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# Reason and Sensibility: The Ideal of Women's Self-Governance in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft

CATRIONA MACKENZIE

*It is standard in feminist commentaries to argue that Wollstonecraft's feminism is vitiated by her commitment to a liberal philosophical framework, relying on a valuation of reason over passion and on the notion of a sex-neutral self. I challenge this interpretation of Wollstonecraft's feminism and argue that her attempt to articulate an ideal of self-governance for women was an attempt to diagnose and resolve some of the tensions and inadequacies within traditional liberal thought.<sup>1</sup>*

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When morality shall be settled on a more solid basis, then, without being gifted with a prophetic spirit, I will venture to predict that woman will be either the friend or slave of man. We shall not, as at present, doubt whether she is a moral agent, or the link which unites man with brutes.  
(Wollstonecraft 1975, 120)

## I.

In a letter written in 1795 while she was traveling in Scandinavia doing business on behalf of Gilbert Imlay, the man who had recently abandoned both her and her child by him, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote of herself: "For years have I endeavored to calm an impetuous tide—laboring to keep my feelings to an orderly course.—It was striving against the stream.—I must love and admire with warmth, or I sink into sadness" (Wollstonecraft 1977, 160). It is reflections such as these, as well as the tempestuous events of Wollstonecraft's personal life, that have led one of her biographers to suggest that Wollstonecraft was unable to live her own life by the ideal of self-governance that she proposed for women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.<sup>2</sup> The explanation

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proffered for this apparent discrepancy is that the *Vindication* was written when Wollstonecraft was childless and inexperienced in sexual relationships with men. Her later experiences, however, taught her that passion cannot always, or cannot very easily, be governed by reason. More recent feminist commentators have rejected this rather patronizing view of the relationship between Wollstonecraft's life and her writings.<sup>3</sup> But the idea that Wollstonecraft defined self-governance in opposition to passion has not been challenged and still prevails even in feminist interpretations of her work.<sup>4</sup> Jane Martin, for example, argues that Wollstonecraft adopts a "sovereignty model of personality," which posits reason in opposition to feeling as the "ruling element" of the soul and which allows between reason and feeling "no give and take, no interaction, no sensitivity to context" (Martin 1985, Chap. 4).

In this essay I argue that the overriding preoccupations of Wollstonecraft's work, as well as of her life, were to articulate what it means for women to think and act as autonomous moral agents, and to envisage the kind of social and political organization required for them to do so. Although at times she seemed to identify autonomy with reason, defining it in opposition to passion, in a context in which woman was "always represented as only created to see through a gross medium, and to take things on trust" (Wollstonecraft 1975, 142). Wollstonecraft also struggled to develop an account of women's moral agency that would incorporate a recognition not only of women's capacity to reason but also of their right to experience and give expression to passion, including sexual desire. Of particular concern to her was the need to create the possibility for genuinely reciprocal friendships and love relationships between men and women. She was also vehement that women's bodies should be regarded neither as mere objects of use, pleasure, and exchange among men, nor by women as objects of narcissistic attention. Rather, respect for the body is an integral part of both self-esteem and respect for others. Wollstonecraft's view was that such reciprocity and respect could be realized only in a context in which women are able to exercise control of both the external—financial, educational, and political—circumstances of their lives and the direction of their own affections.

Such an interpretation need not deny that there are tensions within Wollstonecraft's account of women's autonomy, as well as difficulties with it for contemporary feminists. In particular, Wollstonecraft's treatment of the distinctions between reason/passion and public/private seems to raise problems from a feminist perspective for her understanding of self-governance. But I will suggest that these problems are not as clear-cut as they are sometimes made to seem. First, it is true that at many points in the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft is explicit that virtue must be founded on reason, not sensibility. She also ties virtue to the notion of the perfectibility of the soul. This lends credence to the view that she regards self-governance as a matter of reason's control over unruly passions associated with the body. From a feminist perspective this is problem-

atic because it allies Wollstonecraft's account of self-governance with hierarchical oppositions between soul/body, reason/passion, and masculine/feminine. The supposedly sex-neutral "self" that controls the body is thus implicitly associated with "masculine" virtues while downgrading "feminine" virtues associated with affectivity.<sup>5</sup> While not denying that Wollstonecraft does appeal to the idea of a "soul which knows no sex," I will try to show that, within the inevitable limits imposed by this idea, Wollstonecraft was also struggling to articulate a more subtle view of self-governance, one that would not pit women's reason in opposition either to their bodies or to affectivity. The outlines of this view are certainly present in the *Vindication*, but they are more fully developed in Wollstonecraft's posthumously published novel *The Wrongs of Woman* (Wollstonecraft 1980b) and in some of her travel writings and personal letters.<sup>6</sup>

Second, in the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft makes much of the claim that although virtue must be regarded as the same in both sexes, men and women have different "duties." Women's "duties," associated with the care of children and the running of the household, are considered by Wollstonecraft to follow "naturally" from women's role in reproduction. But as feminists have pointed out, this division of the sexes according to duties, as well as the idea that certain duties are "natural" to women, derives from and preserves the distinction between public and private that is at the root of women's subordination. Moira Gatens, for example, argues that Wollstonecraft's endorsement of a sexual division of labor is a consequence of her attempt to extend the liberal ideal of equality to women (Gatens 1991a).<sup>7</sup> According to Gatens, Wollstonecraft assumes that the liberal notion of equality, and the reason that grounds it, are sex-neutral. In fact, however, the characteristics of the "equal" liberal citizen are defined in opposition to, but also presuppose, those affective virtues associated with women. As a result, the liberal public sphere is a sphere of male equality that can function only through the subordination of women in the private sphere. Wollstonecraft's argument that women can fulfill dual roles as mothers-daughters-wives and as equal citizens thus overlooks the fact that within liberalism women's duties are necessarily tied to women's subordination. According to Gatens, Wollstonecraft attempts to deal with this difficulty by denying the ethical significance of women's embodiment and of those virtues associated with women, and by adopting a supposedly sex-neutral but in fact masculine ideal of virtue in both public and private spheres. But given the practical consequences of women's embodiment (in particular, the nature of women's involvement in reproduction), while the ethical significance of sexual difference is denied, difference reemerges at the level of the division of labor. Because the sexual division of labor lies at the heart of women's social inferiority, the net effect of Wollstonecraft's account of virtue is to leave intact the structures of women's subordination.

