MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE PROBLEMATIC OF SLAVERY

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> A traffic that outrages every suggestion of reason and religion . . . [an] inhuman custom.
>
> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

> I love most people best when they are in adversity, for pity is one of my prevailing passions.
>
> *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*

History and texts before *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

In 1790, Mary Wollstonecraft became a major participant in contemporary political debate for the first time, due to her evolving political analysis and social milieu. In contrast to *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in 1790 which drew primarily on the language of natural rights for its political argument, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) favoured a discourse on slavery that highlighted female subjugation. Whereas the *Rights of Men* refers to slavery in a variety of contexts only four or five times, the *Rights of Woman* contains over eighty references; the constituency Wollstonecraft champions – white, middle-class women – is constantly characterized as slaves. For her major polemic, that is, Mary Wollstonecraft decided to adopt and adapt the terms of contemporary political debate. Over a two-year period that debate had gradually reformulated its terms as the French Revolution in 1789 that highlighted aristocratic hegemony and bourgeois rights was followed by the San Domingan Revolution that primarily focused on colonial relations.

Wollstonecraft's evolving commentaries on the status of European women in relation to slavery were made in response to four interlocking events: first, the intensifying agitation over the question of slavery in

England that included the case of the slave James Somerset in 1772 and Phillis Wheatley's visit in 1773; second, the French Revolution in 1789; third, Catherine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790) that forthrightly argued against sexual difference; and fourth, the successful revolution by slaves in the French colony of San Domingo in 1791.

This discourse on slavery employed by Wollstonecraft was nothing new for women writers, although it was now distinctly recontextualized in terms of colonial slavery. Formerly, in all forms of discourse throughout the eighteenth century, conservative and radical women alike railed against marriage, love, and education as forms of slavery perpetrated upon women by men and by the conventions of society at large.

Wollstonecraft's earlier works, received discourse, and the advent of the abolitionist debate

Prior to the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft had utilized the language of slavery in texts from various genres. In *Thoughts* (1786), an educational treatise, Wollstonecraft talked conventionally of women subjugated by their husbands who in turn tyrannize servants, 'for slavish fear and tyranny go together' (Wollstonecraft, 1787: 63). Two years later, in *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), her first novel written in Ireland during trying circumstances as a governess, the heroine decides she will not live with her husband and exclaims to her family: 'I will work . . ., do anything rather than be a slave' (Wollstonecraft, 1788: 49).[1] Here as a case in point, Wollstonecraft inflects slavery with the orthodox conception of slavery that had populated women's texts for over a century – marriage was a form of slavery; wives were slaves to husbands.

Wollstonecraft's early conventional usage, however, in which the word slave stands for a subjugated daughter or wife was soon to complicate its meaning. From the early 1770s onward, a number of events from James Somerset's court case to Quaker petitions to Parliament and reports of abuses had injected the discourse of slavery into popular public debate.

The Abolition Committee, for example, was formed on 22 May 1787, with a view to mounting a national campaign against the slave trade and securing the passage of an Abolition Bill through Parliament (Coupland, 1933: 68). Following the establishment of the committee, abolitionist Thomas Clarkson wrote and distributed two thousand copies of a pamphlet entitled 'A Summary View of the Slave-Trade, and of the Probable Consequences of Its Abolition' (Clarkson, 1808: 276–85 and *passim*). Wollstonecraft's friend, William Roscoe, offered the profits of his poem 'The Wrongs of Africa' to the committee. The political campaign was launched on the public in full force (Craton, 1974: chapter 5).

Less than a year after the Abolition Committee was formed, Wollstonecraft's radical publisher, Joseph Johnson, co-founded a radical periodical entitled the *Analytical Review*. Invited to become a

reviewer, Wollstonecraft's reviews soon reflected the new influence of the abolition debate (Sunstein, 1975: 171). One of the earliest books she critiqued in April 1789 was written by Britain's most renowned African and a former slave; Wollstonecraft was analyzing a text based on specific experiences of colonial slavery for the first time. Its title was *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African Written by Himself*, in which Equiano graphically chronicles being kidnapped from Africa, launched on the notorious Middle Passage, and living out as a slave the consequences of these events.

While the *Analytical Review* acquainted the public with old and new texts on the current debate, Wollstonecraft was composing an anthology for educating young women that also reflected her growing concerns. Published by Joseph Johnson and entitled *The Female Reader: or Miscellaneous Pieces for the Improvement of Young Women*, the textbook cum anthology included substantial extracts promoting abolition. It included Sir Richard Steele's rendition from *The Spectator* of the legend of Inkle and Yarico, Anna Laetitia Barbauld's hymn-in-prose, 'Negro-woman', about a grieving mother forcibly separated from her child, and a poignant passage from William Cowper's poem, 'The Task', popular with the contemporary reading public:

> I would not have a slave to till my ground,
> To carry me, to fan me while I sleep,
> And tremble when I wake, for all the wealth
> That sinews bought and sold have ever earn'd.
> No: dear as freedom is, and in my heart's
> Just estimation priz'd above all price,
> I had much rather be myself the slave,
> And wear the bonds, than fasten them on him
> (Wollstonecraft, 1789: 29–31, 171, 321–2).

