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To Be Necessary: The Remarkable Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

Abstract

Although overshadowed by her daughter, Mary Shelley, in the public imagination, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) stands as a significant figure in her time who left a significant legacy. Her writings advocating for women's education, equal rights, and career opportunities established her as the progenitor of the modern women's rights movement. Wollstonecraft's ideas resonated in the era of the Atlantic world revolutions and laid the foundation for later advances of women in the Western world; therefore, it is important to study her contributions in the present.

Keywords

Mary Wollstonecraft, women's history, women's studies, feminism, Atlantic world revolutions, French Revolution

Phillips: The Remarkable Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

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To Be Necessary: The Remarkable Life of Mary Wollstonecraft

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by

Elisabeth J. Phillips
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“I do not want to be loved like a goddess . . . but I wish to be necessary to you.”¹ On January 2, 1794, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote those words to her lover, Gilbert Imlay, who had begun stepping away from their relationship with increasing frequency. Two years later, on August 16, 1796, she would write to her second lover, William Godwin, “You talk of the roses which grow profusely in every path of life – I catch at them; but only encounter the thorns.”² With these two quotes, one can clearly see the depth of feeling and the immense intellect Mary Wollstonecraft possessed. She was taken from the world prematurely, dying of complications from childbirth at age thirty-eight. She left behind several published writings, two young daughters, and her husband. It was far more established a legacy than most women of her time, yet nevertheless Mary fell into relative obscurity, overshadowed by the international success enjoyed by her youngest daughter. The infant who eventually became Mary Shelley is renowned the world over; this itself is a glorious legacy. Yet Mary Wollstonecraft accomplished more than enough in her own right to establish a legacy as a figure of the Enlightenment and a radical woman in her time. As one studies Wollstonecraft, one unconsciously seeks the exceptional circumstances that divided her from her sex and the established gender roles of her time. An exploration of Mary Wollstonecraft’s life reveals that she established herself in a manner worthy of recognition through her writings and her legacy.

In Mary’s unfinished work *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* the titular character is introduced through the sufferings of her childhood. The neglect, poverty, and abuse that defined Maria’s upbringing were written from experience. Mary Wollstonecraft, born on April 27, 1759, was the second oldest of her parents’ seven children. Edward Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft and Roger Ingpen, *The Love Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft to Gilbert Imlay* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott Company, 1908), 22.

² Ralph M. Wardle, ed. *Godwin & Mary: Letters of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), 15.

Dixon were both from upper middle-class families that were financially affluent and wanted for little. Edward apprenticed to his father, also named Edward, as a weaver of handkerchiefs.³ Elizabeth's family were wine traders in Ireland.⁴ While Mary's father had a stable career in addition to an inheritance of a rough sum of £10,000 – equitable to upwards of £600,000 or \$785,172 in the 21st century – the genteel lifestyle it afforded them was not to last.⁵ Edward developed a crippling gambling addiction that drained the family's coffers, forcing several moves around England. "Almost before Mary became aware of her position as a lady, the family began to slide back down the social scale."⁶

From birth, however, it had been made clear to Mary that she was unwanted, as she was given to a wet nurse for the first year of her life and remained largely ignored for the remainder of her time in the Wollstonecraft home. The first move occurred when Mary was around nine years old and Edward relocated the Wollstonecraft household to Beverley. His alcoholism and abusive behavior destroyed any semblance of peace in the family. In later years Mary would recall "sleeping on the landing and shielding her mother from his blows," which taught her only "to despise her father and pity her mother."⁷ In Mary's fifteenth year, Edward moved the family again; this time, to Hoxton, where they would remain for only a little over a year before relocating to Laugharne, Wales. Mary described that time as the family "consigned to a farm whilst he (Edward) spent most of his time in London 'on business or pleasure.'"⁸ Inevitably, the Wollstonecrafts would be uprooted once more, for in Mary's eighteenth year, they were

³ Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ Kate Chisholm, "Biography," in *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*, ed. Nancy E. Johnson & Paul Keen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 3.

⁶ Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

returning to Hoxton. Here Mary would finally be given the opportunity to leave the abusive nest of her childhood and strike out on her own, an independent and self-sufficient young woman.

