WOLLSTONECRAFT

Wollstonecraft

PHILOSOPHY, PASSION, AND POLITICS

Sylvana Tomaselli

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON & OXFORD

Published by Princeton University Press
41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540
6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TR

press.princeton.edu

Library of Congress Control Number 2020945110
ISBN 978-0-691-16903-3
ISBN (e-book) 978-0-691-21263-0

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

Editorial: Sarah Caro, Ben Tate, and Josh Drake
Production Editorial: Jill Harris
Jacket Design: Heather Hansen
Production: Erin Suydam
Publicity: Kate Hensley and Kate Farquhar-Thomson
Copyeditor: Karen Verde

Jacket art: Portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft, by John Opie (c. 1797),
oil on canvas, copyright © National Portrait Gallery, London

This book has been composed in Miller

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

GRATITUDE, THOMAS HOBBES TELLS US in chapter 15 of *Leviathan*, is the fourth law of nature: "That a man which receiveth Benefit from another of meer Grace, Endeavour that he which giveth, have no reasonable cause to repent him of his good will." I hope not to be standing in breach of this, my favorite of Hobbes's nineteen laws of nature, in what follows. First, I wish to thank Madeleine Armstrong and Sam Harrison, without whose assistance this book would not have crossed the finish line in time. I am also most grateful to Eileen Hunt Botting, Stacey McDowell, and Bee Wilson for their transformative readings of the script and Bruce Baugh for his generous suggestions. My long-standing debt to Fredric Smoler for improving all I have ever sent his way must be acknowledged here. Thanks also go to Princeton University Press's readers for their most helpful comments and to its editors, Sarah Caro and Ben Tate, and to Karen Verde for her meticulous copyediting. For their learning, ways of thinking, conversations, eye-rolling, shared laughter, and all else that makes for all kinds of friendships, I am grateful to Andrew Arsan, Richard Bourke, Catherine Crawford, John Dunn, Edward Hundert, Biancamaria Fontana, Raymond Geuss, Mark Goldie, Marc Feigen, Thomas Hopkins, Susan James, Duncan Kelly, Ralph and Marie-Claire Kerr, Prakash Mishra, John Osman, John Robertson, Johannes and Adriana Schaesberg, Meg and Gordon Scoffield, Anna Sica, Joshua Simons, Gareth Stedman Jones, Nigel and Sarah Street, Chronis Tzedakis, John and Lizzie Wallwork, Paul Wood, William and Marie-Nöelle Worsley, and Anne Zwack. I would also like to thank my very brilliant students, all the kind staff members of St. John's College as well as the Fellows, and I wish to remember the late Wynne Godley, Istvan Hont, Tony and Peter Lothian, Ruby Nemser, Nicholas Phillipson, Roy Porter, Luis Racionero, and John and Jean Yolton.

WOLLSTONECRAFT

earlier work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* as well as *Hints*, be added to the volume as they seemed essential to understanding her most famous text. Even though I requested it, it is only relatively recently that I have come to fully appreciate the importance of reading those works together. Over time, it became clear to me that thinking of her as "the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," as William Godwin referred to her in the title of her *Posthumous Works*, distorted our perceptions of both Wollstonecraft and her famed work. It had to be read as part of a larger corpus and she had to be thought as the author of a number of diverse works written in various genres, at different times and in various places. While the trend has been changing in recent years, and each of her works is increasingly receiving the attention they deserve, the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* has cast a long shadow over the rest of her writing for much too long.

Wollstonecraft was an extraordinary person. This was in no small measure due to her exceptional capacity to face life's vicissitudes, to will herself to do and be what she thought the moment called for. Yes, she did twice attempt suicide. It was, one could say, out of character, or possibly not, depending on one's stance on suicide. Be that as it may, it was wrong by what we might assume to have been her own moral and religious beliefs, but it cannot easily be said to have been weak. If it be deemed weak, then these were the exceptions, albeit monumental, in a life that she forged in the face of much adversity.