While I do not deny that the idea that women have certain “natural” duties must be rejected, I do maintain that Wollstonecraft’s views on the relation between public and private spheres are more complex than perhaps Gatens allows. Although Wollstonecraft certainly wants nothing to do with the Rousseauian idea of specific “feminine” virtues, she does not deny the ethical importance of the affections. Nor does she overlook the ethical significance of sexual difference.<sup>8</sup> Her concern is to understand the kind of moral character required in order to achieve justice in the public realm and genuine reciprocity in the private. But what motivates this concern is a recognition that male and female embodiment are different and that this difference has ethical and political significance. It was for this reason that she called for not only a “revolution in female manners” but also a complete transformation of the legal and economic relations of both public and private spheres.

It is certainly true that Wollstonecraft was not entirely successful in her effort to combat the representation of women’s bodies as obstacles to women’s moral agency, a view that came to dominate philosophical and cultural conceptions of femininity from the Enlightenment onward. At times she seems to take over the view that women’s bodies are more “dependent” than men’s bodies are and hence that women’s bodies may be impediments to virtue. Particularly in *The Wrongs of Woman* and in some of her reflections on her own feelings for her daughter, she also seems to suggest that women are by nature more susceptible to the “attached affections” than are men. And, as I stated above, she seems to endorse the idea that certain duties are natural to women. But even here Wollstonecraft shows an awareness that perhaps her views, as well as her own susceptibilities, arise more from “the imperfect state of society” than from the nature of women’s bodies.

## II.

When reading Wollstonecraft it is important to try to disentangle her somewhat sketchy conception of self-governance from the arguments for equality out of which it arises. In her defense of equality she puts a great deal of stress on women’s capacity to reason and on the idea that virtue must be founded on reason. This gives rise to the impression that for Wollstonecraft self-governance is equivalent to the rule of reason. I suggest, however, that Wollstonecraft does not straightforwardly endorse the extreme rationalism of the arguments for equality. Rather, these arguments serve the strategic function of directly answering the charges against women’s equality that were raised by Enlightenment thinkers—but in particular, by Rousseau. Although the arguments for equality provide the necessary theoretical underpinning for her account of self-governance, in this account the role of reason figures more as a necessary part of a virtuous character than as the sole authority in all matters.

Wollstonecraft's argument in defense of women's equality works by extending the Enlightenment critique of sovereign power to relations between the sexes. Her claim is that if sovereign power is deemed illegitimate because it sanctions arbitrary power, then logical consistency requires that any exercise of arbitrary power be deemed illegitimate. What she seeks to show is that women's subordination to men is purely arbitrary, that is, it cannot be justified by reason. Wollstonecraft's main method of exposing the arbitrary nature of patriarchal power is via a critique of Rousseau's arguments against women's claims to equality. Her targets are, first, Rousseau's claim that women are by nature inferior to men with respect to those capacities that ground equality—namely reason, independence, and virtue—and, second, his claim that women's equality would subvert the social order.<sup>9</sup> In the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft presents two main arguments against the first claim, an environmental argument and an argument based on an appeal to the perfectibility of the soul. The environmental argument involves a straightforward appeal to empiricist psychology. Following Locke she argues that our capacities are developed and our characters formed in response to our environment, or what she terms "the effect of an early association of ideas." For Wollstonecraft, one of the most significant features of the environment is education or its lack, but environment also embraces customs, habits, opportunities, parental influences, and so on. Her response to Rousseau concedes that women "in the present state of society" do seem to be less capable of both reason and virtue than men are, but she seeks to show that this is simply a product of women's education and environment rather than a natural incapacity.

The environmental argument has, of course, been rehearsed repeatedly under a number of different guises by feminists since Wollstonecraft. A more interesting argument from the point of view of Wollstonecraft's concern with autonomy is the appeal to the perfectibility of the soul. At one level this argument works simply to challenge the coherence of any claim that certain groups of human beings can be naturally subject to others. Women, says Wollstonecraft, are either human beings or they are not—that is, they are either capable of reason and virtue or they are not, they either have an immortal soul or they do not. To postulate the possibility of a being that is neither one thing nor the other is to suggest that women are "beautiful flaws in nature. Let it also be remembered that they are the only flaw" (Wollstonecraft 1975, 122). If women are *not* human beings, then they must be regarded as subject to their impulses and hence incapable of freedom of the will. If this is the case, then their subjection to the authority of others is perfectly justifiable. However, if women *are* human beings, then their subjection to the will of others is completely unjustifiable. Furthermore, if this is the case, it is morally requisite that women be given the liberty and the scope to perfect their souls through the exercise of their reason. Underlying this challenge is the idea that human beings have a duty to improve their souls, more than this, that the

highest aim of human life is self-improvement.<sup>10</sup> Thus Wollstonecraft's argument against Rousseau is that by denying women equality, he undermines the foundation of morality because he denies women the possibility of undertaking what is in fact the sternest duty of beings accountable for themselves to God. Shortly we will see how this doctrine of perfectibility underpins Wollstonecraft's conception of self-governance.