These formational experiences would color Mary's understanding of gender roles for the rest of her life. She viewed her father as cruel and brutal, a mere beast, while her mother was weak and simpering. Mary had been neglected from infancy by both of her parents, starved for the attention they lavished upon her older brother, Edward, and on each successive sibling. This resulted in an extreme insecurity that would greatly affect her relationships and conduct. The first time this is evidenced in Mary's writing was in correspondence with her dear friend, Jane Arden, during their teenage years, when Mary lashed out at Jane through fear and jealousy for their friendship. Jane had only been speaking to other friends, but Mary saw it as a threat to her position in Jane's life. Mary's second friendship was formed at Hoxton through an introduction provided by her mentor, Mrs. Clare, to a previous young ward of theirs, one Fanny Blood. Here Mary's immediate tendency to fully commit to people can be clearly seen, for having decided to be Fanny's friend, she made it so. However, "Fanny was no more able than Jane to sustain a passionate sentimental relationship of the kind Mary wanted; she found her eagerness greeted with an increasingly cool response."⁹ While Mary began concocting plans of living with Fanny, Fanny herself was pining for a young businessman who had expressed interest in her; his discovery of her family's poverty, however, led to his passions cooling even as hers remained fierce. Fanny held no particular regard for Mary beyond that of a casual friend, even admitting that she did not prize her above her sisters, Everina and Eliza. Mary and Fanny would continue a correspondence for several years, although no letters survive. Much more infrequent, yet still ongoing, was communication with Jane Arden. Through these two young women, Mary received

⁹ Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 14.

an education in relationships, one she desperately needed in light of her dysfunctional upbringing.

The intellectual education of Mary Wollstonecraft was a subtle, casual affair drawn out over many years. As the family's coffers could not support private tutors or governesses, Mary was not formally educated to the standard of the class of her birth. Instead, she would be repeatedly blessed to find sympathetic parties, friends and neighbors, who opened their libraries for her to use. In this, Mary was able to obtain a more intellectual education than her sex would typically permit, as the standards for wealthy girls was to prepare them for marriage and little else. It was in Beverley that she met the first of her hosts. The Arden family, particularly Mr. Arden and his daughter, Jane, included Mary in their philosophical discussions.¹⁰ While in Beverley, Mary had the opportunity to attend a day school. This education did not provide her with the thorough instruction of grammar or boarding schools as it focused on preparing her to manage a home by limiting the subjects to reading, writing, and some arithmetic. However, this did not disappoint Mary, as she praised this experience when reflecting on her adolescence. "Years later, when she considered national education, she praised the 'country day-school' for its inclusiveness and preparation for citizenship, in marked contrast to the great exclusive male public schools teaching vice and tyranny."¹¹

Mary's second host family was found in Hoxton, when she was first introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Clare. Mr. Clare was a retired reverend and was said to have severe physical disabilities. The couple eagerly took in Mary, allowing her to remain with them for extended periods and caring for her mind as much as for her physical needs. "They encouraged Mary to spend her time with them and gave her books to read: probably Milton and Shakespeare,

¹⁰ Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 7.

¹¹ Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2000), 12.

Thomson and Pope, perhaps Johnson's *Rasselas*, with its message of quiet fortitude."¹² Many years later, Mary recalled the Clares "as a 'very amiable Couple' who 'took some pains to cultivate my understanding (which had been too much neglected) they not only recommended proper books to me, but made me read to them; - I should have lived very happily with them if it had not been for my domestic troubles, and some other painful circumstances, that I wish to bury in oblivion."¹³ After leaving Hoxton and the influence of the Clares, Mary would remain largely self-taught for the rest of her life. Roy Porter identified several phases in her life, as "Politicization came gradually, as she made her way through a turbulent life and became successively an educationalist (*Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*), a novelist (*Mary, a Fiction* (1788)), a children's writer (*Original Stories from Real Life* (1788)) and a reviewer for the *Analytical Review*."¹⁴ Mary wrote passionately on subjects as they arose; in addition to Porter's list, she was also an advocate for prison reform in her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. In learning about Mary's childhood education, the direction of her life is made clear. She was raised on Enlightenment books, including treatises that shook the world. It was then only natural that she would discover an extraordinary career, although the path forward would be tumultuous.

The sparks of independence that erupted from Mary's first forays into literature were fanned into embers upon her adulthood and the taking of a position. At nineteen, Mary became the companion to an older woman, Sarah Dawson, a role known to be trying because of the demands of the mistress. Mary would never shy away from difficult circumstances, remaining in this position for over four years and traveling around England's social centers of Windsor,

¹² Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 13.