The strength she possessed, or acquired, was a gift she very much wanted to share: she strove to make a case for endurance and wanted children to be made resilient. She despaired of the fact that women's education prevented them from acquiring the physical and mental strength life and human flourishing required. This is not to say that she always fully succeeded in living up to her own expectations of herself or those others might have had of her. Hers was not an easy life, and she had more than her share of sorrows from an early age, but she demonstrated

courage and resourcefulness through the course of it. Her family drifted from social and economic comfort to hardship, of which she and her sister bore the brunt. Her education was uneven, though it was to widen and reach considerable depth through fortuitous encounters as well as being asked by her publisher and supporter, the Dissenter Joseph Johnson (1738–1809), to contribute extensively to the *Analytical Review*. She mostly lived from her writing, determined to pay off her debts, started a school, was a governess to Lord and Lady Kingsborough in Ireland and traveled to Portugal to assist a dear friend, Fanny, in childbirth. In Paris under the Terror, she passed as the wife of American entrepreneur and sometime novelist Gilbert Imlay (1754–1828) and undertook for his sake a perilous journey in Scandinavia with their infant daughter, Fanny (1794–1816). Her resilience to heartbreak, though repeatedly tested, faltered once prior to her northern expedition, and a second time, when it became clear that Imlay had left her, never to return. She recovered, published the *Letters*, married, but died of septicaemia at the age of thirty-eight in 1797, following the birth of her second daughter, Mary (1797–1851), the future author of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Wollstonecraft had married Mary's father, William Godwin (1756–1836), in March of that year. Largely self-taught and as independent financially as any writer in her situation might be, Wollstonecraft had been an active participant in the cultural and political life of her age, battling, among others, with both Edmund Burke and the leaders of the Revolution in France.[1]

If her personality makes up part of any answer to "Why Wollstonecraft?," it is the manner in which it translated into her

1. For a detailed intellectual biography, see Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*. See also Lyndall Gordon, *Vindication: A Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), and Charlotte Gordon, *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley* (New York: Random House, 2015). For Wollstonecraft's engagement with French writers, see Tomaselli, "*French* Philosophes," pp. 139–145.

writing that constitutes the essence of a reply. It is impressive in its variety, originality, and indeed volume, given her tumultuous existence and its difficult circumstances, not to mention her life's brevity, all of which makes her such an enthralling figure. Produced during a single decade, her literary output stretches to six or seven average-size volumes, consisting of five important texts in pedagogy and social and political thought, two novels, three translations, and many reviews and letters. Her first publication, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life*, appeared in 1787. Just nine years later, the last work to be published in her lifetime, *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, came out eighteen months before her untimely death. The unfinished novel she was writing toward the end of her life, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria*, was published posthumously by Godwin in 1798.

To be sure, in a century rich in very remarkable intellectuals, Wollstonecraft could not be said to be unique. The playwright Olympe de Gouges (1748–1793), who denounced slavery and called for the rights of women and a variety of social reforms, did not have an easy life either and was to die by the guillotine.[2] Both Gouges and Wollstonecraft followed in a long line of authors on education. Mary Astell (1666–1731) and Damaris Masham (1659–1708) were just two who long preceded them in this respect in England. Neither were Gouges nor Wollstonecraft alone in tackling what might be called "the woman question" or misogyny more generally in the eighteenth century. Other women traveled the world, and several English writers reported on France during the Revolution. Wollstonecraft herself reviewed the reports of one of them: Helen Maria Williams's (1761?–1827) *Letters written in France, in the Summer, 1790, to*

2. Scott, "French Feminists and the Rights of 'Man,'" 1–21. Sandrine Bergès, "Olympe de Gouges versus Rousseau: Happiness, Primitive Societies, and the Theater," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4, no. 4 (2018): 433–451.

a Friend in England; containing various Anecdotes relative to the French revolution; and the Memoirs of Mons and Madame du F. Nor, obviously, was novel-writing uncommon: Williams produced one as well as poetry, and a number of her contemporaries, most notably Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), were distinguished translators as well. In 1790, Wollstonecraft herself published a translation or version of Maria Geertruida de Cambon's epistolary *De Kleine Grandison* from the Dutch. Living, or eking out a living, by the pen was not unusual in the eighteenth century, not even for a woman, nor was entering the political fray and pamphleteering. Moreover, Wollstonecraft's was not the only reply to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Catherine Macaulay (1731–1791) produced one of the many, often anonymous, responses the work elicited.