In response to Rousseau's claim that women's equality would subvert the social order, Wollstonecraft seeks to show that precisely the reverse would be true.<sup>11</sup> Her argument to this effect focuses on Rousseau's conception of feminine virtue as founded not in reason but in modesty, which, she claims, is not virtue at all but a sham more likely to corrupt and degrade women and the social order than to improve either. The strategy of Wollstonecraft's argument is to concede to Rousseau certain assumptions but to deny the validity of the inferences he makes on the basis of those assumptions. First, she agrees that public virtue must be founded in private virtue, conceding also the importance of modesty and fidelity in relationships between men and women. However, she argues that Rousseau's recommendations for the education of women and his subjection of women to the authority of men will not bring about the desired result. According to Wollstonecraft, modesty must be founded in self-respect and in respect for the integrity of one's body, while fidelity is only a virtue if it arises out of genuine affection. Understood thus, modesty and fidelity are not sexually specific virtues at all. But Rousseau adopts a sexual double standard and makes modesty and fidelity the paramount virtues for women. Furthermore, he grounds these allegedly "feminine" virtues not in women's self-respect and capacity for affection but in male needs. It is clear that for Rousseau the function of so-called feminine virtue is to make women pleasing to men and to ensure that women's own needs are subordinated to this end. Wollstonecraft cites as evidence of this claim Rousseau's injunctions to Sophie to ensure that she is always alluring for Emile, while at the same time insisting that her chastity is her main asset. But pointing to the behavior of the leisured middle-class and aristocratic women whom Wollstonecraft so despised, she suggests that Rousseau's advice is more likely to produce infidelity, or at least sham fidelity, than genuine fidelity because it focuses women's whole attention on "corporeal embellishments" rather than on attaining genuine virtue.<sup>12</sup> The fact that feminine "virtue" must in the end be assured through force indicates that Rousseau was in fact aware of this.<sup>13</sup> Wollstonecraft's joking suggestion is that he abandoned logic on this issue because he succumbed to his own lasciviousness! Wollstonecraft is also outraged by Rousseau's insistence that it is not sufficient for a woman to be faithful; in addition, everyone must know of her fidelity. By making virtue a function of the opinions of others rather than of a person's own integrity and honesty, Rousseau deliberately undermines women's independence. More than this, he quite openly incites women to duplicity and cunning. But by depriving women

of integrity and of every legitimate means of exercising power, Rousseau ensures that women will in fact create social disorder because despotism becomes the only path open to them. By being civil and political slaves women become private tyrants (Wollstonecraft 1975, esp. chaps. 4, 5, and 12).<sup>14</sup> Wollstonecraft's conclusion is that Rousseau's recommendations teach women manners rather than morals—hardly an adequate basis for the virtue required to perfect the soul.

Rousseau's second argument in support of the claim that women's equality would subvert the social order is that women's primary function in life is to raise and educate children. Were women themselves to be educated to participate as equal citizens who would take responsibility for this crucial task? Wollstonecraft's response is simple but devastating. Once again she concedes certain assumptions to Rousseau, namely, that the family is indeed the foundation of social life and that women's primary *social* duty is to raise and educate children. However, she points out that if women are trained to be dependent on men, and required to base their judgements on the authority of men, then they will be incapable of raising and educating children. Wollstonecraft's argument is that the task of education demands independence of judgment. This in turn requires a capacity for reflection and generalization. But the education and social position that Rousseau recommends for women denies them the opportunity of developing these capacities. Furthermore, if women are ignorant of virtue and are themselves subjected to arbitrary authority, how likely is it that they will inculcate virtue in their own children? What is more likely is that they in turn will subject their children to arbitrary authority rather than teach them virtue through the use of reason. But having conceded that women's primary *social* duties are maternal duties, Wollstonecraft also argues that women have a duty to which their social duties must always be secondary. This is their duty to themselves as beings accountable to God.

### III.

Wollstonecraft's views on the perfectibility of the soul are beautifully captured in one of her travel letters written in Tonsberg, Norway. This letter shows that Wollstonecraft's belief in the immortality of the soul did not prevent her from reflecting on the moral significance of human embodiment. In the letter, Wollstonecraft recounts her horror at discovering in the town's church a recess full of coffins containing embalmed bodies. Her horror arose from a sense that it degrades humanity to attempt to preserve the body when all active life has been extinguished, when "the enchantment of animation" is broken. In contrast to the "noble ruins" that are reminders of the exertions and efforts of earlier generations and that "exalt the mind," these futile attempts at prolonging life bring home the "littleness" and mortality of the individual. Reflecting on her reaction, Wollstonecraft writes,



Life, what art thou? Where goes this breath? this I, so much alive? In what element will it mix, giving or receiving fresh energy . . . I feel a conviction that we have some perfectible principle in our present vestment, which will not be destroyed just as we begin to be sensible of improvement. (Wollstonecraft 1977, Letter VII, 158-59)

Although at times Wollstonecraft's belief in the immortality of the soul led her to adopt an attitude of stoicism and resignation in the face of life's sorrows and injustices, her more considered view was that it is by learning from error and experience and by fighting injustice that the soul is improved.<sup>15</sup> As we will see, Wollstonecraft's views on what constitutes virtue or the perfection of the soul shifted somewhat from the *Vindication* to *The Wrongs of Woman*. But the idea that self-governance is essential to virtue and to the possibility of perfectibility or self-improvement remained a constant theme in her work, as did the idea that sexual inequality is immoral because it deprives women of self-governance.

Central to Wollstonecraft's notion of perfectibility and to her account of self-governance is a contrast—not accidentally echoing the same contrast in Rousseau—between independence and dependence. To be dependent is “to act according to the will of another fallible being, and submit, right or wrong, to power” (Wollstonecraft 1975, 135). However, independence, which Wollstonecraft calls “the grand blessing of life, the basis of every virtue” (Wollstonecraft 1975, 85), is not the mere converse of dependence, namely, being self-willed, but is a more complex virtue. In the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft lays great stress on the importance of reason to independence. She characterizes reason in the following terms:

Reason is . . . the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth. Every individual is in this respect a world in itself. More or less may be conspicuous in one being than another; but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason? (Wollstonecraft 1975, 142)

According to Wollstonecraft, a person must exercise her reason in a number of different ways in order to achieve independence. The most important of these ways, and the one to which she remains committed throughout her writings, is that exercise of reason which counters the effects of prejudice and which refuses blind obedience to authority. Our actions can be free and virtuous, she wants to say, only if they are based on reasoned judgments, rather than arising out of conformity to social expectations or from notions of duty

that require the individual to submit her own judgment to the arbitrary authority of others. In the *Vindication* this view leads Wollstonecraft to condemn military training and discipline as incompatible with freedom (Wollstonecraft 1975, 97).<sup>16</sup> In *The Wrongs of Woman* she has Darnford declare that “minds governed by superior principles . . . were privileged to act above the dictates of laws they had no voice in framing” (Wollstonecraft 1980b, 2: 187).<sup>17</sup> These “superior principles” are principles founded in respect for the rights of rational beings, including self-respect, as opposed to the principles of social utility that justify, among other things, the subordination of women and the exploitation of the poor. Her view was that a knowledge of such principles could only be arrived at by “enlarging the mind” through education, sensibility, and experience. By “cramping the understanding,” women’s education and social position, as well as Rousseau’s recommendations on these matters, put the capacity for making independent judgments out of the reach of most women, condemning them to be slaves to the opinions of others.