¹³ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*, 22.

¹⁴ Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 335.

Southampton, Bath, and Bristol.¹⁵ Out of context, it is shocking that a young woman would leave home before it became necessary, but with an understanding of the Wollstonecraft family dynamics, it is only surprising that Mary did not leave earlier. During her tenure working for Mrs. Dawson, Mary maintained correspondence and close relationships with both Fanny and Jane, visiting them several times. This created no small amount of tension when her family discovered that she had been nearby visiting Fanny but made no note of it to them; as a rule, she also neglected to write to any of her family members on a regular basis.¹⁶ This was not due to a lack of care, but rather misunderstandings and contrasting personalities on both sides. It would take Elizabeth's deteriorating health to bring Mary home, as it was her duty as the eldest daughter to care for her mother. Mary did nurse her mother for the several months she lay dying, but their relationship never recovered, and when Elizabeth finally passed it cannot be said that Mary truly grieved. Indeed, when Elizabeth Wollstonecraft was buried on April 19, 1782, Mary did not give any eulogy.¹⁷

Rather than acting as an end, her mother's death became a new beginning for Mary. She was now freed from nursing and from any duties to the family. Her eldest brother, Ned, handled the family's finances in addition to taking in Everina and Eliza for the purposes of arranging their marriages. Mary's father remarried so quickly as to be inappropriate and took her youngest brother, Charles, with him and his new bride, Lydia. After this event, it could only be said that Mary loathed her father more than she had previously. Nevertheless, Mary was finally able to fulfill her dream of moving in with Fanny. Mary stayed with the Blood family for more than a year until she was drawn away by the need of her sister, Eliza. Despite their prickly

¹⁵ Chisholm, "Biography," in *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*, 4.

¹⁶ Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*, 38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

relationships, Mary did care for her siblings. The events that followed make up some of the most controversial in successive studies of Mary's life. Eliza had married a man named Meredith Bishop in October 1782 and gave birth to their daughter, Mary Elizabeth Frances, in August 1783. The pregnancy and childbirth were both difficult, and it would soon become clear that Eliza suffered from post-natal depression. This condition was yet unknown in the medical field with all symptoms attributed to hysteria, and women suffering from it were frequently committed to insane asylums. According to historian Janet Todd, Mary did not want this fate to befall her little sister. In an attempt to help, she moved in with the Bishops, but her observations of the relationship between Eliza and Bishop were flawed, heavily influenced by memories of Edward Wollstonecraft. However, other historians, including Claire Tomalin, have suggested that Mary was invited by Bishop to assist her sister. "Meredith had no women in his family to call on to supervise the house, the care of the child or the management of Eliza. By November he was in despair and sent for his sister-in-law."¹⁸ Regardless of how the situation began, the solution Mary concocted was to remove Eliza from both Bishop and baby Mary. Eliza had begun to improve, but Bishop was now taken ill, and even Mary herself was admitting to a muddled mental state in her letters. Mary and Eliza would take flight from Bermondsey to Hackney by coach. The consequences were severe, as Eliza became more distraught – said to have "bit her wedding ring to pieces" - and little Mary, whether by coincidence or as a direct result of her mother's absence, died before her first birthday.¹⁹

Eliza remained with Mary, and the two were soon joined by Everina as they opened a girl's school in Newington Green. This venture was unsuccessful and forced to close after only a few years in 1786 due to low enrollment, for the trio were not known as gifted instructors. Mary

¹⁸ Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 24.

¹⁹ Chisholm, "Biography," in *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*, 4-5.

was soon forced to take a leave of absence from the school when she received word that Fanny, not long married to an English merchant, was pregnant. Anxiety filled Mary at the news, for she was well-aware of Fanny's delicate composition after decades of poverty, and she feared the birth would kill her. Although Mary had immediately set out to travel to Fanny's home in Lisbon, she failed to arrive before labor set in and her worst fears confirmed. Not only did Fanny die, but so too did her baby. While Fanny had not been her closest friend – that title would always reside with Jane Arden – she had been the dearest companion of Mary's life, and the loss was devastating. The collapse of the Newington Green school not long after was yet another blow; even if Mary did not desire to remain a teacher, the school had been her creation. It was time for her to transition once again to a new role.