So, why Wollstonecraft? Why not Williams or Carter or the great Anglo-Saxon scholar, Elizabeth Elstob (1683–1756)? The many European authors and scientists? Or the celebrated Mrs. Macaulay, renowned for her history of England at home and abroad, an impressive pedagogical and political writer and pamphleteer, who merits no less attention? Wollstonecraft admired her, was influenced by her, and there are many similarities between the two authors, not least their joint concern for the status of women. Both were also to acquire much notoriety: Macaulay in her lifetime for, among other things, her marriage to a much younger man, Wollstonecraft posthumously for having been the unmarried mother of Fanny.[3]

Notwithstanding all of the above, the answer to "why write on Wollstonecraft?" lies in her disarming frankness about what she perceived to be the human condition and her effort to be

3. For a comparison of their views, see Gunther-Canada, "Cultivating Virtue"; and "The Politics of Sense and Sensibility"; Bridget Hill, "The Links between Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay: New Evidence," *Women's History Review* 4, no. 2 (1995): 177–192. See also Coffee, "Catherine Macaulay," 198–210; Elizabeth Frazer, "Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay on Education," *Oxford Review of Education* 37 (2011): 603–617.

honest with herself in the light of changing circumstances. How many can write "that an unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and that the neglected wife is, in general, the best mother"?[4] One might be shocked or simply disagree, but it is at the very least thought-provoking. So are Wollstonecraft's reflections on raising her daughter Fanny:

> You know that as a female I am particularly attached to her—I feel more than a mother's fondness and anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex. 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 regard—I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit—Hapless woman! What a fate is thine! [5]

Few writers are as candid as she is here about what she perceived to be the tensions between love and moral principles: should one raise one's children to thrive in the world as it is, or raise them as they ought to be, in anticipation of a world that may not be realized in their lifetime? Few were as daring as she was in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in speaking of the rivalry between mothers and daughters. Few non-fiction writers

4. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, and Hints*, edited by Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 100. See also *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in ibid., p. 54. All future references to both Wollstonecraft's *Vindications* and *Hints* are to this edition. Hereafter shortened to *VM*, *VW*, and *Hints*.

5. *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, assistant editor, Emma Rees-Mogg, 7 vols. (London: William Pickering, 1989), Vol. 6, p. 269. (Hereafter all of Wollstonecraft's works, except for her *Vindications* and *Hints*, will be taken from that edition, shortened to *Works*.)

what for corruption; between enhancement and distortion, and thus the processes that underpinned each, as well as alternative futures. I also aim to stress the importance of time in her conception of individual development as well as that of humankind. Wollstonecraft did not only reflect on the nature of the progress of humanity as a whole. She was a teacher and pedagogue and thought of the mind's and the body's growth over time and at different stages of life. She thought about time, its divisions, and how it was used. She closed one of her reviews by asserting "as an irrefragable maxim, that those who cannot employ time must kill it."[8]

This book follows very loosely a format Wollstonecraft herself adopted in her first published work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in The More Important Duties of Life* (1787), that is, bringing together her reflections on a number of subjects under eponymous headings. Her first heading was "The Nursery," followed by "Moral Discipline"; the others included "Artificial Manners," "The Observance of Sunday," "Card-Playing"; and the last was entitled "Public Places." Her thoughts are gathered here under specific headings, not only for the sake of clarity, but in order to highlight some of her lesser known views. This seemingly piecemeal approach facilitates a reconstruction of her philosophy of mind and history as well as her reflections on human nature, society, and Providence. It also allows for the tracing of continuities between the various objects of her reflections over an all too brief life.

Having spent much ink, as many other commentators have, on all that she censured, denigrated, and loathed, of which there was plenty, it is essential to consider all that she liked and loved. Wollstonecraft was a severe critic, a harsh reviewer, and unrestrained in her denunciations of individuals as well as institutions. It is all too easy to gain and give the impression that she

8. *Analytical Review*, Vol. 6 (1790), *Works*, Vol. 7, p. 224.

was an arch and bitter derider. She was not. She took pleasure in many things and was eager to share her joys. It is the aim of the opening chapter to highlight these.

