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# The Construction of the Female Gothic Posture Wollstonecraft's *Mary* and Gothic Feminism

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To tell a woman that she thinks like a man is the highest praise that can be given to a woman in a patriarchal society. But where and when exactly did such an attitude originate among women? It is my contention that the valorization of the masculine woman first assumed widespread circulation in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft. To read Wollstonecraft's quasi-sentimental *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), is to realize that the Female Gothic ideology originated in the hyperbolic gestures, the frenzied poses of victimization that tips the novel over the edge from sentimentality into Gothicism. In writing this novella Wollstonecraft exposed and at the same time reified the tyranny of sentimental literary formulae for women. She revealed that for women of all classes, life really was the way it was depicted in sentimental fiction — a series of insults, humiliations, deprivations, beating fantasies, and fatal or near-fatal disasters. At times when reading *Mary* we cannot be faulted for wondering, are we peeking voyeuristically into a virtual diary, a cathartic purging of Wollstonecraft's own disappointing sexual experiences, or are we reading instead a work of propaganda, a systematic creation of an ideology that was to shape female consciousness for the next two centuries? I have to conclude that the novel is and is intended to be

both personal and at the same time historically significant for what it originated: the ideology that I have labelled 'Gothic feminism'.<sup>1</sup>

Historians and critics have long recognized that Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) stands as one of the earliest and most important documents in the history of the feminist movement.<sup>2</sup> And when Wollstonecraft is discussed as one of the founding mothers of feminism much is made of her adherence to Enlightenment principles, the writings of John Locke and Montesquieu, and the French Revolutionary tradition of fraternity, liberty, and equality. Virtually everyone who has written on Wollstonecraft's feminism, in other words, sees her working within a male-originated and male-dominated tradition of writers.<sup>3</sup> And there is no denying the fact that Wollstonecraft consciously identified herself primarily with male writers. Her strange shadow-boxing with Rousseau throughout the *Vindication* indicates that her identification with him was stronger and more compelling than any she had with the various female writers of her time.

Rousseau, however, is not the issue, nor is Catherine Macaulay nor any of the other intellectual mentor-figures to whom Wollstonecraft owed allegiance at some time in her life. What is at stake in Wollstonecraft's career is her attempt to merge a deeply felt personal experience of pain with a more just social, legal, and political agenda for women. She wrote the *Vindication* out of the same impetus that she wrote the novels. We might say that the *Vindication* exists as the buried content of *Mary*, or rather that the novella is buried as the subtext of the *Vindication*. The ideology that I recognize operating in these texts I have called 'Gothic feminism', and I believe it emerged from the heady brew that was eighteenth-century Sentimentality, Gothicism, melodrama, and the widespread and popular educational treatises advocating equal opportunities and training for women. Gothic feminism is not about being equal to men; it is about being morally superior to men. It is about being a victim.

My contention is that a dangerous species of thought for women developed at this time and in concert with the Sentimentality of Richardson and the hyperbolic Gothic and melodramatic stage productions of the era. This ideology taught its audience the lessons of victimization well.<sup>4</sup> According to this powerful and socially coded

formula, victims earn their special status and rights through no act of their own but through their sufferings and persecutions at the hands of a patriarchal oppressor and tyrant. One would be rewarded not for anything one actively did, but for what one passively suffered. Women developed in this formula a type of behavior that we would recognize as passive-aggression; they were almost willing victims, not because they were masochists but because they expected a substantial return on their investment in suffering. Whereas Richardson's *Clarissa* found herself earning a crown in heaven for suffering rape by Lovelace, the women in Female Gothic texts are interested in more earthly rewards. The lesson that Gothic feminism teaches is that the meek shall inherit the Gothic earth; the Female Gothic heroine always triumphs in the end because melodramas are constructed that way. Justice always intervenes and justice always rectifies, validates, and rewards suffering. Terrible events can occur, but the day of reckoning invariably arrives for Gothic villains. The message that this ideology peddled fostered a form of passivity in women, a fatalism that the mainstream feminist would be loath to recognize today. And yet Gothic feminism is inherent in the special pleading of contemporary women who see themselves even today as victims of an amorphous and transhistorical patriarchy. And this type of thinking, this form of special pleading, originated in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft.

