more effectually to enslave us, may inculcate this partial morality, and lose sight of virtue in subdividing it into the duties of particular stations” (1:145). The “particular stations” in question are those of men and women, and the “partial morality” is that which insists women must consent to their husbands’ sexual demands. Maria recognizes that her imprisonment and abuse are consequences of her earlier adherence to this partial morality. Yet this recognition, as expressed to her daughter, remains partial. While imprisoned, Maria falls in love with Henry Darnford, a fellow inmate of the asylum. But their affair uncannily retraces the trajectory of her marriage. Just as Maria once sought marriage to escape her father’s domestic tyranny, she looks to Darnford for rescue from the tyranny of her marriage. And just as Venables betrays her freedom, the probable result of Maria’s appeal to Darnford is suggested in one sketch for the continuation of the novel: “Divorced by her husband—Her lover unfaithful—Pregnancy—Miscarriage—Suicide” (1:183). In the cases of both Venables and Darnford, the novel suggests that partiality—the gendered misapprehension of a part for the whole—lies at the root of Maria’s self-deception.
Maria is first seduced by Venables when he gives a guinea in charity. She writes to her daughter that the guinea’s “magic touch invested my hero with more than mortal beauty. My fancy had found a basis to erect its model of perfection on” (1:83). Through such magical transitions from token to character, such embodiments of sentiment, Maria further enmeshes herself in the legal and material networks of male power. This same synecdochic slide into betrayal is repeated when Maria’s tale of the guinea comes itself to serve as a token, or particular narrative anchor, for a further synecdochic extrapolation. For although the guinea story is written by Maria in her “Memoirs to her Child,” it is read, not by her child, but by Henry Darnford, Maria’s second treacherous lover. Maria and Henry trade textual tokens—he lends her copies of Dryden, Milton, Rousseau; she lends him her own writings. It is on the basis of this trade that Maria again constructs an imagined male object of desire, sketching “a character, congenial with her own, from these shadowy outlines” (1:93).

Wollstonecraft refers to such textual transitions from token to character in the preface to the novel when she writes that “the history ought rather be considered, as of woman, than of an individual” and states that the “main object” of the novel is to exhibit “the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society” (1:83). Maria’s individual situation should be taken to figure the condition of women generally, for “was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?” (1:88). To effect this general representation Wollstonecraft writes, “the sentiments I have embodied” (Wollstonecraft 1989, 1:83). That is, the collective structures of injustice have been given concrete bodily form; the reader must retrace this passage from an individual situation (that of Maria, for instance) to the general condition of women. In this way, the rhetorical principle employed by the novel—of embodying general sentiments in individual cases—may appear to replicate that partiality that the narrative itself suggests disempowers women. The feminist justification Wollstonecraft gives in the preface for the novel’s style seems complicit with the cultural logics identified in the novel as oppressive. At least, the appearance of such a contradiction between rhetorical form and discursive theme was understood by much feminist criticism of the 1970s and 1980s as indicating that Wollstonecraft was a writer still caught within patriarchal traps that she only half perceived.

But of course an unbridgeable difference splits these two ways of “embodying” particulars. For Maria’s own generalizing constructions, the magic
transformations effected by her fancy, are taken as the particulars, the individual instances, of the novel’s own work of embodiment. Within the novel as a whole, each individual little story serves as a variation whose theme is only stated through this process of variation. The sense in which Wollstonecraft’s “history” can be considered “as [that] of woman,” rather than “of an individual” resides in this second-order mode of embodying the sentiments. Wollstonecraft arrives at a general representation by aggregating the differential utterances of “partial” modes of representation. By interpolating Maria’s memoirs to her daughter within the frame of her novel in this way, Wollstonecraft readdresses the maternal text to an alternative readership, and through invoking this nonfamilial audience, Maria’s critique of partiality is liberated for a different collective political subject.

In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft observes that women in general are precluded from acting as political agents. This is the law of partiality that silently regulates public political discourse. As a result, women are largely incapable of articulating general judgements, and for Wollstonecraft this is one of the most serious obstacles confronting a “revolution in female manners.” But if women’s exclusion from generalities is a “partial” law, it does not function only by confining women to partiality. Indeed, the problem with partiality is not that it prevents women from taking an objective view of their situation. Rather, it is that their view is not partial enough: “it should seem, that one reason why men have superior judgement, and more fortitude than women, is undoubtedly this, that they give freer scope to their grand passions, and by more frequently going astray enlarge their minds” (5:179). The condition of autonomous agency is a history of “frequently going astray,” for only such swerves allow independent links to be formed between individual actions and general principles.