In 1786, Mary gained employment by a Lady Kingsborough in Ireland as governess to her daughters. The experiences of that position in both instruction and observation would fuel Mary's first publication, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*. Everina and Eliza encouraged her to write, and Mary soon secured a publisher, Joseph Johnson, who she had met while teaching in Newington Green.²⁰ Aside from publishing her own works, Mary also served as a reviewer for Johnson's magazine. Their relationship was no ordinary employer-employee dynamic, but rather one of closeness and dear regard. "Johnson's complex relationship to Wollstonecraft covered financial support, mentoring, shared investment in sensibility, and intense friendship."²¹ Thus, Mary Wollstonecraft began her career as a writer, one that provided ample income and secured her independence. While she was not wealthy, she was self-sufficient, and her words were making some impact on the world.

²⁰ Chisholm, "Biography," in *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*, 5.

²¹ David Fallon, "Joseph Johnson," in *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*, ed. Nancy E. Johnson and Paul Keen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 29.

One cannot imagine that Mary found herself eager to find love after all that she had witnessed in her family and friends. She had experienced few flirtations in her lifetime, no genuine offers of marriage, and in her early thirties likely had discounted the possibility entirely. Love, or some facsimile of it, was brought upon her in the form of Gilbert Imlay, an American soldier and writer. The couple met in Paris during the French Revolution when Imlay was thirty-nine and Mary thirty-four.²² Imlay, as time would show, was a scoundrel through and through, but Mary thought them a star-crossed pair. Mary had initially traveled to Paris on funds earned through the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in December 1792. She was fleeing an awkward situation where she had proposed a polyamorous relationship with artist Henry Fuseli and his wife, but the later rebuffed Mary's advances.

Despite the circumstance that propelled her to Paris, for a writer yearning for social revolution, there was no better place to be than at the heart of the events occurring in France. These experiences would themselves fuel another work, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, which was a distinctly unique record of the French Revolution because Mary was watching the ramifications unfold before her eyes. Flirtations were exchanged between Mary and Imlay, passions rose, and soon the couple were fleeing Paris together for the countryside, living as a couple. Although there is no indication that they ever wed, Mary began using Imlay's surname as protection from the sanctions levied against the British. It would not be long before she was pregnant. Despite this news, or perhaps because of it, Imlay began spending more time away from Mary on travels, while she finished her work on the French Revolution. On May 14, 1794, Mary gave birth to her firstborn daughter, who she named Fanny after her dearest friend. The reunification this event brought between

²² Andrew Cayton, *Love in the Time of Revolution: Transatlantic Literary Radicalism & Historic Change, 1793-1818* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 1.

Imlay and Mary was short-lived, and this time there would be no restoration. Despondent at her circumstances, Mary attempted suicide by laudanum. She was interrupted before the action could prove fatal, perhaps by her maid Marguerite, who pleaded with Mary to remember her daughter. One of Mary's greatest attributes was the depth of her care for those around her, and the thought of abandoning her baby destroyed any suicidal urges in that moment.

Following this first suicide attempt, Mary would travel overseas with little Fanny and Marguerite from France to Scandinavia, traveling through Sweden, Norway, and Denmark in succession. Her goal was to locate and recover a ship stolen from Imlay that was rumored to carry silver bullion. Mary recorded her adventures in *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. First published in 1796, it would be the last of her writings that Mary would see go to print during her lifetime. Her letters are detailed, recording the people she met and the places she visited; Mary felt compelled to push for larger causes such as prison reform after seeing the conditions of prisoners abroad. While the ship was never found, her letters were worthy treasures of their own, particularly after they were published in January 1796 and ignited interest in writings of travel. In late 1795, the true end came to Mary's relationship with Imlay when she discovered he had taken up residence with another woman. Completely heartbroken, Mary attempted suicide for the second and final time, with much more thorough planning. Having returned to London, Mary walked late at night to Putney Bridge through a downpour, ensuring her dress was completely soaked through, before jumping into the River Thames. Her life was saved by two fishermen who were nearby. They followed her into the waters and pulled her to safety. As Kate Chisholm observed, "The horror of trying, and failing,

to drown herself purged any remaining suicidal urges and Mary was at last able to tell Imlay, ‘I now solemnly assure you, that this is an eternal farewell.’”²³