A series of events then followed one another in rapid succession that continued to have a bearing on the reconstitution of the discourse on slavery. In July 1789, the French Revolution erupted as the Bastille gaol was symbolically stormed and opened. Coinciding with the French Revolution came Richard Price's polemic, Edmund Burke's response, and then Wollstonecraft's response to Burke and her review of Catherine Macaulay's *Letters on Education*. Meanwhile, in September and the following months, Wollstonecraft reviewed in sections the antislavery novel *Zeluco: Various Views of Human Nature, Taken from Life and Manners, Foreign and Domestic*, by John Moore. Let me back up and briefly elaborate how all this attentiveness to colonial slavery affected public debate and Mary Wollstonecraft's usage of the term.

The French Revolution

On 4 November 1789, Wollstonecraft's friend, the Reverend Richard Price, Dissenting minister and leading liberal philosopher, delivered

the annual sermon commemorating the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 to the Revolution Society in London. The society cherished the ideals of the seventeenth-century revolution and advocated Dissenters' rights. This particular year there was much for Dissenters to celebrate. Basically, Price applauded the French Revolution as the start of a liberal epoch: 'after sharing in the benefits of one revolution,' declared Price [meaning the British seventeenth-century constitutional revolution], 'I have been spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious' (Price, 1790: 55). The written text of Price's sermon, *Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, was reviewed by Wollstonecraft in the *Analytical*'s December issue. A year later, on 1 November 1790, Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that attacked both Price and his sermon was timed to be published on the anniversary of Price's address. It soon became a topic of public debate. Several responses quickly followed.

As the first writer to challenge Burke's reactionary polemic, Wollstonecraft foregrounded the cultural issue of human rights in her title: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. It immediately sold out. Not by political coincidence, she composed this reply while evidence about the slave trade was being presented to the Privy Council during the year following the first extensive parliamentary debate on abolition in May 1789. *The Rights of Men* applauded human rights and justice, excoriated abusive social, church and state practices, and attacked Burke for hypocrisy and prejudice. She argued vehemently for a more equitable distribution of wealth and parliamentary representation. By 4 December the same year, Wollstonecraft had revised the first edition and Johnson rapidly turned out a second one in January 1791 (Tomalin, 1974).

In *The Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft also frontally condemns institutionalized slavery:

> On what principle Mr. Burke could defend American independence, I cannot conceive; for the whole tenor of his plausible arguments settles slavery on an everlasting foundation. Allowing his servile reverence for antiquity, and prudent attention to self-interest, to have the force which he insists on, the slave trade ought never to be abolished; and, because our ignorant forefathers, not understanding the native dignity of man, sanctioned a traffic that outrages every suggestion of reason and religion, we are to submit to the inhuman custom, and term an atrocious insult to humanity the love of our country, and a proper submission to the laws by which our property is secured (Wollstonecraft, 1790: 23–4).

In *The Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft explicitly argues for the first time that no slavery is natural and all forms of slavery, regardless of context, are human constructions. Her scorching words to Burke about his situating slavery 'on an everlasting foundation' (in the past and the future) sharply distinguishes her discourse from her more orthodox invocations of slavery in *Thoughts* and *Mary*. Contemporary events

have begun to mark the discourse on slavery in a particular and concrete way.

In particular, Wollstonecraft challenges the legal situation. In *The Rights of Men*, she graphically represents slavery as 'authorized by law to fasten her fangs on human flesh and . . . eat into the very soul' (Wollstonecraft, 1790: 76). None the less, although she supports abolition unequivocally, she considers 'reason' an even more important attribute to possess than physical freedom. 'Virtuous men,' she comments, can endure 'poverty, shame, and even slavery' but not the 'loss of reason' (Wollstonecraft, 1790: 45, 59).

The same month that Wollstonecraft replied to Burke, she favourably reviewed Catherine Macaulay Graham's *Letters on Education*. Macaulay's argument against the accepted notion that males and females had distinct sexual characteristics was part of the evolving discourse on human rights that connected class relations to women's rights. Macaulay also expropriated the language of physical bondage and wove it into her political argument. Denouncing discrimination against women throughout society, *Letters* also rails against 'the savage barbarism which is now displayed on the sultry shores of Africa' (Ferguson, 1985: 399). Macaulay takes pains to censure the condition of women 'in the east' – in harems, for example – and scorns the fact that men used differences in 'corporal strength . . . in the barbarous ages to reduce [women] to a state of abject slavery' (Ferguson, 1985: 403–4). Macaulay's historical timing separates her from earlier writers who used this language; by 1790 slavery had assumed multiple meanings that included the recognition, implied or explicit, of connexions between colonial slavery and constant sexual abuse.

In *The Rights of Men*, however, Wollstonecraft had not exhibited any substantial attention to the question of gender. But, after she read Macaulay, her discourse on gender and rights shifted. Notably, too, as one edition after another of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* hit the presses, Johnson was concurrently publishing Wollstonecraft's translation of Christian Gotthilf Salzmann's *Elements of Morality for the Use of Children*. In the preface to this educational treatise, Wollstonecraft pointedly inserted a passage of her own, enjoining the fair treatment of Native Americans. In terms of democratic colonial relations as they were then perceived, Wollstonecraft rendered Salzmann more up to date. There was, however, still more to come before Wollstonecraft settled into writing her second *Vindication* in 1792.

First of all, information about slavery continued to flow unabated in the press. According to Michael Craton, 'William Wilberforce was able to initiate the series of pioneer inquiries before the Privy Council and select committees of Commons and Lords, which brought something like the truth of slave trade and plantation slavery out into the open between 1789 and 1791' (Craton, 1974: 261). None the less, in April 1791, the Abolition Bill was defeated in the House of Commons by a vote of 163 to 88, a massive blow to the antislavery campaign.