Wollstonecraft thought of herself as a philosopher and a moralist: "As a philosopher, I read with indignation the plausible epithets which men use to soften their insults; and, as a moralist, I ask what is meant by such heterogeneous associations, as fair defects, amiable weaknesses, &c.?"[9] Everything she wrote, whatever the genre, she wrote as a philosopher and moralist. She had much to say on a wide variety of topics. This book cannot do justice to all of her reflections. Nor can it be written from every point of view or disciplinary approach. As I came and now still come to Wollstonecraft primarily from political philosophy, her fictional works, which have received much valuable attention, while by no means ignored, are not treated here as they would have been had I been a literary scholar.[10] I should also acknowledge from the start that I have endeavored to avoid "isms" as much as possible in this book, leaving readers to attribute any should they so wish. For my part, I find that labels often obscure more than they reveal or need to be qualified to the point of becoming meaningless. Moreover, the labels one might be tempted to apply to Wollstonecraft or her writings are likely to be anachronistic. Although she engaged with the works of others, she thought for herself and thought of herself as doing so. It is hoped that something of her personality as a whole and her understanding of the past and present, as well as her aspirations for the future, might emerge through what follows. Had she lived longer, we would likely have a more complete picture of the realistic utopia that she was gradually sketching out.

9. *VW*, p. 104.

10. Most significantly, Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*; Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984); and Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*.

CHAPTER ONE

What She Liked and Loved

OF ALL THE THINGS Mary Wollstonecraft might have wished for her sisters, friends, or indeed herself and humanity, self-command or, as she would have termed it, fortitude, would be highest. She has Maria, the protagonist of her posthumous novel, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria*, recall her uncle defining "genuine fortitude" thus: it "consisted in governing our own emotions, and making allowance for the weaknesses in our friends, that we would not tolerate in ourselves."[1] Control over one's self was central to her conception of character, and it was something that she viewed as sorely missing in the world: "Most women, and men too, have no character at all," she wrote in her first published work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (1787).[2] She stressed the essential nature of control of one's self in all her writings in one form or other. Self-command or self-governance, as Catriona MacKenzie refers to it in an important article on the subject, was the foremost virtue for her since it was the necessary

1. *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria*, *Works*, Vol. 1, p. 164.

2. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life*, *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 36.

condition of all the others.[3] She was not alone in seeing it as the bedrock of human personality. Adam Smith (1723–1790), with whose work on moral personality she engaged, thought likewise; he spoke of the "great school of self-command" and saw it as the basis of every other virtue;[4] so, of course, had a long line of philosophers reaching all the way back to Socrates. To be sure, all philosophers, when pressed, would agree that ultimately nothing can be achieved, no virtue exercised, without the power to will oneself to do or to forbear. Wollstonecraft made that point emphatically. She believed European society to be in particular need of being told this. Although she did see, or hoped to see, some signs of a potential moral rejuvenation in the revolution in France, she judged contemporary society to be corrupt and the bulk of her contemporaries to be degenerate in some way. While she expended much intellectual energy understanding how self-control could be taught and developed, and which social forces enhanced and which weakened it, she used most of her ink exposing what she took to be the folly of the world, its vanity, and delusions: its sheer stupidity. This is particularly true of her *A Vindications of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft found little to praise in either sex. Neither women, with very rare exceptions, nor men emerge unscathed from her pages or fulfill their human potential. While she certainly did not hold what is commonly referred to as a pessimistic view of human nature, much of her writing is condemnatory and her tone, cutting. Her book reviews are mostly damning when they are not dismissive, her own books rich in disapproval of nearly everything she depicted in them, likewise her correspondence. It was, to be sure, the style of the time, of the

3. Catriona MacKenzie, "Reason and Sensibility: The Ideal of Women's Self-Governance in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft," *Hypatia* 8, no. 4 (1993): 35–55. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3810368.

4. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 146, see also pp. 145–156. See also Leddy, "Mary Wollstonecraft and Adam Smith."

genres in which she wrote, and in many ways the product of her circumstances, but it did become her.

As a result, it would be all too easy to think of her as all denunciation and a thorough killjoy. Indeed, that is how she has been viewed, and Julie Murray has rightly challenged this.[5] It therefore may not be amiss to begin a study such as this by evoking some of the things Wollstonecraft did appreciate or even love and wish others to relish. It is also worth noting that while she thought forms of abstemiousness often necessary and the capacity to exercise them vital to the individuals themselves, their relations, and society more generally, she did not think of self-command as equating to, or necessarily entailing, self-denial. In considering what she divulged, or appeared to be, enjoying and what she thought constituted a good life, we gain both in understanding of her as a person and comprehension of her philosophical outlook. It allows us to see and, in some cases, tease out what she deemed the philosophical challenges a reflecting mind such as hers faced, for even the seemingly most simple pleasures entailed serious considerations on her part. Most, it would appear, if not all, had to be in the service of the development of a particular kind of personality, one with character. What made for character or contributed to its making emerged in part from what she wrote of the arts.