In her recovery from Imlay, Mary would not be long without another partner. As Mary wrote and published, she was being noticed by a printer named William Godwin. He was unimpressed with her works at first, and equally unimpressed by her character during their initial meeting. It was in early 1796 that the couple met at the home of Mary Hays, a common friend and noted intellectual of their social sphere. Far from love at first sight, William and Mary grew gradually in their regard for one another over several months. Once they had overcome initial impressions, Wollstonecraft and Godwin formed what Roy Porter considers to be “the Enlightenment’s premier husband-and-wife team.”²⁴ While they were not married for most of their relationship, and in fact never lived together, they were truly inseparable, as demonstrated by the wealth of letters they left behind. Only a handful of letters from Godwin’s catalog have gone missing over the years, and the ones that remain tell the compelling love story from the couple’s own pens. As slow as their romance may have begun, they were quickly married roughly a year after their meeting on March 29, 1797. Mary was already pregnant with their child and had even begun using Godwin’s name.

Mary’s second pregnancy would not be nearly so easy as her first. The first complication arose with Mary’s age, as she was thirty-eight, an advanced age to be having a child. This significantly increased the risk of complications during and following pregnancy. Few details remain regarding Mary’s experiences during the pregnancy, but details of her delivery and subsequent death have been preserved. Mary’s labor was long and arduous, culminating in a difficult childbirth. One can only wonder at her thoughts during those long hours. Mary had been

²³ Chisholm, “Biography,” in *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*, 9.

²⁴ Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, 4.

through childbirth once before, but she would certainly have noticed the differences in this delivery. She was also likely thinking of her family; Mary had personally seen what the loss of mother or child did to those left behind. Perhaps she worried for Fanny, who would be left with no mother or father should she die. The baby Mary would birth that day would become her greatest legacy. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, named for her mother, was a tiny baby – perhaps preterm - and not thought likely to survive. During the minutes following the delivery, the placenta did not deliver properly, and the midwife was not able to remove it entirely. As a result, infection set in before doctors could arrive, although their ability to save Mary at this point is debatable. Mary Wollstonecraft passed away from septicemia on September 10, 1797, after ten long days of suffering.

Godwin was left as a single father with two little girls – one a small child not his own, and the other a red-faced newborn. Only a few months after Mary’s death, Godwin published his *Memoirs of the Author of “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,”* described by Andrew Cayton as having “engaged Wollstonecraft’s character more than her writing and highlighted the affair with Imlay as a turning point in her life. Godwin’s account remains the most influential interpretation of the Wollstonecraft-Imlay relationship.”²⁵ A blessing found in Mary’s premature death is that her husband, Godwin, took it upon himself to publish her writings. Many men burned the correspondence of their deceased partners, but Godwin found himself doing the opposite, preserving Mary’s voice for generations to come. Thus, Mary’s two world-shattering love affairs are preserved in clear detail and from her own heart. Both entanglements were the subject of much public scandal upon publication. “Why? Why did anyone care about the problems of two people when the world as a whole was turned upside down? They cared because

²⁵ Cayton, *Love in the Time of Revolution*, 4.

Mary Wollstonecraft was no ordinary Clarissa, the heroine of the eponymous novel by Samuel Richardson. She, of all women, should have known better.”²⁶ Cayton concludes, “Wollstonecraft’s personal life became notorious in part because she was a woman who had dared to attack the patriarchal culture that denied women the rights and responsibilities to which they were entitled as human beings. They cared because William Godwin made them care . . . They cared because Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Imlay were prominent literary figures in the cultural capital of the late-eighteenth-century Atlantic world.”²⁷ While Mary’s love affairs brought upon her a level of scandalous notoriety, they serve as evidence of her radical thought in jettisoning the societal standards of the day.

Mary’s legacy can be divided into two categories: the first, her writings and publications. The trials on Mary Wollstonecraft’s mental health throughout her life were fierce – beginning with the abusive household of her childhood to the tragedies that befell her loved ones in young adulthood and culminating with Imlay’s betrayal - but they led to her picking up a pen and sending those words to the world. During her lifetime, she would publish ten works, ranging from novels to treatises to children’s stories. Seven additional publications would be printed posthumously by her husband, William Godwin. Throughout the decade that she wrote, Mary’s ideals remained consistent, although there was natural expansion and growth in her thought as she learned more through reading and discussions. Her best-known works were rebuttals to prominent publications by men in which she demonstrated weaknesses in their arguments and provided alternatives more favorable in her eyes.