Just as much, if not perhaps more to the point, in August of that year, slaves in the French colony of San Domingo (now Haiti) revolted, another crucial historical turning point. The French Caribbean had been 'an integral part of the economic life of the age, the greatest colony in the world, the pride of France, and the envy of every other imperialist nation' (James, 1963: ix).

The conjunction of these events deeply polarized British society. George III switched to the proslavery side, enabling faint-hearted abolitionists to change sides. Meanwhile, radicals celebrated. This triumphant uprising of the San Domingan slaves forced another angle of vision on the French Revolution and compounded the anxiety that affairs across the Channel had generated. Horrified at the threat to their investments and fearful of copycat insurrections by the domestic working class as well as by African Caribbeans, many panic-stricken whites denounced the San Domingan Revolution (Klingberg, 1926: 88–95).

Although no one spoke their pessimism outright, abolition was temporarily doomed. When campaigners remobilized in 1792, they were confident of winning the vote and refused to face the implications of dual revolutions in France and San Domingo. Proslaveryites, now quite sanguine, capitalized on the intense conflicts and instigated a successful policy of delay. A motion for gradual abolition – effectively a plantocratic victory – carried in the Commons by a vote of 238 to 85.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

The composition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* started in the midst of these tumultuous events, its political ingredients indicating Wollstonecraft's involvement in all these issues. Indeed, Mary Wollstonecraft seems to have been the first writer to raise issues of colonial and gender relations so tellingly in tandem.

More than any previous text, the *Rights of Woman* invokes the language of colonial slavery to impugn female subjugation and call for the restoration of inherent rights. Wollstonecraft's eighty-plus references to slavery divide into several categories and subsets. The language of slavery – unspecified – is attached to sensation, pleasure, fashion, marriage and patriarchal subjugation. It is also occasionally attached to the specific condition of colonized slaves.

Wollstonecraft starts from the premise that all men enslave all women and that sexual desire is a primary motivation: 'I view, with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex. . . . For I will venture to assert, that all the causes of female weakness, as well as depravity, which I have already enlarged on, branch out of one grand cause – want of chastity in men' (1792: 37, 138).

Men dominate women as plantocrats dominate slaves: 'As blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the

former only want slaves and the latter a play-thing. . . . All the sacred rights of humanity are violated by insisting on blind obedience; or, the most sacred rights belong *only* to man' (44, 83). In permeating the text with the idea that women are oppressed by all men, Wollstonecraft accords all women, including herself, a group identity, a political position from which they can start organizing and agitating.

However, when Wollstonecraft begins to argue at a concrete level, when she confronts, say, the 'foibles' of women, that sense of group solidarity dissolves. Notable examples are women's too ready acceptance of inferior educations, female vanity and an excessive display of feeling, exemplified in the following passages on: First, education:

> Led by their dependent situation and domestic employments more into society, what they learn is rather by snatches; and as learning is with them, in general, only a secondary thing, they do not pursue any one branch with that persevering ardour necessary to give vigour to the faculties, and clearness to the judgment. (23)

Second, self-involvement:

> It is acknowledged that [females] spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, – the only way women can rise in the world, – by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act: – they dress; they paint, and nickname God's creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio! – Can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world? (10).

With such attention to vain practices and little intellectual encouragement, women can scarcely be expected to lead (nor do they lead) sensible lives:

> Nor can it be expected that a woman will resolutely endeavour to strengthen her constitution and abstain from enervating indulgencies, if artifical notions of beauty, and false descriptions of sensibility, have been early entangled with her motives of action. (43).

In censuring how white middle-class women act, Wollstonecraft views them as a homogenized group – 'I view, with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex. . . . It is time to effect a revolution in female manners' (37, 45). She separates herself off from them as a mentor-censor.

Wollstonecraft's self-distancing arises from an understandably positive view she holds of her own ability to transcend situations that she generally deplores in the female population. Since she had broken through prescribed barriers in a rather independent fashion from an

early age, she deplores the same lack of resourcefulness in other women; she sees no valid reason why other women cannot act the same way, her sense of female conditioning somewhat precarious. Or perhaps she understands her own social construction and her past inability to remove herself from certain scenarios – when she worked as the irascible Mrs Dawson's companion, for example. She could be projecting anger at her own passivity in earlier situations.

This sense of herself as set apart comes out even more clearly, though somewhat indirectly, in a footnote to the second *Vindication*. In the text proper, Wollstonecraft is referring to the length of time it will take for slaves – like white women presumably – to gather themselves up from the condition of slavery:

> Man, taking her body, the mind is left to rust; so that while physical love enervates man, as being his favourite recreation, he will endeavour to enslave woman: – and, who can tell, how many generations may be necessary to give vigour to the virtue and talents of the freed posterity of abject slaves. (76–7).

In the footnote Wollstonecraft quotes herself, stating that slavery always constitutes an untenable human condition: 'Supposing that women are voluntary slaves – slavery of any kind is unfavourable to human happiness and improvement'. (77). Then she purportedly quotes from an essay by a contemporary, Vicesimus Knox, as follows:

> The subjects of these self-erected tyrants [i.e., those who establish what norm of human affairs will be, either 'some rich, gross, unphilosophical man, or some titled frivolous lady, distinguished for boldness, but not for excellence'] are most truly slaves, though voluntary slaves; but as slavery of any kind is unfavourable to human happiness and improvement, I will venture to offer a few suggestions, which may induce the subjugated tribes to revolt, and claim their invaluable birthright, their natural liberty. (77)

However, as it turns out, Wollstonecraft has altered Knox's quotation to underscore her own political orientation. In his essay, Knox was not talking of women, let alone calling them slaves.