But, equally, Wollstonecraft’s commitment to the political necessity of “going astray” needs to be set against her critique of indirectness and deviation. For the general condition of women is one of enforced error: “A man, when he undertakes a journey, has, in general, the end in view; a woman thinks more of the incidental occurrences, the strange things that may possibly occur on the road, the impression that she may make on her fellow-travellers . . . the finery that she carries with her” (5:129). This captivation by “trivial cares” (5:129) is a symptom of a limited form of female agency under patriarchal conditions, which Wollstonecraft terms “cunning.” So while any
general viewpoint is built up from particular moments of error, there are two kinds of error: those men make in deviating from the general, and those women, including Maria, make, which enforce their conformity to their general condition.

Wollstonecraft links cunning to figurative language, arguing for an unadorned and utilitarian language. In a much-discussed passage, Wollstonecraft states: “I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slided from essays into novels, and from novels into flowery letters and conversation. These pretty superlatives, dropping glibly from the tongue, vitiate the taste, and create a kind of sickly delicacy that turns away from simple unadorned truth” (5:76). The departure from “the simple language of the truth” takes place historically through the replacement of naked domination by more discursively sophisticated forms of social ordering (5:96). Like many social theorists of the eighteenth century, Wollstonecraft accepts a stadial history of social forms. But she revalues the standard gendering of this narrative of progress, in which civil existence becomes feminized as societies advance to higher levels of civilization. In Wollstonecraft’s version, the most developed societies of her time are indeed more “feminine” than the barbaric societies occupying earlier stages of development. But for Wollstonecraft, this feminization does not necessarily benefit women, for bad “masculine” government is replaced here by bad “feminine” government: “as wars, agriculture, commerce, and literature, expand the mind, despots are compelled, to make covert corruption hold fast the power which was formerly snatched by open force” (5:87). Through cunning, social injustice is exercised covertly within public discursive structures. Cunning may work through language, through the substitutability of signifiers one for another, but it always retains an essential connection to physical coercion, and the cunning swerves of the signifier follow the lines of despotic power-relations. The linguistic tropes and figures available to men, for instance, are never fully available to women. For men, the swerve of the signifier is a freedom: a chance, by going astray, of arriving at a judgment of general validity. For women—even when it is experienced as an expression of individual female power—it is heteronomy.

But if the language of cunning turns away from truth, Wollstonecraft perceives a historical opening for a new female generality within this linguistic swerve into corruption. Once political power is largely constituted discursively, the “establishment of true civilization” becomes possible, Wollstonecraft writes, for “once the public opinion preponderates, through the exertion of reason, the overthrow of arbitrary power is not very distant”
When injustice becomes linguistic, it can be resisted by a reordering of the public sphere and, ultimately, by the reconstitution of language itself. Wollstonecraft’s own syntactical experiments are committed to just such a reconstitution. Her texts enact this language of female solidarity and emancipation, as well as arguing for its necessity. Prior to this language becoming general, however, the displacement of overt domination by cunning remains an “illicit sway” (5:131), because the discursive authority of cunning derives from and perpetuates the violence that it putatively replaces. So while cunning signals that a radical reconfiguration of power is possible, it also hinders that transformation.

It does this in particular by individualizing political agency. Cunning is a power drawn from the specificity of an individual situation and always remains tethered to that personal pole. The “cunning tricks” (5:68) an individual woman must employ if she is to gain power—or even merely to survive, merely for her own protection—are political counterparts to “female” nominalism, to women’s captivation by partiality, by cultural particulars. In this way, cunning prevents the formation of a female generality, and the cunning woman negates collective belonging.

Because Wollstonecraft’s feminist project identifies language as the stronghold of modern patriarchy, it aims to transform the way women speak and write. “But what have women to do in society?” Wollstonecraft asks in her second Vindication, in order to introduce the possibility of a future syntax of female agency that refuses the lures of cunning (5:218). She first suggests some practical occupations, ways of gaining independence from immediate familial male power: women should become midwives and physicians. These occupations suggest that this problem for Wollstonecraft is one of transition: how does one locate, in the present, the traces of the new? How can one move from the present crisis to a realm of freedom from patriarchal order? Crucially, the symbolic figure who introduces the possibility of a new order here is not the mother who gives birth, but the woman who assists.