The Theater

Wollstonecraft did value many things for the sheer enjoyment they gave her and others. This was especially evident in her youth, before "misfortune had broken [her] spirits," as she described it when she was only twenty-two.[6] She prized the

5. Julie Murray, "Mary Wollstonecraft, Feminist Killjoy," in *Romantic Circles*, Praxis Series, https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/wollstonecraft/praxis.2019.wollstonecraft.murray.htm.

6. *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Janet Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 28 (hereafter *Letters*).

her audience surrendered themselves fully, as in an act of love. Such artists were magicians, but their powers did not affect everyone: "nay, even Shakespear's [*sic*] magic powers are only for those who cultivate their reason."[15] Her knowledge of the theater extended well beyond him, however, and she could not resist speaking of Molière, Corneille, Dryden, and Racine in *The French Revolution* praising the first as an extraordinary author who wrote on "the grand scale of human passions, comparing the second to the third, and describing the last as 'the father of the french [*sic*] stage.'"[16]

Her first published work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, included a piece on 'The Theatre' as one of its constituent short essays.[17] She began by declaring it the site of the most rational amusements, especially to "a cultivated mind," though she warned that to one less so, it might prove a schooling in affectations. This was not a minor consequence for Wollstonecraft. Authenticity mattered to her. Exaggerated displays, false emotions, and all forms of distortions of personality were anathema to her. When writing to Imlay from Scandinavia, she even declared always having been "of the opinion that the allowing actors to die, in the presence of the audience, has an immoral tendency; but trifling when compared with the ferocity acquired by viewing the reality as a show."[18] The theater was therefore not free of moral danger, as it could easily be the scene of "a false display of the passions" and lead spectators to copy extreme ones, while being oblivious to the "more delicate touches." Wollstonecraft confessed that she herself had been affected "beyond measure" by Lear's line on seeing Cordelia: "I think that Lady is

15. *Analytical Review*, Vol. 6 (1790), *Works*, p. 224.

16. *The French Revolution*, *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 25.

17. For an extensive and wide-ranging discussion of Wollstonecraft's view of the theater, see Crafton, *Transgressive Theatricality, Romanticism, and Mary Wollstonecraft*.

18. *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, 19, *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 323.

my daughter," yet had been unmoved by the unfaithful, deceitful, but ultimately penitent Calista's declamations about the cave in which she would live "Until her tears had washed her guilt away."[19] Wollstonecraft, no less than anyone else, needed to be taught to be sensitive to the more subtle emotions and complex moral predicaments depicted on stage. However, her awareness of her own limitations had not stopped her questioning the value of Greek tragedies and, taking *Oedipus* as an example, asked what moral lesson could conceivably be drawn from a story of someone impelled by the gods "and, led imperiously by blind fate, though perfectly innocent, he is fearfully punished, with all this hapless race, for a crime in which his will had no part."[20] Sheer destiny was, we can infer, of no psychological interest to her. What she wanted to see staged were moral dilemmas facing characters who had genuine choices and were not shackled to a preordained fate. Whether Ophelia was in such a position is questionable, but one may assume, given what she argued, that Wollstonecraft thought Hamlet had faced such a choice.

So, while Wollstonecraft did express some concern about the potential of drama to have an emotionally distorting impact, her brief composition on the subject made clear her genuine interest in it as well as providing further evidence of her love of Shakespeare. The theater could enhance our understanding of humanity and thereby contribute to the making of our own selves. To be sure, this was by no means always the case. She could be critical of individual plays for their want of plot or character development without rejecting the art itself.[21] That her concern was far from the virulent critique of the theater articulated by Plato and

19. *Works*, vol. 4, p. 46. The references are to *King Lear* (IV.vii.68–70), and Nicholas Rowe, *The Fair Penitent* (1703), IV.i. See S. Harris, "Outside the Box: The Female Spectator, 'The Fair Penitent,' and the Kelly Riots of 1747," *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 1 (2005): 33–55.