Wollstonecraft's fiery response to female domination echoed in Knox's essay – that women should act independently and ignore strictures – is probably why the essay appeals so much to her. Entitled 'On the fear of appearing singular', one of the essay's most telling passages encourages such (singular) thought, no matter the consequences or the social ridicule:

> It may not be improper to premise, that to one individual his own natural rights and possessions, of whatever kind, are as valuable as those of another are to that other. It is his own happiness which is concerned in his choice of principles and conduct. By these he is to stand, or by these to fall.

> In making this important choice, then, let the sense of its importance lead him to assert the rights of man. These rights will justify him in acting and thinking, as far as the laws of that community, whose protection he seeks, can allow, according to the suggestions of his own judgment. He will do right to avoid adopting any system of principles, or following any pattern of conduct, which his judgment has not pronounced conducive to his happiness, and consistent with his duties; consistent with those duties which he owes to his God, to his neighbour, to himself, and to his society. Though the small circle with whom he is personally connected may think and act differently, and may even despise and ridicule his singularity, yet let him persevere. His duty to freedom, his conscience, and his happiness, must appear to every man, who is not hoodwinked, superior to all considerations (Knox, 1782: 21–2).

This sense of importance that Wollstonecraft attached to independent or singular thought – a cornerstone of bourgeois individualist ideology – helps to explain her apparent lack of emotional solidarity with the white women she roundly castigates throughout the second *Vindication*. Although her intentions are unreservedly positive – to restore natural rights to all women – her approach is not entirely compassionate. She sees all around her that women 'buy into' societal norms. Because she has resisted these norms and short-circuited her own social construction, she deplores women who have not followed suit.

This separation that Wollstonecraft maintains from other women prevents her from seeing the implications of women's response, especially in the common frivolous practices she condemns. She cannot see that flirting and vanity could have a positive dimension, could sometimes be deployed by these very women as strategies of resistance, as devious ways of assuming a measure of power. Wollstonecraft, instead, sees the trope of the coquette, for example, as exclusive evidence that women accept their inferiority. The following passage on Rousseau's ideas about women as sexual objects illustrates Wollstonecraft's dislike of teasing behaviour. 'Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquetish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire' (1792: 25). Wollstonecraft sees women as slaves to men not just because of male sexual lust, but because women enslave themselves through an obsession with fashion and an eager acceptance of inadequate education. She cannot see female foibles in any other context than female self-trivialization.

Furthermore, the blame that Wollstonecraft attaches to white women for their vanity is complicated by her assessment of the relationship between African women and dress:

> The attention to dress, therefore, which has been thought a sexual propensity, I think natural to mankind. But I ought to express myself with more precision. When the mind is not sufficiently opened to take

> pleasure in reflection, the body will be adorned with sedulous care; and ambition will appear in tattooing or painting it.
>
> So far is this first inclination carried, that even the hellish yoke of slavery cannot stifle the savage desire of admiration which the black heroes inherit from both their parents, for all the hardly earned savings of a slave are expended in a little tawdy finery. And I have seldom known a good male or female servant that was not particularly fond of dress. Their clothes were their riches; and, I argue from analogy, that the fondness for dress, so extravagant in females, arises from the same cause – want of cultivation of mind (1792: 186–7).[2]

Wollstonecraft equates self-conscious dressing with lack of intellectuality. In doing so, she reveals her own acceptance (and construction) as a contemporary woman, bombarded by and receptive to such ideas about Africans as David Hume's:

> There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. . . . Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men (Hume, 1898: III, 252).[3]

Wollstonecraft does not take into account either white women's resentment about powerlessness, their displacement of anger, their projection of personal power and pleasure, or, in the case of Africans and African Caribbeans, some customary cultural practices.[4] Given, too, her protestations to Sophie Fuseli about her scrupulous conduct toward the Swiss painter, Henry Fuseli (and his toward Mary Wollstonecraft), her attack on coquetry might also betray a rather personal subtext.[5]

Wollstonecraft's views, then, of white women's behaviour in particular, and of sexual difference in general are complex and politically self-contradictory.[6] Justifiably, she thinks of herself positively breaking through social constraints while the vast majority of women conforms to a restrictive mandate. She sees this process continuing as a result of practices that reach back to antiquity:

> Man, from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion, and his invention to shew that she ought to have her neck bent under its yoke; she, as well as the brute creation, was created to do his pleasure (49).

These contentions parallel ideas expressed in Catherine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* where she argues that women are historically oppressed because of situation and circumstances; the only item distinctly separating men and women is physical strength which men have used to exercise freely their physical desires. The fine differences between them seem to be as follows: Catherine Macaulay

wants women to stop being giddy but recognizes their social construction. At one level, Wollstonecraft concurs with this and even uses the language of 'circumstances' to explain vain and flirtatious female behaviour. But she seems much less patient – more desperate even – with women's situation. Catherine Macaulay is calmer, less rhetorically intense in her analysis, perhaps because with a certain amount of middle-class privilege in her life, the situation has affected her less.