In the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft seems to follow Rousseau in linking dependence on the opinions of others to being subject to one’s own inclinations and passions.<sup>18</sup> In some places she therefore connects that exercise of reason which leads to independence of judgment and virtue with the control of the passions and with a kind of self-denying fortitude. Her complaint against the indolent women of the middle classes, for example, is that their senses are inflamed by the pursuit of pleasure and by momentary feelings. As a result, their reason is prevented from “attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others and content with its own station” (Wollstonecraft 1975, 152). In contrast, the virtuous widow Wollstonecraft depicts for us is a woman who subdues any passionate inclinations, selflessly devotes herself to educating and providing for her children, and then “calmly waits for the sleep of death” (Wollstonecraft 1975, 138-39). In a similar vein, Wollstonecraft also declares that “a master and mistress of a family ought not to love each other with passion. I mean to say that they ought not to indulge those emotions which disturb the order of society.” (Wollstonecraft 1975, 114).

However, even in the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft seems to be ambivalent about this view. In a number of places she contrasts the “romantic, wavering feelings” that “inflare” the passions with those “strong, persevering passions” that “strengthen” the passions and so enlarge the understanding and ennoble the heart. (See, for example, Wollstonecraft 1975, 115, 152, 169.) Similarly she contrasts lust with love, sensuality with sensibility, parental self-love with parental affection, and so on, suggesting that although the first term in the pair undermines virtue the second term is essential to it. She also suggests that “the regulation of the passions is not, always, wisdom” and that the reason why men seem to be more capable of independent judgement than women are is because they have more scope to exercise “the grand passions” (Wollstonecraft 1975,

212). Even more surprising, she claims for women the right to sexual desire: “Women as well as men ought to have the common appetites and passions of their nature, they are only brutal when unchecked by reason: but the obligation to check them is the duty of mankind, not a sexual duty” (Wollstonecraft 1975, 238).

In the novel *The Wrongs of Woman*, the character Maria cautions her daughter in a letter to learn to distinguish genuine love and affection from passing infatuation but also urges her not to flee from pleasure and to open her heart to affection, even though that will also make her vulnerable to pain. In an important passage she deplores contemporary moral standards that require women to remain married to men for whom they have neither affection nor esteem: “woman, weak in reason, impotent in will, is required to moralize, sentimentalize herself to stone, and pine her life away, laboring to reform her embruted mate” (Wollstonecraft 1980b, 2: 154). Maria declares that, to the contrary, lack of passion and coldness of heart undermine virtue, and she argues that desire must be reciprocal and women must have the freedom to express “that fire of the imagination, which produces *active* sensibility, and *positive* virtue” (Wollstonecraft 1980b, 2: 153). Later she rails against the tyranny of laws that pit women’s reason in opposition to their inclinations.

How should these apparent tensions be read, and what implications do they have for Wollstonecraft’s conception of self-governance? In the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft does seem to waver between two different ways of thinking about self-governance. On the one hand, especially in her insistence on women’s capacity to reason and in her scathing condemnation of the “manners” of contemporary women, she seems to regard the control of the passions by reason as essential to self-governance. On the other hand, she seems also to be moving toward the view that in a well-balanced, virtuous character, reason and sensibility should mutually strengthen and support each other rather than either dominating the other. This seems clearly to be the view of *The Wrongs of Woman*. Why, then, this ambivalence on Wollstonecraft’s part? There may be some truth in the claim that the events of Wollstonecraft’s own life helped confirm her in the latter view. However, there may also be other reasons for Wollstonecraft’s wavering. A clue to these reasons is found in one of her travel letters. Reflecting on her fears and hopes for her daughter Fanny, Wollstonecraft writes:

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 despondent and oppressed state of her sex. I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. With trembling hand I shall cultivate sensibility, and cherish delicacy of sentiment, lest, while I lend fresh blushes to the rose, I sharpen the thorns that will wound

the breast I would fain guard—I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit—Happy woman! what a fate is thine. (Wollstonecraft 1977, Letter VI, 156)

In many other places in her writings Wollstonecraft qualifies her claims with a statement to the effect that what she describes characterizes the situation of women “in the current imperfect state of society.” This indicates that Wollstonecraft’s apparent devaluation of passion stems from a number of sources. As I argued above, it must be seen, in the context of Wollstonecraft’s defense of equality and of women’s capacity to reason, as a counter to the Rousseauian depiction of “feminine” virtue. But Wollstonecraft’s anxiety about passion is also a response to a social situation that denied to women the scope for expressing desire and passion and hence gave rise to devastating conflicts between reason and sensibility. This is particularly evident in Wollstonecraft’s reflections on Fanny quoted above and in her depiction of Maria’s marriage to George Venables, a situation that Maria managed to tolerate for six years only by deadening her sensibility. A further reason for Wollstonecraft’s ambivalence was her view that “in the current state of society” there was always the danger that women’s sensibility was more likely to undermine than strengthen virtue by encouraging “romantic, wavering feelings” rather than “strong, persevering passions.” As Maria reflects while gazing out of her asylum window hoping to catch a glimpse of Darnford, “how difficult it was for women to avoid growing romantic, who have no active duties or pursuits” (Wollstonecraft 1980b, 1: 87).