The first work published was *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* in 1787. “Mary Wollstonecraft gloried in woman as nurse of the rising generation and, on that elevated basis,

²⁶ Cayton, *Love in the Time of Revolution*, 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

expressed her profound contempt for simpering, whimpering, flirtatious spoilt coquettes – those who, in making love their vocation, ‘always retain the pretty prattle of the nursery, and do not forget to lisp, when they have learnt to languish’, thus turning sexuality into the Trojan horse of oppression.”²⁸ To prevent the continuation of this cycle, Mary’s work explores the best educational methods and options for girls to be properly prepared in fulfilling their duties as wives and mothers without the loss of their reason. She argued “that women can offer the most effective contribution to society if they are brought up to display sound morals, character and intellect, rather than superficial social graces.”²⁹ The education of women thus begins in the nursery, she argues, where “it is only in the years of childhood that the happiness of a human being depends entirely on others – and to embitter those years by needless restraint is cruel.”³⁰ In this, her own childhood experiences can be clearly identified as she urges the reader to raise their children in the opposite manner of her parents. Mary, who has not yet had a child, still keenly identifies the importance of relationships and influence on babies for their eventual conduct as adults. “To conciliate affection, affection must be shown, and little proofs of it ought always to be given – let them not appear weaknesses, and they will sink deep into the young mind, and call forth its most amiable propensities. The turbulent passions may be kept down till reason begins to dawn.”³¹ Mary critiques Locke’s thoughts on education because “the parents must have subdued their own passions, which is not often the case in any considerable degree.”³² Indeed, a propensity to over-discipline children for innocent mistakes or “giddy tricks” will lead to the children learning concealment and deception to prevent punishment from occurring in the

²⁸ Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, 330.

²⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), i.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

³² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

future.³³ What then does she consider to be punishable offenses? “A violation of truth, cruelty to animals, inferiors, or those kinds of follies which lead to vice.”³⁴ Mary insists that children should be spoken to with answers befitting their age; never humored or talked down to, but rather engaged on a level they can understand. Through these foundational experiences, she is then able to go through several stages of a girl’s life, exploring how young girls should be prepared for society and life so that they can be successful in their roles.

Mary’s most prominent works would become her two *Vindications*. Her first, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, was a rushed affair, written over a few weeks in November 1790 and published in two editions shortly thereafter. At one point, Mary despaired of ever completing the work, but Johnson’s willingness to discontinue the publication spurred her onward. “Calling on Johnson for the evening ‘for the purpose of relieving herself by an hour or two’s conversation,’ she shared her thoughts, and Johnson insisted she could abandon the work ‘if it would contribute to her happiness.’ This unexpected response ‘piqued her pride.’ She speedily completed the work for publication by November, and a second edition followed before the end of the year.”³⁵ Although Mary’s *Vindication* was not the only work written in response to Burke, it was one of the fastest, and her unique stance contributed to its quick success. According to Gertrude Himmelfarb, “She achieved some celebrity in 1790 with her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, the first of several replies to Burke’s *Reflections*, anticipating Paine’s *Rights of Man* and establishing her credentials as an intellectual and a radical.”³⁶ In this first *Vindication*, Mary “cast Burke as a toady to power and an apologist for oppression.”³⁷ She

³³ Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Fallon, “Joseph Johnson,” *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*, 31.

³⁶ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 109.

³⁷ Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, 335.

“reproved his ‘moral antipathy to reason.’”³⁸ In this, it is clear that while this first *Vindication* is a rebuttal to Burke’s *Reflections*, the focus is truly on Burke himself.

It is her second *Vindication*, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, that established Mary’s name in Enlightenment thought. The boldness of her words caused no small amount of uproar. “She demanded equal rights for women, but her efforts were condemned as having been influenced by the ‘pernicious’ French Revolution.”³⁹ Mary called for female suffrage, equal education, and increased rights for women. In her protracted independence and stable career, Mary was the anomaly among her sex, but she desired the same opportunities for all women. Scholar Deborah Weiss claims that “Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* is revolutionary because it conceives of women as an unjustly underdeveloped segment of mankind – that is, as a unique class of human beings whose moral and intellectual development has been delayed as a result of the culturally constructed idea of ‘sexual character,’ or gendered traits in our parlance.”⁴⁰ Mary begins her second *Vindication* with a letter addressed to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, Bishop in Autun, France, where she states her purpose for writing: “Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice.”⁴¹ Her supporting arguments for this thesis trace back to her first work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*. If women are expected to be the first educators of their children, sons and daughters alike, they cannot be expected to do so properly

³⁸ Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, 449.