Wollstonecraft's argument from antiquity has further implications, too. She contends that this age-old subjugation for unspecified reasons enables men's desire to transform women into tools for sexual lust. These beaten-down women with bent necks resemble the brute creation, brute a synonym in contemporary vocabulary for slaves. Thus, white women, slaves and oxen become part of a metonymic chain of the tyrannized; this association of colonial slavery with female subjugation opens up new political possibilities. The bent yoke, for example, suggesting excessive maltreatment also suggests insecurity on the part of the oppressor, a combination that precipitates insurrection. The question that permeates the image is: who will eternally bear a brutelike status? Remember, too, that the San Domingan Revolution is less than a year old so Wollstonecraft's words inscribe a threat of resistance in them: 'History brings forward a fearful catalogue of the crimes which their cunning has produced, when the weak slaves have had sufficient address to over-reach their masters' (167).

Moreover, Wollstonecraft deliberately uses the language of slavery to define women's status: 'When, therefore, I call women slaves, I mean in a political and civil sense; for, indirectly they obtain too much power, and are debased by their exertions to obtain illicit sway' (167). This imposed status, this condition of subjugation provokes women into the flirtatious behaviour she dislikes, but also provokes duplicitous strategies of gaining power. In histories of slave insurrections, the ear of the master – necessary for finding things out and for facilitating the timing of rebellions – was frequently obtained through such 'illicit sway'. While decrying the domestic sabotage of conquetry, she affirms a time-honoured slave strategy and the need for resistance. Perhaps more importantly, Wollstonecraft is suggesting collective opposition, but can only do so through positing the resistance of slaves and the London mob. Put bluntly, to suggest that women politically resist – although she herself does – only seems possible for Wollstonecraft at an oblique level, given her social conditioning.

Wollstonecraft also re-emphasizes that the historical subjugation of women is linked to male desire for sexual as well as political and social power. In doing so, she fuses the oppression of white women and black female slaves as well as slaves in general. A striking passage from *The Rights of Woman* based on the trope of sexual abuse exemplifies the point. It includes one of the few specific references to contemporary African slaves in *The Rights of Woman*, or in any of Wollstonecraft's texts for that matter.

> Why subject [woman] to propriety – blind propriety, if she be capable of acting from a nobler spring, if she be an heir of immortality? Is sugar always to be produced by vital blood? Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them, when principles would be a sure guard, only to sweeten the cup of man? (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 82–3).

The passage announces that slaves and white women are subjected to tyrannical practices that have no purpose beyond the paltry one of 'sweeten[ing] the cup of man'. On the one hand, slaves should not be expected to give 'vital blood' to produce sugar and cater to white British colonial-patriarchal whim and profiteering. On the other hand, the 'cup of man' symbolically intimates that a female (opponent) is doing the filling. This sexual innuendo is consistent with Wollstonecraft's complex socio-sexual discourse throughout *The Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft's awareness of the generic use of *man* further problematizes her provocative phraseology and the relationship she hints at between sweetening men's cup and 'poor African slaves'. If only as faint shadows, black female slaves and the specific kind of sexual persecution they endure are ushered into view, interjecting themselves as sexual victims. Aware of political and personal levels, Wollstonecraft subtly denotes sexuality as one of the 'prejudices' that brutalize white and black women alike. As Cora Kaplan suggests, 'We must remember to read *A Vindication [of the Rights of Woman]* as its author has instructed us, as a discourse addressed mainly to women of the middle class. Most deeply class-bound is its emphasis on sexuality in its ideological expression, as a mental formation, as the source of woman's oppression' (Kaplan, 1986: 48).

Sex and resistance interact. A coquette's cunning that can overpower (manipulate) men, links to subterfuges and plots by slaves, especially by black female slaves who double as objects of desire. Or at least Wollstonecraft might unconsciously recognize that undue attentiveness to one's person means that desire is suppressed and life is lived on almost self-destructive, self-contradictory planes; excess vanity is not as foolish as she superficially thinks. Thus sexuality becomes the site of black female and by implication white female resistance. Women use the very object of desire – themselves, their bodies – to thwart those who desire.

Wollstonecraft knows, too, that external forces cause sexual and racial difference. She articulates this understanding in a positive review of Samuel Stanhope Smith's *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (1787). She agrees with Smith that climate and social conditions are the principal causes of difference among men and women throughout the world, but that, above and beyond these differences, human beings constitute a unity (Johnson, 1788: Vol. 2, 431–9).[7] She again pinpoints superior male physical strength as the reason for this ongoing situation.

Thus she denies the conservative argument of innate difference and

necessary cultural separations – that God created essentially distinct beings.[8] Such subjected people as African-Caribbean slaves and white Anglo-Saxon women are *prevented* from developing and exercising their reason; certain environments have precipitated their alleged propensity for passion. Once again, Wollstonecraft is arguing opposing sides of a question. Whereas attention to dress proves that Africans, conceived in a totalized way, are an unmeditative people, in this reading they became people historically cut off from intellectual pursuit. With a change in circumstances, she argues, reason can replace alleged naiveté and infantilism.[9]

Wollstonecraft's intervention regarding sexually abused female slaves is not surprising. Through reviews and personal reading, Wollstonecraft was well attuned to this phenomenon. In 1789, a review of Equiano's *Travels* centrestages her horror at 'the treatment of male and female slaves, on the voyage, and in the West Indies, which make the blood turn its course' (Johnson, 1789: 28). Equiano categorically indicts 'our clerks and many others at the same time [who] have committed acts of violence on the poor, wretched, and helpless females' (Equiano, 1789: 69). In chronicling his feelings on finally leaving Montserrat, Equiano harrows readers by undergirding his despondency, disgust, and (silently) his sense of impotence: 'I bade adieu to the sound of the cruel whip and all other dreadful instruments of torture; adieu to the offensive sight of the violated chastity of the sable females, which has too often accosted my eyes' (Equiano, 1789: 121).