The profession of midwifery was highly politicized through the eighteenth century, as the once collective female traditions surrounding childbirth, organized around the female midwife, were supplanted by a newly medicalized system of birth focused on the man–midwife, or accoucheur. Recent historians of this transition have attributed it less to any effective superiority of male medical expertise, or to a simple patriarchal repression
of traditional women’s business, than to the introduction of class distinc-
tions into a formerly unified female experience of childbirth and to the
emergence of new heterosocial gender relations characteristic of late eigh-
teenth-century sensibility (Wilson 1995; Cody 2005). These readings reflect
a crucial aspect of the eighteenth-century midwifery controversy—its ar-
ticulation within a broader field of cultural politics that was predominantly
textual in nature. Wilson, for example, parallels the rise of the male midwife
and the rise of the novel. And arguments about the gendering of midwifery
were central enough to mid-eighteenth-century literary culture to provide a
key parodic theme for Sterne’s runaway bestseller of 1760–61, the first four
volumes of *Tristram Shandy*.

The position Wollstonecraft takes in the 1790s revival of this issue does
not involve a conservative return to the village traditions of Sterne’s mid-
wife in opposition to the scientific pretensions of his male physician, Dr
Slop. This much, at least, is clear from Wollstonecraft’s twin invocations of
the figures of female midwife and female physician. And then there are the
philosophical implications of Wollstonecraft’s remarks on midwifery, sug-
gested in the succeeding paragraph, in which she identifies a second opening
for female political agency:

> They might, also, study politics, and settle their benevolence on the
> broadest basis; for the reading of history will scarcely be more use-
> ful than the perusal of romances, if read as mere biography; if the
> character of the times, the political improvements, arts, &c. be not
> observed. In short, if it be not considered as the history of man; and
> not of particular men, who filled a niche in the temple of fame, and
dropped into the black rolling stream of time, that silently sweeps all
> before it, into the shapeless void called—eternity. (5:218)

For Wollstonecraft, different practices of reading produce different kinds of
reader. A shift in textual apprehension makes different ways of acting possible.
Reading can, then, be understood as a kind of midwifery. Wollstonecraft’s
themes of maternity and birth should be interpreted from this perspective,
rather than being taken as evidence of her allegiance to an ideology of re-
publican motherhood or to the determinant biology of the natural mother.
Few metaphors have been more central to the Western philosophical tra-
dition than that of midwifery, as Sarah Kofman (1998), for example, has
suggested in reinterpreting this tradition through the prism of Socrates’ self-
definition as a midwife. Kofman thereby uncovers an often effaced feminine dimension inherent in Western philosophy, and Wollstonecraft’s juxtaposition of the female midwife and the female reader suggests a similar feminist reappropriation of Socrates’ recourse to maieutic and feminine mediations of knowledge. In her chapter on education in the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft argues that “boys and girls, the rich and the poor” should all be taught “the elements of religion, history, the history of man, and politics” in common—using “conversations, in the socratic form” (1989, 5:240). Both reading and midwifery bring forth new forms of life, new ways of living and new conceptions of the lived. As at least one recent commentator has noted, the utopian alternative ending to *The Wrongs of Woman* is staged as a rebirth that is made possible only by the intervention of Jemima, acting “as a sort of metaphoric midwife” (Burke 2007, 37). It is this power that Wollstonecraft seeks to place in female hands. Motherhood, in which social reproduction is tied to sexual reproduction, offers a comparatively limited potential for social transformation. It presents no necessary break with the situation in which men “force all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain immured in their families, groping in the dark” (Wollstonecraft 1989, 5:67).

Wollstonecraft urges women to read history, but not to read it biographically. History is legible only when it is collective. We can gain a sense of the significance of this shift in the mode of reading, from biography to collective history, by comparing Wollstonecraft to her contemporary Isaac D’Israeli, whose *A Dissertation on Anecdotes* was first published in 1793. For D’Israeli, anecdotes are a mode of representation employing “detached . . . particulars” but offering a peculiarly intimate understanding of general historical developments: “It is alone by anecdotes the genius of an age or nation is thoroughly to be understood” (1793, 9). This is because anecdotes provide the historian with access to the “minute springs and little wheels” of “the history of manners” (30, 6) and “familiarize us to the genius of one whom we admire” (51). In consequence, “we consult the annals of history, as a son and a brother would turn over his domestic memoirs” (5). Anecdotes thus construct filial relations between the reader of history and the nation understood as a homosocial family.

D’Israeli’s image of the history of human nature as “a vast machine,” to be understood “by dwelling on its minute springs and little wheels,” recurs in his essay of 1796 “On the Influence of the Female Character in Politics and Religion.” Insofar as D’Israeli argues there that women possess a peculiar political influence—“certain powers”—by virtue of “their stationary situation
in society,” this essay can be read as a response to contemporary feminist arguments that women should have access to greater political agency and freedom of social existence. D’Israeli’s discussion of female power resonates strikingly with that of Wollstonecraft: “We are apt to be surprised when we contemplate some of the greatest revolutions, that they derived their origin from the fair; that a government or a religion have been established by a female, and that while an invasion takes place, a monarch is assassinated, or an inquisition erected, the motive power of this vast machine, is a little unperceived spring, touched and played upon by the dexterity of woman” (D’Israeli 1796, 340).