20. *The French Revolution*, *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 112.

21. E.g., her review of *The Fugitive. A Comedy. As it is performed at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket*. *Works*, Vol. 7, pp. 454–455.

famously in the mid-eighteenth century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau might be somewhat surprising, not so much because she engaged with the thought of both these authors, but because, like the latter, she was so hostile to anything that might encourage men and women to appear other than they were or indeed to all that contributed to the making of the hall of mirrors in which much of society was entrapped.[22]

She was also aware that the theater and theater audiences were not the same the world over. They reflected deep cultural, social, and psychological differences between people. As Lisa Plummer Grafton has argued, Wollstonecraft thought the French people particularly theatrical, and claimed they imbibed the fondness for public places, and the theater in particular, as they suckled their mothers' milk.[23] Indeed, she was initially critical of their national character for being so much shaped by their theatrical amusements. She thought that the continual gratification of their senses in which the theater played a large part made the French fickle, unable to reflect on their feelings, and stifled their imagination.[24] Once in Scandinavia, she was to revise her opinion on this subject, as we will have occasion to see later, and began her *Letter XX* in her disarmingly confessional tone: "I have formerly censured the french [*sic*] for their extreme attachments to theatrical exhibitions, because I thought that they tended to render them vain and unnatural characters."[25] She now considered that money spent at the theater was far better spent than in drinking and commented on the sobriety of the French people, remarking that it was precisely this that made "their fêtes more interesting" and their common people superior to that of every other nation.

22. For an illuminating treatment of this subject in relation to Rousseau, see David Marshall, "Rousseau and the State of Theatre," *Representations* no. 13 (1986): 84–114, www.jstor.org/stable/2928495.

23. *The French Revolution*, *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 25. *Transgressive Theatricality, Romanticism, and Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 50.

24. *The French Revolution*, *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 25.

25. *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 327.

Moreover, she noted, responses to performances did not vary greatly between social classes in France, where audiences responded as one socially unified whole, whereas differences were far more marked in England:

> At our theatres, the boxes, pit, and galleries, relish different scenes; and some are condescendingly born by the more polished part of the audience, to allow the rest to have their portion of amusement. In France, on the contrary, a highly wrought sentiment of morality, probably rather romantic than sublime, produces a burst of applause, when one heart seems to agitate every hand.[26]

Thus plays, performances, and reactions to them were of great interest to her on several different levels. The powerful impact of art on individuals and large audiences, as we will have cause to see again in relation to music and other forms of creations, was a subject on which she deliberated.

If she rejected artificiality, she did not reject the fine arts any more than she did the theater. Both needed conditioning or training of some kind. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argued that "[a] taste for the fine arts requires cultivation; but no more than a taste for the virtuous affections; and both suppose that enlargement of mind which opens so many sources of mental pleasure."[27] This brief statement is one of her most revealing and warrants highlighting. One had to acquire a desire for being a certain kind of person. The yearning to be a cultivated and moral being had itself to be nurtured. Both called for effort. Both called for intellectual development, which in turn produced greater fonts of enjoyment. The desire to be cultivated and virtuous had to be inculcated by thoughtful

26. *The French Revolution*, *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 19.

27. *VW*, p. 261; see M. Ahmed Cronin, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Conception of 'True Taste' and Its Role in Egalitarian Education and Citizenship," *European Journal of Political Theory* 18, no. 4 (2019): 508–528.

parenting, sustained by appropriate education, and not thwarted by society.[28] The theater could, given the right preparation on the part of individuals in the audience, contribute to that process, as could—and indeed should in Wollstonecraft's view—the other arts.

Painting

Of the art of painting itself Wollstonecraft wrote relatively little directly, or if she did, it has not survived the destruction of many of her letters.[29] She probably sat for her portrait for John Williamson (1751–1818) in 1791, a work commissioned by her admirer, the Liverpool lawyer, William Roscoe (1753–1831), and for John Opie (1761–1807) around 1792 and again in 1797, and was on very good terms with him and his wife.[30] They are mentioned in her letters, as are brief references to her posing amidst accounts of social engagements. She encountered illustrators and painters when she joined the circle of Joseph Johnson, her publisher. He patronized William Blake and Henry Fuseli (1741–1825), who rose to fame following the exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1782 of *The Nightmare* (1781), his erotically charged and disturbing painting.