Besides her intimacy with Equiano's first-hand experiences, Wollstonecraft has presented a paradigm of slavery in an extract on Inkle and Yarico in *The Female Reader*. Shipwrecked British merchant Inkle is rescued and nursed back to health by islander Yarico. After they fall in love, Inkle promises to take Yarico to London and treat her royally, but when a rescue ship appears, Inkle cavalierly sells her to slave traders when their ship docks in Barbados. To top off his inhumanity, after Yarico pleads for mercy on account of her pregnancy, Inkle 'only made use of that information to rise in his demands upon the purchaser' (Wollstonecraft, 1789: 31).[10]

Hence, Wollstonecraft's subtle approach to the sexual abuse of black women in the 'vital blood' passage, in reviewing Equiano, in spotlighting that last look at a pregnant Yarico in an anthology for adolescent girls. Since her discourse as a white woman is already shockingly untraditional, to speak sex, and of all things to speak openly of black women's sexuality and hint at abuse suffered at the hands of white planters, would be an untenable flouting of social propriety. She has to maintain a semblance of conventional gender expectations.

On the site of the body and sex, then, Wollstonecraft foregrounds the relationship between black and white women and their common point of rebellion. At one point even, referring to women as 'brown and fair', meaning dark and fair-haired white women most likely, slippage and connexion between black and white women reopen a fissure of sorts for comparing overlapping oppressions. Slave auctions and the

marriage market, for example, are represented as variations on activities that are life-threatening to African-Caribbean and Anglo-Saxon women (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 144). None the less, Wollstonecraft acknowledges by her loaded silences that the representation of others' sexuality as well as sexual self-representation is a tricky business (Jordan, 1968: 150–4). Thus, in one sense, equal rights and a self-denying sexuality go hand in hand, because sexuality for Wollstonecraft (dictated at large by men) imperils any chances of female autonomy. Not only that, Wollstonecraft recognizes dissimilar codings for white female and bondwomen's bodies, differences in complicity and coercion. In keeping with her sense of singularity, she is much harder on middle-class white women, in part because she is closer to them. She does not feel affected by or implicated in female social conditioning. Unlike Catherine Macaulay who argues that women will only waken up if they understand their oppression, Wollstonecraft implicitly recommends imitation of her own bold behaviour as the 'wakening up' device. To recap briefly: all women have the same choices available as she did and should forego vanity and self-indulgence; they should break their 'silken fetters'. If she can short-circuit subjugation, her brief goes, so can anyone.

Thus beyond a rhetorical appeal to effect a revolution in female manners, Wollstonecraft tends to eschew a group response to the absence of female rights. This aloofness, furthermore, permeates – even undercuts – her sense of vindication. A buried sense of identification and solidarity expresses itself, instead, in a displaced way.

Specifically, Wollstonecraft talks about resistance only by talking about slaves. The successful revolution by slaves in San Domingo taught the British public that slaves and freed blacks could collectively overthrow systematic tyranny. In the following passage, by equating slaves with labouring class 'mobs' and using highly inflated diction for rebels, Wollstonecraft censures slaves' reaction. 'For the same reason', states Wollstonecraft, quoting from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'women have, or ought to have but little liberty; they are apt to indulge themselves excessively in what is allowed them. Addicted in every thing to extremes, they are even more transported at their diversions than boys.' She continues this response to Rousseau: 'The answer to this is very simple. Slaves and mobs have always indulged themselves in the same excesses, when once they broke loose from authority. – The bent bow recoils with violence, when the hand is suddenly relaxed that forcibly held it' (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 144–5).

Yet since Wollstonecraft disdains passivity and servitude, she may be embedding an unconscious desire about female resistance that corresponds to her own. She could be hinting that women should emulate the San Domingan insurgents and fight back. The nuance is further stressed pictorially by the sexual overtones of female compliance in 'bent bow'. Just as importantly, the image resonates with the previous textual image of women from earliest times when necks bent under a yoke.

Put succinctly, what slaves can do, white women can do; or, as she asserts in *The Rights of Woman*, authority and the reaction to it push the 'crowd of subalterns forward' (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 17). Sooner or later, tyranny incites retaliation. San Domingo instructs women about the importance of connecting physical and moral agency. Struggle creates a potential bridge from ignorance to consciousness and self-determination. In the most hard-hitting sense, the San Domingan revolutionaries loudly voice by their bold example – to anyone ready to listen – that challenge to oppression is not an option but a responsibility. The social and political status quo is anything but fixed.

Wollstonecraft's metaphor of the bent bow also decrees a stern warning to men. It reminds readers that male tyrants and predators incite their own opposition; at some point those who are 'bowed' may uncoil themselves and assault the 'bender'.