Wollstonecraft’s attempt in the *Vindication* to distinguish between those passions that undermine and those that strengthen virtue echoes Rousseau’s attempt to make a similar distinction. Like Rousseau, she feels that the very same faculties and capacities, under different circumstances, may give rise to virtue and generosity of heart or self-centered vice. She also shares Rousseau’s views about the power of education to shape these faculties and capacities for good or ill. Where she differs from Rousseau is in her acute awareness that virtue and vice arise as much, if not more, from the character of our social and affective relations with others as from our individual dispositions, characteristics, and capacities. Although she often wants to make exceptions for individuals of “genius” and at times portrays herself as Rousseau’s solitary walker, requiring solitude for reflection, Wollstonecraft’s individuals are nevertheless much more embedded in their relations with others than are Rousseau’s.<sup>19</sup> Despite the fact that she condemns the kind of obedient dependence characteristic of subordination, for Wollstonecraft independence is not defined in opposition to a mutually supportive dependence on others. In fact, the values of affection, reciprocity, and love for humanity are central to her account of self-governance. Wollstonecraft’s view is that in the absence of genuine feel-

ings for others, self-governance is most likely to be displaced by a kind of self-interested prudence. This was one of the aspects of Imlay that so wounded her, and which she blamed on his involvement with commerce.<sup>20</sup> In the *Vindication* she claims:

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 . . . we must attain knowledge of others at the same time that we become acquainted with ourselves. Knowledge acquired any other way only hardens the heart and perplexes the understanding. (Wollstonecraft 1975, 215).<sup>21</sup>

And in *The Wrongs of Woman* Jemima is presented as a woman with a great capacity for virtue, but in her “virtue, never nurtured by affection, assumed the stern aspect of selfish independence” (Wollstonecraft 1980b, 1: 82) until Maria treats her with affection and respect.

Many of the tensions in her writings and the conflicts in her life bear testimony to Wollstonecraft’s painful awareness that for women “in the current state of society” this kind of self-governance founded in generosity and affection was very difficult to achieve. On the one hand, she argues, women’s subordination to men within the family, the idea that women’s function is solely to please men, and the denial to women of the right to express or act in accordance with their affections all conspire to make love and friendship founded on respect just about impossible between men and women. This is because the effect of women’s situation on *women* is to give rise either to an excess of affectionate sensibility—as Wollstonecraft felt was true of herself—or else to coquetry, while its effect on *men* is to render them lascivious or tyrannical or both. In these circumstances it is highly unlikely that women will have sufficient self-respect, or command sufficient respect from men, to make reciprocity a genuine possibility. In this context it is interesting to note that Wollstonecraft’s sometimes prudish remarks in the *Vindication* about the need for bodily modesty arise from the conviction that self-respect and respect for others is necessarily connected with respect for the integrity of one’s own body and for the bodies of others. By the time of *The Wrongs of Woman* the prudish aspects of this conviction have disappeared, and Wollstonecraft’s comments about marriage laws—“legal prostitution”—that make women and their children the property of men suggest that she regarded women’s right to self-governance with respect to their bodies as integral to the demand for equality.

On the other hand, she continues, women’s exclusion from the duties of citizenship tends to promote a kind of self-centeredness and leads to a lack of that sense of justice that is necessary if we are to treat others with respect. Here Wollstonecraft points to the behavior of those leisured women who show more concern for their dogs than for their servants. She also points to the kind of parental affection that is an extension of this kind of self-love: “Justice, truth,

everything is sacrificed by these Rebekahs, and for the sake of their *own* children they violate the most sacred duties, forgetting the common relationship that binds the whole family on earth together” (Wollstonecraft 1975, 265). Wollstonecraft is adamant that the only solution is a transformation of women’s situation in *both* private and public spheres.

#### IV.

One of the major themes of Wollstonecraft’s work is that women will not be able to attain self-governance without a certain degree of material—particularly financial—independence. Wollstonecraft’s concern with women’s financial independence arises out of two firm convictions. The first is that women’s emotional dependence and subjection to the tyranny of men will continue so long as women are financially dependent on men and so long as women’s independence is not protected by the law. This conviction is articulated most forcefully in *The Wrongs of Woman*, where it is dramatized in the stories of Maria, Jemima, and the various women in whose houses Maria takes lodgings after leaving George Venables, all of whom are victims of the law’s inequality. The second is that financial independence, but more importantly, work, is essential to self-esteem and to virtue. As Wollstonecraft remarks in the *Vindication*, “virtue, says reason, must be acquired by *rough* toils, and useful struggles with worldly *cares*” (Wollstonecraft 1975, 143, note 5). These convictions underlie her suggestion that women could very usefully be trained for a number of professions, including medicine, education, politics, and business.

Wollstonecraft was aware that women’s financial independence could not be achieved without large-scale changes in the organization of society. To this end she advocated sweeping changes in marriage and property laws, urged the introduction of a system of public coeducation, and suggested, even if somewhat tentatively, that it was not sufficient for women to be citizens, they must also be represented in government. Her view was that these were matters for public, not private, concern and felt that until such changes were introduced women would be unable to achieve self-governance in either their social or their affective relationships. However, Wollstonecraft had no clear proposals for how the changes she advocated might be compatible with the maternal “duties” that she seemed to think were natural to women. For this reason feminists recently have raised two serious objections to Wollstonecraft’s conception of self-governance.

First, it is often claimed that Wollstonecraft’s ideal of self-governance is an ideal attainable only by middle-class women. In the *Vindication*, for example, her description of a harmonious and fulfilling domestic scene includes reference to a woman “discharging the duties of her station with perhaps merely a servant-maid to take off her hands the servile part of the household business” (Wollstonecraft 1975, 254-55), and it is evident that without such domestic

help Wollstonecraft herself would not have been able to devote much of her time to the business of writing.<sup>22</sup> The character of Jemima in *The Wrongs of Woman* indicates that Wollstonecraft became increasingly aware of this problem. Nevertheless, much of the narrative is occupied with the story of the middle-class Maria, who promises, in exchange for Jemima's support, to better her situation. Is the self-governance of educated middle-class women therefore to be achieved at the expense of working-class women who can relieve them of the "servile" aspects of their duties?<sup>23</sup> This question remains pertinent today.