Let me begin by examining Wollstonecraft's *Mary*, as crude a piece of fiction as one is likely to read, and this is the author's opinion of the piece. Godwin tells us that the novel was inspired by Wollstonecraft's intense friendship with Fanny Blood, and that it was written during Wollstonecraft's disastrous foray serving as a governess for the Kingsboroughs in 1786.<sup>5</sup> The advertisement that Wollstonecraft composed for the novel distinguishes its heroine from the popular models of her day, but notice that this definition is posed in negative terms. Wollstonecraft's heroine is 'neither a *Clarissa*, a *Lady G* –, nor a *Sophie*', in other words, neither a sentimental Christian, an upper-class lecher, or a Rousseauian ideal. Wollstonecraft's *Mary* is a woman who possesses 'thinking powers', and from that simple fact all of her subsequent miseries would appear to result. Intelligence is always for Wollstonecraft a decidedly 'masculine' attribute, largely because she internalized her own society's rigid notions of gendered characteristics so thoroughly. She does not question, anymore than her reading audience did, that women were primarily emotional and intuitive, while

men were rational and logical. By not questioning these culturally-sanctioned assumptions, Wollstonecraft found herself in a hopeless quagmire. The only way women could improve themselves was to become as much like men as possible, and chief among the accomplishments she advocated for women was the need for them to repress their emotions and valorize their minds. Even when a woman attempted this most difficult of gender transmutations, however, she was still victimized by forces greater than herself; she was victimized by her exact opposite and her would-be complement, the emotional man.

Notice, however, that the novel begins by depicting for us the limited repertoire of acceptable femininities. We are presented first with a nasty portrait of the heroine's mother, Eliza, an indolent girl possessed of nothing but 'negative goodnature: her virtues, indeed, were all of that stamp'. Uneducated, prejudiced, concerned only with the '*shews* of things', she has no notion of what 'relative duties' she should perform (5). Unable to be either an effective mother or a valuable wife, she is the first culprit in the heroine's sorry life. With such a mother, Wollstonecraft implies, how could the daughter ever expect to achieve anything of significance. The mother's vacuity leads to an inheritance of emotionalism, triviality, and superficiality that she passes on to her unfortunate children. And clearly Wollstonecraft believed that this situation was a common one during the period. Surely she intended to skewer her own failed mother as well as her odious employer Lady Kingsborough. But in the portrait of the young Eliza we also recognize Wollstonecraft's first portrait of overdetermined femininity. This is a woman who has so thoroughly internalized the popular tropes of female vulnerability that she has effectively crippled herself.

The *Vindication*, of course, presents women who are very similar to Eliza – vacuous, sensual, selfish, vain. In the description we have of Eliza reading Warwick's *Platonic Marriage*, we see a condemnation of the popular sentimental fiction of the day that undercuts the existence of the very sentimental work we are reading. In the *Vindication* Wollstonecraft had penned her own attack on sentimental novels:

there is a display of cold artificial feelings [in such novels], and that parade of sensibility which boys and girls should be taught to despise

as the sure mark of a little vain mind. Florid appeals are made to heaven, and to the beauteous innocents, the fairest images of heaven here below, whilst sober sense is left far behind. — This is not the language of the heart, nor will it ever reach it, though the ear may be tickled (94).

The disjunction here between 'cold artificial feelings' and 'florid appeals made to heaven' reminds us that the head/heart dichotomy resided at the root of Enlightenment codes of conduct and feeling. Raymond Williams made this explicit in his definition of sensibility: '[Sensibility] was, essentially, a social generalization of certain personal qualities, or, to put it another way, a personal appropriation of certain social qualities'.<sup>6</sup> This is a bit like claiming 'the personal is political', and for Wollstonecraft, certainly she had a need to see her personal situation writ large as the basis for a political and social reform agenda.

If novels, according to Wollstonecraft in *Mary*, are 'the most delightful substitutes for bodily dissipation', they serve also to develop the passions and provide 'views of the human heart' (6). But these novels serve only to 'contaminate' the mother by making her aware of the fact that neither she nor her husband feel the way that young lovers play-act so successfully in the novels (6–7). By fictionally presenting an ideal of passion that no mortal woman or man could realistically achieve, the sentimental novel actually served to make women feel inadequate as both wives and mothers. By foisting an excessive emotionalism on their female readers, sentimentality actually produced a backlash. If women could not possibly live up to the standards of a Sophie or a Clarissa, then they would live up to another standard, a more palatable one that they crafted for themselves out of the Gothic genre.