This image of the bent bow further recalls Wollstonecraft's own situation in the last decade. Undeterred by an emotionally unnerving home life, she tried her hand at most of the humdrum occupations open to women, refusing to be moulded or deterred by social prescription. Befriending and being befriended by Dissenters like Richard Price only fortified Wollstonecraft's already firm opposition to women's lot. Moreover, her sutble, analogous and multiply voiced threats address at least two major audiences. She overtly advises women to educate themselves and warns men that vengeance can strike from several directions. The fierce, conservative reaction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a response to the covert as well as the overt text.

In that sense, the wheel comes almost full circle. Wollstonecraft recognizes that all women are opposed by all men in a general group identity. However, because she privileges personal and political singularity and takes pride in independent thought and action, she identifies her own resistance to gendered tyranny as the means by which women should subvert domination. She projects outwards from her personal response to female domination, oblivious to more devious practices on the part of other females to assert themselves and gain at least some personal if not political power. In one sense, her bourgeois individualism prevents that insight since she sees herself outside customary female assimilation. Faced with oppression, women have simply made wrong choices. Consequently, Wollstonecraft can posit collective rebellion by white women to prescribed subordination only by analogy.

With this displaced reaction in mind, certain re-views of Wollstonecraft's diatribe against female reactions to males – their flirtatious behaviour – can be more sympathetically read. Just as Wollstonecraft can indict Africans for being neither intellectual nor reflexive while portraying a carefully executed and successful revolution, so, too, does she exhibit a conflictual stance toward women. Since slaves resist masters and since all men oppress all women, women will, by implication, resist their male masters. Thus indirectly, Wollstonecraft registers that through coquettish manipulation, however feebly or distortedly, a women's resistance could be enacted.[11]

This argument about slaves and mobs, that is, creates a fissure in the text. If we doubled back, say, on salient passages where Wollstonecraft condemns Rousseau – 'Women should be governed by fear', he says, 'to exercise her natural cunning and made a coquettish slave' (47) – Wollstonecraft's view of slaves' and mobs' resistances becomes open to reinterpretation: even though she assaults these self-trivializing behaviours and deplores their forms, at some level she may recognize them as tropes of insurrection; she uses female reaction to male domination in a plural way. Deploring how women try to finesse and please men through sexual manoeuvring, she rhetorically conflates coquettish with cunning and makes sexual manipulation double as a form of resistance to tyranny. Women 'play at' blind obedience not only to get some of what they want, but unconsciously to ridicule their 'masters', to cancel out tyranny with emotional excess, with a mirror-image perversion of power. Frivolous giggling is also a signal act of mimicry whereby women seem to conform to expectations. Ironically, the artificiality of forced laughing marks male desire and orthodox prescriptions for female behaviour.

If Wollstonecraft is (unconsciously or not) subtly mocking the idea that fear works as a governing principle to produce obedience, she foregrounds the idea that forced obedience linked to sex is a practice that can turn into its opposite: women will mimic the master's desire with design, they will use conformist ideas about womanhood to gain power. At times, Wollstonecraft recognizes these strategies more openly. The state of warfare which subsists between the sexes (races), makes them (the tyrannized group) employ those ruses or 'illicit sway' that often frustrate more open strategies of force.

The aim of *The Rights of Women*, then, is to vindicate women's rights. Starting from the premise that all women are oppressed by all men, Wollstonecraft subscribes to a concept of overall group identity. This is undercut, however, when she probes particulars because her sense of a personally wrought self-determination causes her to find women culpable for their vanity, their acceptance of an inferior education, their emphasis on feeling. She locates herself outside what she deems self-demeaning behaviour.

So in the end, she posits a group response indirectly, only by looking at oppressed communities who have actively resisted – slaves in particular – and sometimes 'mobs'. Her suppressed sense of solidarity and identification with women express themselves through the rebellion of slaves whose bow (back) has been bent too far. This analogy also constitutes a threat against masters; contradiction is there from the beginning since all men are oppositional – within Wollstonecraft's political framework – to all women.

Put another way, Mary Wollstonecraft's construction within specific social and cultural boundaries that she resists produces a covert text. Her sense of personal singularity occludes her vision so she cannot always imagine or conceptualize flirtation as a tool of resistance. Despite a radical outlook, moreover, she still subscribes to a sense of

class hierarchy that contradicts her demands for greater distribution of wealth and legal representation and for female independence and colonial emancipation. In that sense, her text brilliantly illuminates the bourgeois project of liberation. She embodies the liberal ideal of progress in demanding freedom in certain individuals but the shortcomings inherent in that ideal undercut it. The conditions that produced the text, then, end up questioning the text itself and highlighting its gaps and incompletions, its long series of tensions between bourgeois values and issues of class, race, gender and desire. So deeply estranged from its internal conflicts is *The Rights of Woman* that it cannot ideologically fulfil itself; an authentic, workable solution to female subjugation is impossible. The text trips over itself, its variant vindications ideologically incompatible. As a result, contradiction emerges as a major textual coherence, problem-solving beyond reach.

Additionally, because the text invokes the French and San Domingan revolutions, the complexity of sexual difference, inequities perpetrated against Dissenters, and the abolition movement, textual implosions inevitably occur. Even while the text appears to dampen inflammatory ideas and underwrite the current system, liberating ideas erupt to refute the self-contradictory discourse of bourgeois feminism.

Thus the issues that Wollstonecraft avoids or bypasses end up hollowing and shaping the text into a new determination. She talks about disaffection, yet often blames women's alienation on their own behaviour; she poses the problem as one for which women bear responsibility. Her socio-cultural myopia leads her to misread resistance. Concurrently, she undermines her own argument through parallels between white women and black slaves. Moreover, the condition of women that she illumines pinpoints an important area of sexual difference and pushes the frontiers of this debate forward. Put baldly, the text ironically subverts the very bourgeois ideology it asserts (that creates alienation) and demands liberation despite the restrictive system it promotes.