Second, it is argued that despite the importance of Wollstonecraft's critique of property and marriage laws and of her argument that the rights of citizenship must be extended to women if they are going to be expected to fulfill what are after all social duties (the rearing of children), her critique of civil society works by trying to extend the contractual relations of civil society into the private sphere rather than by challenging the association between the masculine/feminine distinction and the tensions within the liberal public sphere between justice and love, contract and kinship, individuality and community. In other words, Wollstonecraft claims for women the capacities of the self-governing male citizen, arguing that relations within the family between men and women and parents and children must be founded on the same basis as relations between equal citizens within the public sphere. Given this starting point, Wollstonecraft can only acknowledge the ethical and political implications of women's specific embodiment by arguing that women have specific *social* duties—namely, their maternal duties—to which any activities in which they engage in the public sphere must be seen as secondary. Wollstonecraft's conception of self-governance thus compels her to preserve the distinction between public and private spheres and consequently to accept the oppressive representation implicit in this distinction of women's bodies as passive and bound to nature.<sup>24</sup>

These criticisms can begin to be addressed by first assessing Wollstonecraft's views on maternity. Wollstonecraft's remarks about women's maternal duties need to be read fairly carefully for the following reasons. First, it is clear that these remarks play a very important strategic function in her argument in defense of equality. For as was indicated above, what she seeks to show is that even granting the premises of the Rousseauian argument, the conclusions thought to follow from it do not in fact do so. It should not be assumed, however, that Wollstonecraft simply endorses these premises. Second, that Wollstonecraft does not straightforwardly endorse these premises is evident from a number of conflicting remarks she makes about maternity. It is true that she does claim that "the care of children in their infancy is one of the grand duties annexed to the female character by nature" (Wollstonecraft 1975, 265). However, she also claims that "natural affection, as it is termed, I believe to be a very faint tie, affections must grow out of the habitual exercise of a mutual sympathy" (Wollstonecraft 1975, 266). And in *The Wrongs of Woman* Maria

remarks that “*in the present state of women* it is a great misfortune to be prevented from discharging the duties, and cultivating the affections” of a mother (Wollstonecraft 1980b, 2: 154 *Italics added*). These remarks suggest that Wollstonecraft’s views on maternity pertain to a very specific context, one in which women had few options as far as contributions to society were concerned, apart from the raising of children; in which, given the lack of genuinely reciprocal relationships between men and women, the only outlet for women’s affections was in their relationships with their children; in which women were by default primarily responsible for the raising of children because there was no legal or social obligation for men to do so; and in which many leisured women effectively abrogated their responsibilities toward their children.

Given the complexity of this context, Wollstonecraft’s views on maternity need to be read on a number of different levels. At one level they are addressed to men, in particular to middle-class men, in the hope of convincing them that the education of their daughters and wives will in fact better enable them to perform those duties that she concedes are “annexed to the female character by nature.” At another level, by distinguishing between affections and duties and by suggesting that maternity is a *social* duty, not a merely “natural affection,” Wollstonecraft aims to contest the assumption that maternity and self-governance are incompatible virtues by showing that the kind of affections, responsibilities, and skills that arise in the context of child rearing are essential to self-governance. On this basis she can then argue that “maternal duties” are not incompatible with the duties of a citizen. At yet another level, this distinction also enables Wollstonecraft to suggest that women should be able to fulfill their obligations to society in ways other than, or additional to, maternity. Although Wollstonecraft was very well aware that this would not be possible without vast changes in the structure of society, it seems clear that she thought the difficulty was a question of social organization rather than of women’s natures.

If this reading of Wollstonecraft’s views on maternity is correct, what are its implications for the claim that her ideal of self-governance is an ideal attainable only by educated middle-class women? It is important to distinguish between the issue of whether class distinction is a necessary feature of Wollstonecraft’s conception of self-governance and the issue of what she herself says on the matter. As far as Wollstonecraft herself is concerned, she seems to voice a number of somewhat conflicting views, probably reflecting the limited range of conceivable options that were available to her, indeed to all women. In a number of places she suggests that self-governance has less to do with what she calls a woman’s “station” than with a woman’s dignity and independence. In the *Vindication*, for example, she claims that virtue seems to be most prevalent among poor, uneducated working-class women (Wollstonecraft 1975, 171), and in *The Wrongs of Woman* Maria writes to her daughter: “I fondly hope to see you . . . possessed of that energy of character which gives



dignity to any station; and with that clear, firm spirit that will enable you to choose a situation for yourself, or submit to be classed in the lowest, if it be the only one in which you can be the mistress of your own actions." (Wollstonecraft 1980b, 2: 149). Wollstonecraft was aware, however, that poor women, in addition to suffering the "wrongs of woman," also suffered the burdens of the poor more generally, and she believed that poor women were unlikely to be the mistresses of their own actions until both class and sex inequalities are abolished. Yet elsewhere Wollstonecraft seems to align self-governance with "cultivated sensibilities" and to take the existence of servants for granted, even though she is insistent that servants must be regarded and treated as fellow human beings. It is clear, though not surprising, that Wollstonecraft did not really come to terms with the question of who would care for the children of professional women. It is therefore quite possible that she assumed another woman, probably a servant, would take up some of the responsibility. Despite this, I would deny that Wollstonecraft's conception of self-governance presupposes class distinction. For her ideal of self-governance is not committed to the idea that only professional women can achieve independence, even though she is adamant that a certain degree of education is essential for all women. Rather, at the heart of Wollstonecraft's concern with women's independence are the ideas that women must have the liberty and resources to assume responsibility for their own actions and that self-governance is not inconsistent with maternity, affection, or interdependence.