³⁹ Shirley Elson Roessler & Reny Miklos, *Europe 1715-1919: From Enlightenment to World War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 87.

⁴⁰ Deborah Weiss, *The Female Philosopher and Her Afterlives: Mary Wollstonecraft, the British Novel, and the Transformation of Feminism, 1796-1811* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3.

⁴¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, ed. Anne Mellor and Noelle Chao (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 16-17.

without first being instructed themselves. Mary's work, once again, clearly relates to her formational experiences in childhood; she saw the worst of parents, so she would call for proper parenting through equal rights for women that allowed them to raise their children with the fullest opportunities. In this, it is more than a mere call for educational equality, but an overarching equality that would see both sexes given the same opportunities to contribute to society, beginning with the nuclear family unit.

Much less well-known are her fictional books and her history of the French Revolution. During her lifetime, Mary wrote two novels and a children's book in addition to *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*. The latter is unique and immeasurably valuable because it was written from her own perspective gained while in Paris as the events of the French Revolution were unfolding. Mary asserted at the beginning of the work that it was critical for the context of her work, and therefore the French Revolution as a whole, to be properly established so that these events can be then understood.

Contemplating then these stupendous events with the cool eye of observation, the judgement, difficult to be preserved unwarped under the pressure of the calamitous horrors produced by desperate and enraged factions, will continually perceive that it is the uncontaminated mass of the french nation whose minds begin to grasp the sentiments of freedom, that has secured the equilibrium of the state; often tottering on the brink of annihilation; in spite of the folly, selfishness, madness, treachery, and more fatal mock patriotism, the common result of depraved manners, the concomitant of that servility and voluptuousness which for so long a space of time has embruted the higher orders of this celebrated nation. By thus attending to circumstances, we shall be able to discern clearly that the revolution was neither produced by the abilities or intrigues of a few individuals; nor was the effect of sudden and short-lived enthusiasm; but the natural consequence of intellectual improvement, gradually proceeding to perfection in the advancement of communities, from a state of barbarism to that of polished society, till now arrived at the point when sincerity of principles seems to be hastening the overthrow of the tremendous empire of superstition and hypocrisy, erected upon the ruins of gothic brutality and ignorance.⁴²

⁴² Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (London: J. Johnson, 1795), vi-viii.

As seen in this brief selection of her writings, Mary wrote often and passionately. When a cause or movement caught her attention, she would not refrain from issuing calls for reform or critiques of prominent figures. While at times her writing was rushed, it was nevertheless effective. Through her calls for reforms and women's rights, Mary established herself as a figurehead for the movement that would not see true success until the twentieth century. Mary also gained the role of the "female philosopher," a position that, "in death, she came to embody all that British society feared about enlightened women and 'modern philosophy.'"⁴³ For a time, Mary was the pinnacle of everything feared by Western society, but over the years she would grow into an icon of progress and equality heralded by generations of radicals.

The second aspect of her legacy is found in her children. Her eldest, Fanny, inherited only tragedy from Mary, dying by suicide at age twenty-two. Although Fanny was loved by her mother, she came to view the end of her life as a preferred course for much the same reason that Mary herself had attempted suicide. Fanny had lost both of her parents, yet she was still loved and cared for by her mother's dearest companions, including her stepfather and even Johnson, her mother's publisher, who provided for her in his will.⁴⁴ Mary had worried about Fanny even when she was still a small child. In her *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, she wrote "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, whilst 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 –

⁴³ Weiss, *The Female Philosopher and Her Afterlives*, 4-5.

⁴⁴ Fallon, "Joseph Johnson," in *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*, 36.