With his notion transposed into Wollstonecraft’s terms, D’Israeli is describing “cunning,” that partial and “invisible” form of female power available within patriarchy. The virtue of the anecdote, for D’Israeli, is its ability to reveal this power to the male gaze, making visible “these invisible, yet powerful wheels, in the machine of human nature, I mean women” (D’Israeli 1796, 355–56). The masculine legibility of the historical text is policed by the archival activities of the male historian, while national history is domesticated and made familial by this scarcely visible trace of female cunning.

In this context, the political significance of reading history as the narrative of a collective subject becomes clear. For D’Israeli, “in histories, we appear only as one who joins the crowd to see [great men] pass; in memoirs, we are like concealed spies, who pause on every little circumstance, and note every little expression” (1793, 14). But Wollstonecraft reverses the values D’Israeli gives to these reading positions. For her, historical phenomena are best “read” by merging with the crowd: “I descend from my height, and mixing with my fellow-creatures, feel myself hurried along the common stream. . . . The world cannot be seen by an unmoved spectator, we must mix in the throng, and feel as men feel before we can judge of their feelings” (1989, 5:181). Reading history in the crowd creates more powerful readers, and thus more powerful female political agents. On this account, we approach a sympathetic comprehension of the actions of others by viewing those others not as members of the same family—as in D’Israeli’s understanding of historical sympathy—but as members of the same “throng.” The throng defamiliarizes all relations, all connections, and all filial reticulation. It creates a fluidity of “love, hope, and fear” (1:181), generating a “common stream” of emotion in which all mix. In short, D’Israeli figures history as a patriarchal family, Wollstonecraft as a mass.

In these terms, to “read” an individual character as discontinuous from his or her situation, anecdotally, is to dissolve the specificity of a character
into the “shapeless void” of atemporal oblivion. If history is to provide a legible (and useful, liberating) text, personal careers cannot be extricable from a horizon of totalization, “the history of man.” But the capacity to arrive at such overarching narrative forms, and to invoke such a universalizing horizon of meaning, is itself contingent on one’s specific situation. If every statement of a life can be correlated to “the history of man,” every statement must have as its imputed speaker the universal “one” of the singular act of speech, and each speaker must be commensurable with the universal term “man.” But, as Wollstonecraft always stresses, existing social conditions deny women “a civil existence.” The very collective term “man” notoriously advertises its partiality. In their mother tongue, women lack the capacity to speak for the whole, to lay claim to the universal. Unaccustomed to linking together events of different scales, because they are “denied all political privileges” and “not allowed . . . a civil existence,” women’s “attention is naturally drawn from the interest of the whole community to that of the minute parts” (5:256). And in consequence, “they find the reading of history a very dry task” (5:256). In effect, women under patriarchal conditions are condemned to read only biographically. They might be mothers, but not midwives; they may read romances and memoirs, but not political history.

In showing how this “disregard for order” prevents women from “generalizing matters of fact” (5:91), Wollstonecraft is, of course, making a general claim. She makes the general argument that under patriarchy women cannot make general arguments, and in this sense she appears to risk a performative contradiction. But the fact that the sentence “Women cannot make general statements” is spoken by a woman—and it is, by Mary Wollstonecraft—does not render it immediately, formally, invalid. For Wollstonecraft attends very closely to the ways the category “woman” subsumes differences between women and to the way these subsumptions help bolster male ascendency. As she writes, “In sermons and novels . . . all women are to be levelled . . . into one character of yielding softness and gentle compliance” (5:164).

So second-wave criticisms claiming that Wollstonecraft allows her enunciative position to unravel her argument are misplaced. The very principle of enunciative coherence—the synecdochic principle that binds general statements to their component instances—is explicitly rejected by Wollstonecraft as cunning and partial. In fact, Wollstonecraft employs this paradoxical structure quite strategically: it allows her to announce the truth about the injustices inflicted on women, while at the same time establishing the possibility of an alternative female linguistic community. And the most direct example
she provides of such language is given in the expression of a care that binds
her to her daughter and that lies beyond her love as a mother.