Where does this leave Wollstonecraft with respect to the public/private distinction and with respect to the alleged masculinity of her conception of self-governance? Again, Wollstonecraft's views need to be read carefully. On the one hand, she was aware that, "in the present imperfect state of society," men's equality and reason were achieved at the expense of women's liberty and autonomy and that reason and sensibility, justice and love, citizenship and kinship, and individuality and community seemed irreconcilable, particularly for women. I have tried to show that because she *was* concerned with the ethical implications of sexual difference, Wollstonecraft tried to articulate a conception of women's self-governance that does not simply identify self-governance with one side of these oppositions (the "masculine" side), but rather tries to reconcile them, as well as to disentangle them from their association with the masculine/feminine distinction.<sup>25</sup> I have also argued that Wollstonecraft was aware that her recommendations for women would require massive reorganization of the public sphere, including the political representation of women's interests. That Wollstonecraft in 1792 could not envisage the full extent of this reorganization should not lead us to conclude that she underestimated its difficulty or immensity.

But what is to be made of Wollstonecraft's agreement with Rousseau that the family is the foundation of civil life? And what is to be made of her concession that women's comparative physical weakness may make them more

“dependent,” and so perhaps less able to achieve virtue, than men? (Wollstonecraft 1975, 80, 109). To some extent this concession should be read as a response to Rousseau’s attempt to link his claims about “feminine” reason and virtue to the supposed “natural” passivity and dependency of the female body. Wollstonecraft seeks once again to show that one may accept Rousseau’s premises without accepting his conclusion—that virtue is different for the different sexes. This interpretation is supported by Wollstonecraft’s frequent arguments to the effect that the physical incapacities to which many women are subject are the direct result of their subordination—in particular, of ideals of feminine beauty that actively discourage women from developing physical strength and skill. However, in light of the fact that Wollstonecraft’s text wavers between the character ideal conception of self-governance that I have highlighted in this article and the idea that self-governance is a matter of reason’s sovereignty over the body, this concession also indicates that Wollstonecraft was still struggling in the grip of the dominant cultural representation of women’s bodies as passive, heteronomous bodies. This is perhaps why in the *Vindication* she could not see a clear solution to the problem of women’s subordination except a transformation of the family. The events of Wollstonecraft’s life after the publication of the *Vindication*, as well as her later writings, indicate that she became somewhat less optimistic about this solution. But the fact that feminists today are still coming to terms with the problem she so acutely diagnosed, and with some of her solutions, shows that many of the conflicts Wollstonecraft experienced and expressed in trying to articulate an adequate ideal of self-governance for women are still with us.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Genevieve Lloyd and Michaelis Michael for helpful discussions during the writing of this paper.

1. I use the terms “autonomy” and “self-governance” interchangeably in this article, although only the latter term was used by Wollstonecraft. My tendency, however, is to stick with Wollstonecraft’s own term.

2. This view is expressed by Claire Tomalin (1974). Between the time of the publication of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 and her death following childbirth in 1797, Wollstonecraft had lived in revolutionary circles in Paris during the French Revolution; had had an affair with the American, Imlay who was the father of her first child, Fanny; attempted suicide on two occasions following the break up of her relationship with Imlay; and lived with and then married William Godwin, who was the father of her second child, Mary (Shelley). By the standards of her time, and indeed even by our own, her life was extremely unconventional. It is partly because of this that the nature of her personal life has often provided the main context for the reception and interpretation of her work since the publication of *Vindication*.

3. See especially Miriam Kramnick’s introduction to the 1975 edition of *Vindication*, and Moira Gatens (1991a). Although my interpretation of Wollstonecraft differs quite

markedly from that of Gatens, her discussion in this article helped provoke a rethinking of my views on Wollstonecraft.

4. An exception to the standard contemporary feminist interpretation of Wollstonecraft's work is that of Jean Grimshaw (1989) which I discovered after writing this article. Grimshaw does not specifically discuss Wollstonecraft's views on autonomy, but she does argue that a careful reading of Wollstonecraft's other writings, apart from the *Vindication*, is essential if we are to understand the tensions and shifts in her views.

5. For a scholarly account of the changing associations within the history of philosophy between the reason/passion and public/private oppositions and ideals of masculinity and femininity, see Lloyd (1984).

6. This unfinished novel, which Wollstonecraft tells the reader is the story "of woman, rather than of an individual," is set in an asylum—Wollstonecraft's metaphor for women's "civil death" in eighteenth-century English society (see note 12 below). Its three central characters are Maria, a woman who has been committed and had her child abducted by an unfaithful and impecunious husband (George Venables) seeking to gain control of her inheritance; Jemima, Maria's warder, a working-class woman whose basically virtuous character has been deadened by poverty, sexual abuse, hard labor, and lack of affection; and the ambivalent Darnford, Maria's lover, who seems to embody both the virtues and the vices that Wollstonecraft discovered in men.

7. See also Moria Gatens (1986) and the discussion of Wollstonecraft in Chapter 1 Gatens (1991b).

8. Gatens' arguments in both her articles on Wollstonecraft (Gatens 1986, 1991a) seem to assume that a recognition of the ethical significance of sexual difference entails the idea of a specific feminine ethic. This assumption does not seem to me to be self-evident.

9. Rousseau's proposals concerning the education of women and his attempts to justify these proposals through an account of woman's "nature," occupy most of book V of *Emile* which is an account of the appropriate education for Sophie, Emile's future wife and helpmeet (Rousseau 1974). In book V it becomes clear that the concern with equality that preoccupies Rousseau in the *Social Contract* and the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* is a concern with men's equality only, as women are specifically excluded from the rights and duties of citizenship. In connection with this, feminist commentators have pointed out how Sophie's education is designed not around her own needs but around the idea that her role is to be Emile's complement and subordinate: "Nature herself has decreed that woman, both for herself and her children, should be at the mercy of man's judgment. . . . A woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to man" (Rousseau 1974, 328). For a sample of some of these commentaries see the discussions of Rousseau in Lloyd (1984), Martin (1985), Okin (1979), and Pateman (1988).

10. Wollstonecraft's interest in the doctrine of human perfectibility seems to have been aroused by her association with the dissenting theologian and reformer Dr. Richard Price. For an account of this association at various periods of Wollstonecraft's life, see Tomalin (1974).