Wollstonecraft became wildly besotted with him, but although she referred to him as an "original genius,"[31] we do not know whether her infatuation with the married artist owed

28. For a useful overview of Wollstonecraft's views on education, see Ferguson, "Theories of Education."

29. Her letters to the painter Henry Fuseli have not survived. See Janet Todd on this subject, *Letters*, pp. xvi–xvii.

30. The first Opie painting is dated c. 1790–1791 by Tate Britain, its current owner. The portrait attributed to John Williamson is in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. See Eileen Hunt Botting, "The Earliest Portraiture of Wollstonecraft, 1785–1804," in *Portraits of Wollstonecraft*, edited by Eileen Hunt Botting (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

31. *Letters*, p. 167.

inseparable from art, his elegant sketches oftener gave us an idea of the beautiful than the sublime."[38] However good, the logic of composition, its inevitably restricted span, the artifice it introduced, meant that representative art could not but provide a diminished experience of nature. This said, neither Gilpin nor she thought that art should or indeed could seek to replicate nature. In fact, in a review some months later, Wollstonecraft went further, asserting that art required "*artificial effects*." Furthermore, she thought Gilpin himself was more committed to this view than he seemed to realize: "we are apt to believe, from experience, that a small landscape, when it is tinted, assumes a more diminutive and artificial appearance than plain, shadowy drawings, because the unnatural, striking glow in them, awakens the imagination, which bold strokes might have cheated, if the veil had not been removed; for unnatural must the charming tints of nature ever appear, when they are not mellowed, by melting into a large expanse of grey air."[39]

Wollstonecraft's third review of Gilpin's works, *Remarks on Forest Scenery, and other Woodland Views, (relatively chiefly to Picturesque Beauty). Illustrated by the Scenes of New Forest in Hampshire*, in August 1791, merits special attention. It reveals, first, that she thought aesthetic taste had to have some form of theoretical grounding. She believed this showed, as will be discussed further in the next chapter, "that reason and fancy are nearer akin than cold dullness is willing to allow."[40] In other words, a genuinely perceptive person would intuit that however much reason and the imagination were generally thought of as opposite/opposing terms, they were in fact profoundly connected. Second, after citing Gilpin on the comparative advantages of exhibiting "incidental beauties" of the meridian and the rising sun, she approvingly quoted the following:

38. Ibid., p. 162.
39. Ibid., p. 197.
40. Ibid., p. 387.

> [i]n general, the poet had great advantages over the painter, in the process of *sublimification*, if the term may be allowed. The business of the former is only to excite ideas; that of the latter, to represent them. The advantage of excited over represented ideas is very great, inasmuch as they are in some degree the reader's own production, and are susceptible of those modifications, which make them peculiarly acceptable to the mind in which they are raised. Whereas the others being confined within a distinct and unalterable line, admit of none of the modifications, which flatter the particular taste of the spectator, but must make their way by their own intrinsic force.[41]

Gilpin was writing as an artist. Wollstonecraft was citing him from her point of view, namely as a viewer. There is reason to think from what she wrote of the other arts that she preferred what was conducive to the process of sublimification (Gilpin's coinage) rather than having an effect forced upon her mind, which is to say that she preferred art that excited ideas in the viewer rather than a mere representation of the ideas. This applied to viewing art, not producing it. When writing, in the fourth and final review of Gilpin, from the point of view of the practitioner, she did assert that "[l]andscape sketching is certainly a most pleasing amusement, and affords the idle, we mean the rich, an employment that by exercising the taste, leads to moral improvement."[42] Thus, the practice of drawing was morally edifying in her view: it gave the practitioner something to do and developed his or her aesthetic judgment in so doing.