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“We must mix in the throng, and feel as men feel,” Wollstonecraft demands. But what is the gender of Wollstonecraft’s throng, this “we” that must “feel as men”? Similar to *The Wrongs of Woman*, the principle of composition in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is largely one of aggregation, the deployment of appropriated intertextual expressions. In its characteristic mode of animadverting, Wollstonecraft’s argument threads together a host of citations and paraphrases and proceeds by “wandering from [its] present subject” (Wollstonecraft 1989, 5:151). In this, Wollstonecraft resembles the female sentimental traveler whom she censures for attending too greatly to “incidental occurrences.” But unlike that traveler, always distracted by trivial particulars, Wollstonecraft does not lose her “end” through this interest in incidents and particulars. Instead, that end is constructed through the constellation of her citations. Indeed, the critical force she derives from this method is such that, as in her earlier *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, at points she need only cite passages from such interlocutors as Rousseau, entirely without gloss or commentary, in order to dismantle their arguments (5:149–150). This silence in her own voice comes to offer the most acute deconstruction. Refracted through Wollstonecraft’s aggregation, the interpolated texts turn against their original writers, and are swept up in the throng of her text.

Wollstonecraft reflects on this mode of writing in her late *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*: “In writing these desultory letters, I found I could not avoid being continually the first person—‘the little hero of each tale.’ I tried to correct this fault, if it be one, for they were designed for publication; but in proportion as I arranged my thoughts, my letter, I found, became stiff and affected: I, therefore, determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained” (6:241). By funnelling the objects of her writing through this arranging principle of the first person, Wollstonecraft does not so much restrict her text to the reflections of “a witty egoist” as construct a capacious “I,” one that allows the usually privative first person to stage, in the field of her text, the unrestrained occasion for a crowd of her readers. Indeed, this sense of the first person’s embrace of the other is the motivating principle of *A Short Residence*, both thematically—as in the well-known passage on “imperious sympathies”—and formally. The immediate textual occasion for Wollstonecraft’s rehearsal of this “involuntary
sympathetic emotion” may well be provided by the sight of her sleeping child, but these sympathies directly bind the writer not just to her family (as might occur in a Burkean account, for instance) but to “the grand mass of mankind . . . a mighty whole” (6:248–49).

And the gender of this personalized yet open throng, this crowd in the “I,” is determinedly female, where “female” is understood as a generality with an as yet unrealized meaning. Wollstonecraft writes of her daughter: “You know that as a female I am particularly attached to her—I feel more than a mother’s fondness and anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex” (6:269). The syntactical ambiguity of the phrase “as a female”—it can refer to both “I” and “her,” qualify both mother and daughter—establishes a female solidarity that exceeds maternal, biological solicitude. Wollstonecraft feels “more than a mother’s fondness” here because femaleness attaches first and third person in a plural subject that lies beyond the claims of familial devotion. This is a collective “as a female” that neither levels all women “into one character” nor erodes that generalized subject into disconnected—merely cunning—individuals. For Wollstonecraft, to read the syntax of this solidarity, we must mix in the throng and cease to read familially.

Wollstonecraft was well aware that letters do not always reach their addressed destinations and that writing may be repurposed in ways that its authors did not imagine. In The Wrongs of Woman, Maria addresses her memoirs “to you, my child, uncertain whether I shall ever have an opportunity of instructing you, many observations will probably flow from my heart, which only a mother—a mother schooled in misery, could make” (1:123). As we have seen, these memoirs are read not by her daughter, but by her unfaithful lover, and the reader reads them at the moment in the narrative when they are supplied to Darnford—as if we were reading over his shoulder, in his place. Wollstonecraft’s A Short Residence is conversely made up of letters addressed to a lover whom we suspect, on internal evidence alone, to be unfaithful. In the reception of Wollstonecraft by modern feminism, readers have often been tempted to readdress A Short Residence and her other works. Instead of the memoirs addressed to a daughter, which are read by the unfaithful lover, feminist critics have often set out to read, with the eyes of dutiful or critical daughters, texts that are explicitly addressed by Wollstonecraft to her unfaithful lovers: to Tallyrand, to Imlay, to philosophy, to cunning women. To position Wollstonecraft in this maternal role has required overlooking her theory of female reading, in which the feminist project of
imagining and bringing to speech a new collective femininity is understood to be the dialectical surpassing of the mother-daughter relation. And yet this surpassing, this negation of the maternity of the text is transacted precisely within the maternal relationship. It is the sight of her daughter that inspires Wollstonecraft to invoke the subject “as a female” that unites her with her daughter in a nonmaternal but cross-generational form of female solidarity. By articulating this nonmaternal solicitude, underwritten by the paradoxical nature of female language, Wollstonecraft challenges those who understand themselves to be the daughters of the feminism she inaugurated to cease to view her as its mother.

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WORKS CITED