11. In contrast to Gatens (1991b, 23), who argues that Wollstonecraft's critique of the inequities of Rousseau's educational proposals for women does not take into account the integral role that these proposals play in Rousseau's overall social and political project, the following argument is intended to show that Wollstonecraft was well aware of this connection. In fact, what Wollstonecraft seeks to show is that Rousseau's proposals for women's education will actually undermine his social and political project.

12. In many places in the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft is quite scathing about the coquettish, pleasure seeking, self-obsessed behavior of these women who could take as long as five hours to get dressed! Her observations as well as her animosity arose from her experience working as governess to the children of a landed Irish aristocratic couple, the Kingsboroughs. Wollstonecraft felt that there was little hope, short of revolution, for changing the ways of the aristocracy. However, she hoped to influence the middle classes, to whom, she claims, her book is addressed. Wollstonecraft was appalled by the way in which the newly leisured middle-class women were attempting to emulate their aristocratic sisters, but, despite her scorn, the argument of the *Vindication* is that the behavior of these women has only one source—their social position. As Miriam Kramnick makes clear, (Wollstonecraft 1975), the social position of both middle- and working-class women and the opportunities open to them were dramatically different at the end of the eighteenth century from what they had been one hundred years previously. The rapid expansion of industrialization and mechanization in production had shifted much productive work out of the domestic economy and out of family-based businesses and into factories removed from the home. As a result, middle-class women, who previously had played a significant role in the economy, had become a leisured class dependent entirely on their husbands for economic support and “protection,” while working-class women spent increasingly long hours outside the home, performing badly paid menial work with very little time left to care for their children. While working-class women thus ruined their health in factories, middle-class women ruined their health through idleness and through attempts to achieve ideals of “feminine” beauty. Women’s economic disenfranchisement became “civil death” when Blackstone announced in 1757 that “the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband” (quoted by Kramnick in Wollstonecraft 1975, 34). As I will suggest later in this article, sensitivity to this context makes more comprehensible some of Wollstonecraft’s more drastic pronouncements against pleasure.

13. According to Rousseau, feminine virtue must be enforced in two ways: first, by ensuring that women not only remain in the private sphere but also lead retiring, almost reclusive lives: “the genuine mother of a family is no woman of the world, she is almost as much of a recluse as the nun in her convent” (Rousseau 1974, 350), and second, through the iron grip of social opinion. Rousseau asserts in *Emile*: “A man has no one but himself to consider, and so long as he does right he may defy public opinion; but when a woman does right her task is only half finished, and what people think of her matters as much as what she really is” (Rousseau 1974, 328).

14. Compare Wollstonecraft (1980b, 1: 137): “By allowing women but one way of rising in the world, the fostering the libertinism of men, society makes monsters of them, and then their ignoble vices are brought forward as proof of inferiority of intellect.”

15. The attitude of stoic resignation is most evident in Wollstonecraft’s early novel *Mary, A Fiction*, originally published in 1788 (Wollstonecraft 1980a). At the end of the novel the heroine’s response to sorrow and sexual injustice is resignation mixed with joy at the prospect of death and the thought that “she was hastening to that world *where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage*” (Wollstonecraft 1980a, 68). Even here, however, Wollstonecraft’s irony gets the better of her resignation.

16. Compare the following remarks, “Standing armies can never consist of resolute robust men; they may be well-disciplined machines, but they will seldom contain men under the influence of strong passions, or with very vigorous faculties; and as for any depth of understanding I will venture to affirm that it is as rarely to be found in the army as amongst women . . . The great misfortune is this, that they both acquire manners before

morals, and a knowledge of life before they have from reflection any acquaintance with the grand ideal outline of human nature. The consequence is natural. Satisfied with common nature, they become a prey to prejudices, and taking all their opinions on credit, they blindly submit to authority" (Wollstonecraft 1975, 106).

17. Compare Maria's picture of her uncle who "inculcated, with great warmth, self-respect, and a lofty consciousness of acting right, independent of the censure of the world," (Wollstonecraft 1980b, 2: 128).

18. Compare Wollstonecraft (1975, 202) on woman "becoming the slave of her own feelings, she is easily subjugated by those of others."

19. In a footnote in the *Vindication* that anticipates contemporary feminist critiques of liberalism, Wollstonecraft suggests that Rousseau's picture of the solitary individual in the "state of nature" overlooks "the long and helpless state of infancy" and so the necessary sociality of human life (Wollstonecraft 1975, 94). Many contemporary feminists have argued that liberal political theory, particularly in its more libertarian guises, is deeply flawed because it assumes a mistaken conception of human subjectivity, namely, that human beings spring out of the earth fully developed like mushrooms, to paraphrase Hobbes. For a sample of these critiques, see Pateman (1988); Jaggar (1983); and Tapper (1986). Whether this characterization is applicable to contemporary forms of liberalism and social contract theory is, of course, the subject of considerable debate among liberals, communitarians, and feminists.

20. See, for example, her letter to him written in Hamburg en route to England from Scandinavia (Wollstonecraft 1977, Letter LXVII, 251). Wollstonecraft seemed to regard commerce as inherently corrupting. Compare her portraits of George Venables and the young Darnford in *The Wrongs of Woman* (Wollstonecraft 1980b).

21. Compare also Wollstonecraft (1977, Letter III, 150-51): "Mixing with mankind, we are obliged to examine our prejudices, and often imperceptibly lose, as we analyze them."

22. Wollstonecraft employed a French nursemaid named Marguerite to care for Fanny.

23. This objection is raised by Gatens (1991a), Martin (1985), and Eisenstein (1981, chap. 5).

24. As was mentioned earlier, this criticism is raised by Gatens (1986, 1991a, and 1991b). Carole Pateman also makes a similar criticism in Pateman (1988).

25. In this respect, her work anticipates some of the preoccupations of contemporary feminist philosophers interested in moral theory and theories of justice. See, for example, Benhabib (1987), Okin (1989); and Young (1990).

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