This said, although Wollstonecraft did not consider painting in much detail, she often visualized political and human relations more generally, and wrote about them as if they were tableaux, tableaux of pastoral idylls or urban poverty, and of women in each other's company, for instance. Thus, we find another

41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., pp. 456–457.

glimpse of her thoughts on the subject in an unexpected context, namely that of her first *Vindication*. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was partly prompted and shaped as a response to a young Frenchman of his acquaintance asking for his opinion of the unfolding events. Part of Burke's withering answer focused on the composition of the National Assembly. Attacking Burke's deprecating comments, Wollstonecraft evoked the quasi-pedagogical relationship between the young Frenchman and the older Member of Parliament, and argued that

> [i]f you had given the same advice to a young history painter of abilities, I should have admired your judgment, and re-echoed your sentiments. Study, you might have said, the noble models of antiquity, till your imagination is inflamed; and, rising above the vulgar practice of the hour, you may imitate without copying those great originals. A glowing picture, of some interesting moment, would probably have been produced by these natural means; particularly if one little circumstance is not overlooked, that the painter had noble models to revert to, calculated to excite admiration and stimulate exertion.[43]

Here we see her, as we have already noted and will see again, deliberating on the relation between imitation as obsequious copy and imitation that is nothing of the sort, but rather takes a model as inspiration in a manner that transcends them. It was a major concern of hers that all forms of servile replication be eradicated in every aspect of human existence, not just the visual arts. Wollstonecraft's reflections on the latter and the arts more generally, however, do shed some light on what she thought the relation between imitation and inventiveness ought to be.

While these topics, whether singly or in combination, were hardly Burke's monopoly, and Wollstonecraft had more than one reason to come to them, his *Philosophical Enquiry into the*

43. *VM*, pp. 41–42.

Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), which she ransacked in aid of her unrestrained attack on his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), brought them to the fore. Although Burke was by no means averse to change and is well-known for his pronouncement that "[a] state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation,"[44] both of these works addressed the issue of the reproduction of society through the combined activity of the imitative capacity of mankind and the transformative effect of the ambitious among it. As we shall have occasion to see further on, much of what Wollstonecraft wrote was shaped by her engagement with him on this subject and by his conception of the sublime and the beautiful and his comments about women within it.

Music

Given that she was asked to review the subject of music as well as poetry, it would seem that the *Analytic Review*'s editor, Joseph Johnson, must have thought Wollstonecraft might not only appreciate these arts, but also be well-placed to reflect on their particular nature. Already in her first published work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (1787), she stated that "[m]usic and painting, and many other ingenious arts, are now brought to great perfection, and afford the most rational and delicate pleasure."[45] In a work of the same period, *Original Stories from Real life; with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (1788), Wollstonecraft argued that "[e]very gift of Heaven

44. *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, gen. ed. Paul Langford, Vol. 8, edited by L. G. Mitchell and William B. Todd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 72.

45. *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 18. See M. Ahmed Cronin, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Conception of 'True Taste' and Its Role in Egalitarian Education and Citizenship," *European Journal of Political Theory* 18, no. 4 (2019): 508–528.

is lent to us for improvement" and "[m]usic, drawing, works of usefulness and fancy, all amuse and refine the mind, sharpen the ingenuity and [form insensibly] the dawning judgement."[46] Artistic talent should not, therefore, be allowed to lie dormant, she contended, as they were divine gifts and great blessings that enhanced our capacity to be fully human; as we just read in her comments regarding landscape painting, it was conducive to "moral improvement."

Wollstonecraft was rather more vocal about music than she appears to have been about painting, though the latter subject did surface, as we shall see again, in her reflections on poetry and nature. That she was more expressive about music may be due to the fact that she responded emotionally more immediately to the one than the other, possibly because she found it less imitative and more consolatory, but perhaps also because her experience of its beauty led her more easily to that of the sublime. It was for her a source of joy and solace, a spiritual channel, a mirror to God's harmonious creation, and a unifying force.

Even though her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* was not an auto-biographical but a pedagogical work, she disclosed that she preferred "expression to execution," adding "[t]he simple melody of some artless airs has often soothed my mind, when it has been harassed by care; and I have been raised from the very depth of sorrow, by the sublime harmony of some of Handel's compositions."[47]

Music, and possibly that of Henry Purcell (1659–1695) and Georg Frideric Handel (1685–1759) in particular, had an important transcendent dimension for Wollstonecraft: "I have been lifted," she continued, "above this little scene of grief and care, and mused on him, from whom all bounty flows."[48] It afforded

46. Cronin, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Conception of 'True Taste,'" *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 415.

47. *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 18.

48. Ibid. Janet Todd writes that when Lady Kingsborough gave "Wollstonecraft, then governess to her children, tickets for both days of the