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft's usage of colonial slavery as a reference point for female subjugation launches a new element into the discourse on women's liberation. No coincidence, then, that Charlotte Smith in *Desmond* (1792) and Mary Hays in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) criticize colonial slavery along with discussions of women's rights; exploring popular controversies, they simultaneously allude to Wollstonecraft's innovative investigations and connexions. First of all, their inscription of colonial slavery presupposes the presence of women of colour and assumes a white, patriarchal class system as its common enemy. Second, it suggests unity among the colonized and their allies. Third, it centrestages the question of sexuality in gender relations and stresses the ubiquity of sexual abuse in qualitatively different environments.

By theorizing about women's rights using old attributions of harem-based slavery in conjunction with denotations of colonial slavery, Wollstonecraft was a political pioneer, fundamentally altering

the definition of rights and paving the way for a much wider cultural dialogue.

Notes

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1 Writers as diverse as Katherine Philips, the Duchess of Newcastle, Aphra Behn, Mrs Taylor, Lady Chudleigh, Sarah Fyge Field Egerton, Anne Finch, the Countess of Winchelsea, Elizabeth Rowe, Elizabeth Tollett, and many more frequently employed the metaphor of slavery to express the subjugation of women; marriage was far and away the front-runner situation in which women described themselves or other women as 'enslaved'. Note also that Wollstonecraft refers to the Spartan's perpetual subjugation in Lacedaemonian society of the Helots, state serfs bound to the soil, with no political rights. See Shimron (1972: 96), Mitchell (1952: 75–84), and MacDowell (1986: 23–5, 31–42).
2 Wollstonecraft does not hold exclusively to those attitudes, however. In the *Analytical Review* somewhat later, for example, she argues that Hottentot people act in harmony with their situation (*Analytical Review* Vol. 25, May 1797, p. 466).
3 The essay was first published in 1742, but the passage quoted was added as a footnote in the edition of 1753–4. See Cook (1936) and Curtin (1964: 42).
4 Mary Prince, for example, as a slave in Bermuda and then in Antigua is described by a vitriolic writer in a pro-slavery newspaper article. The trunk of her only worldly possessions (containing unspecified items) that she took from her owner when she left is exaggerated by this writer to 'several trunks of clothes' to suggest excess vanity and even prostitution.'She at length left his house, taking with her several trunks of clothes and about 40 guineas in money, which she had saved in Mr. Wood's service' (Zuill, 1937: 37).
5 Attentiveness to appearance, across cultures and stemming from different origins, infuriates Wollstonecraft. The fact that her own appearance is negatively commented upon at this time suggests itself as a factor that enters in. Apparently she spruced herself up when she became infatuated with Henry Fuseli, the Swiss painter. See Flexner (1972: 138–9).
6 For Wollstonecraft's views on Eros and her anger at women as sexual objects for men, see Blake (1983: 103–4).
7 See also Smith (1787).
8 Hannah More's renowned opinions on women constitute one of Mary Wollstonecraft's significant textual silences, but most notably in the second *Vindication*. When Wollstonecraft vociferously applauds women's assuming more prominent socio-cultural roles, she implicitly intertextualizes More's opposition to this advice. See also Myers (1990: 260–2).
9 However, despite Wollstonecraft's argument that ethnic differences are due to climate and social conditions à la Stanhope Smith and her unilateral commitment to abolition, she remains ambivalent about black equality. Her acceptance of a system that operates on the differential between owners and

workers and on the basis of certain assumptions about European superiority can never square with an absolute human liberation. Everything is measured against the model of a European society that regards African society as the other. Wollstonecraft may Eurocentrically contend that people in other cultures would be smart and civilized if they were raised as she was, but her review of Olaudah Equiano's narratives gives the lie even to that belief:

> We shall observe, that if these volumes do not exhibit extraordinary intellectual powers, sufficient to wipe off the stigma, yet the activity and ingenuity, which conspicuously appear in the character of Gustavus, [i.e., Equiano] place him on a par with the general mass of men, who fill the subordinate factions in a more civilized society than that which he was thrown into at his birth. (*Analytical Review* Vol. 4, May 1789, p. 28)

10 Aside from her commentary on Equiano's and Yarico's experiences, among others, Wollstonecraft also recognizes other ways that sexuality oppresses white women. She had dealt on a personal level with her sister Eliza's post-partum depression by effecting Eliza's separation from her husband, Hugh Skeys. She felt, it seems, as if Skeys were responsible for her sister's condition; she treated him, more or less, as a male predator, a villain of sorts. At the same time, the *Rights of Woman* appeared at a time in her life when she was immersed in a difficult personal situation; the choices open to a woman who wants to work and to love – she was discovering – were very limited.

11 Remember too that, psychologically, Wollstonecraft's attack on male sexuality could mark a displaced attack on Fuseli whose male sexuality has engendered inner turmoil. Mary Poovey's argument that 'men's [and not women's] unsatiable appetites' are Wollstoncraft's target is worth considering in the light of her passion for the Swiss painter (Poovey, 1984: 71–6 and *passim*). See also discussions of displacement in Freud (1966: 155–6 and *passim*).

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