Hapless woman! What a fate is thine!”⁴⁵ This statement echoes of premonition, as if Mary innately knew that regardless of how well she prepared her daughter, Fanny’s life would end in tragedy, much like her namesake. Fanny traveled to a little town outside Bristol when she discovered that she was pregnant outside of wedlock. In the same movement as her mother, she took a lethal dose of laudanum, but true to her designs there was no one to stop her. The fragment of her suicide note, discovered by her body at an inn in Swansea, read:

I have long determined that the best thing I could do was to put an end to the existence of a being whose birth was unfortunate, and whose life has only been a series of pain to those persons who have hurt their health in endeavouring to promote her welfare. Perhaps to hear of my death will give you pain, but you will soon have the blessing of forgetting that such a creature ever existed as - ⁴⁶

Although the bottom half of the letter was missing, Fanny’s sentiments remained clear. She saw her existence as a trial and burden to those around her, an enduring struggle that would be alleviated only with her passing. Clearly, Mary’s premature death had irreparably harmed Fanny. Mary’s love and concern for her eldest daughter was never communicated to her, and thus the little girl developed unhealthy and untrue perceptions of herself. A general favoritism for her younger sister, Mary Godwin, would have continued the harm, as little Mary was seen to be the embodiment of the great Godwin and Wollstonecraft, the hope for the continuation of their work. Mary Wollstonecraft and Fanny mirrored each other, but the latter did not inherit her mother’s tenacity and strength that allowed her to persevere through similar circumstances. Instead, Fanny would succeed where Mary had failed, and by ending her life fulfilled her mother’s worst fears.

⁴⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 66.

⁴⁶ Janet Todd, *Death & the Maidens: Fanny Wollstonecraft and the Shelley Circle* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2007), 3.

For her youngest daughter, Mary's presence would loom over little Mary Godwin's childhood and adolescence. Wollstonecraft was the famed of the pair, one who created a dominating standard and legacy for the young Mary to uphold. The little girl, who would become as revolutionary as her mother, would live up to – and even exceed – this mandate, pioneering a genre of literature and penning an enduring classic in *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. A trait shared by mother and daughter was the ability to create massively complex works in a matter of months, when others would have taken years. Neither Mary was afraid to go against the status quo, living as they saw fit while logically arguing for their beliefs. Both women experienced immense tragedy, and yet through these hardships created masterpieces of literature that would have ramifications extending through future generations.

Over the last few decades, interest has piqued in Wollstonecraft's life, leading to the publication of numerous works. Reasons for writing on Mary Wollstonecraft are diverse, ranging from traditional biographies to dissections of her writings and philosophy. She naturally became a figurehead for the feminist movement, a connection studied in detail by Barbara Taylor in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. The most prominent biographies written on Wollstonecraft have been surveyed by Brenda Ayres in *Betwixt and Between: The Biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Of these, it is Janet Todd's *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* that stands as one of the most thorough accounts on Wollstonecraft's life. These are a fraction of the publications that analyze her life, with subjects ranging from politics to gender studies to philosophy.

A survey of Mary Wollstonecraft's life leads to several important conclusions. First, most individuals in the 21st century would not be able to identify Wollstonecraft by her name, face, or works. An initial introduction to Mary often comes through familiarity with her daughter, Mary

Shelley. Second, the remarkable achievements of her life would be fully appreciated as the context in which they occurred is rightly understood. It is against the backdrop of her society's norms that Mary's philosophy and radicalism become apparent. Third, while she did not leave as pronounced a mark as Locke, Burke, or Hume, Mary's name nevertheless is included in more thorough studies of Enlightenment thought. Her works proved immeasurably influential in their prime and have since been used throughout the subsequent centuries as scholars have begun to recognize the enormity of her contributions.

Mary Wollstonecraft is widely regarded as the mother of the modern women's rights movement. Her advocacy for women's education, equal rights, and career opportunities brought a floundering movement to the forefront. Her calls to action would gain momentum in the subsequent centuries as they would be propelled to fruition. Women were given the right to vote in England in 1928. In 1956, they were given equal pay to men protected by the law. The Sex Discrimination Act in 1975 made discrimination against women on the basis of their sex in employment and education illegal. Although most of these reforms would not arrive until nearly two centuries after her death, Wollstonecraft's efforts in establishing the women's rights movements cannot be discounted. Her words were heard across the world in a time of revolution. Everything seemed possible as the French and Americans had both overthrown their governments, and reforms were sweeping the Western world. Mary took advantage of her time and her intellect to speak out against the injustices she discerned in the world around her. Her relative obscurity in the modern world, although tragic, does not discount the importance of her life. Mary Wollstonecraft once wrote that she wanted to be necessary; in her writings, her children, and her legacy, she proved to be essential to the course of history.

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