Eliza's descent from self-constructed sentimental heroine to rather ordinary wife and mother begins with the births of her first two children – a sickly son and the robust Mary. Both children were given to nurses to raise while the mother attended to her dogs, the implication being that the mother was so ill-informed that she failed to recognize the importance of her role as educator and role model for her children. Lacking a formal education, apart from reading lessons delivered by the maids, Mary 'learned to think' (7) by being left alone. This situation of the young untutored mind forming itself while communing with Nature reminds us that Wollstonecraft was as

devoted a reader of Rousseau as anyone of her era. While she later took him severely to task for his depiction of the women in *Émile* (1762), at this date she imbibes more blatantly his philosophy than she might like us to notice.

Notice, also, the jealousy that the mother displays towards her daughter. Eliza does not want Mary to display her education or her polished manners because she fears that Mary, 'a fine tall girl', will gain the attention and 'notice' that she thinks she should continue to receive from society (read: men). The father, a drunkard who often 'exclaimed against female acquirements', stands as the complete and logical complement to the flawed mother. 'Very tyrannical and passionate' (7), his flaws cause the daughter great misery, a distress alleviated and transformed only by reading 'tales of woe', which produce in Mary 'a kind of habitual melancholy' and 'exquisite pain' (8).

At this early point in her life, however, the heroine practices for the first time the characteristic defence strategy she will perfect over her lifetime. She displaces and projects her own anger and disappointment onto someone else who suffers in lieu of the real subject causing the rage. In other words, a child is being beaten but it is not me. Mary's intense suffering, for example, is displaced onto a young maid who works in the family nursery. This maid, sent home to her destitute mother, kills herself, causing Mary to feel a sense of grief and responsibility for every living person within her domain. The suicidal maid initiates the descent of this text into the Female Gothic realm. Seeing others as displaced versions of the self begins the process of solipsism that characterizes the Female Gothic heroine. Because her parents failed to provide suitable or grandiose images for this heroine, she is compelled to seek other substitutes. In killing off the maid Mary kills off her childish self. She is not the target of the family's anger, the other child is. In killing off the maid as one projected aspect of her childish self, the girl who loves and needs her parents, she is now free to begin the search for new idealized (read: intellectual) parents. The family romance has begun.

'Several years older than Mary', her neighbor Ann, daughter of a widow and a dead clergyman, becomes Mary's dearest 'new friend' (9). Ann makes Mary write 'with tolerable correctness', she softens Mary's

manners, she serves as a substitute mother, civilizing Mary and calming her volatile emotions. If Mary is continually 'falling from one extreme into the other', Ann brings a new model of constancy and emotional stability into the familial situation (10). The challenge for the sentimental heroine lies precisely in moderating her emotions, educating her senses so that her intellect is in control, rather than secondary to the buffeting of the sensual or emotional. Mary undertakes this training when she retreats to a cave in the rocks and reads Thomson, Young, and Milton (11). The authors named above present Mary with the idea that there are two primary ways of reading the meaning and presence of the divine in this world: the book of Nature and the Bible. Intensely spiritual as only an adolescent can be, Mary lapses into the first and most persistent fantasy of Gothic feminism:

In order to be enabled to gratify herself in the highest degree, she practised the most rigid economy, and had such power over her appetites and whims, that without any great effort she conquered them so entirely, that when her understanding or affections had an object, she almost forgot she had a body which required nourishment. (12)

We can read this curious passage as nothing more than a statement revealing the heroine's propensity for anorexia and masochism as physical deprivation. But more important for our purposes is the loathing of the physical body that is subtly evidenced here. Throughout Wollstonecraft's writings she wages war on the female body, seeing it as flawed, freakish, weak, prone to the very emotional excesses that keep women inferior and enslaved to men.<sup>7</sup> Later when Wollstonecraft's daughter created a monster that suffers because of 'his' body we know that the daughter understood if only intuitively what her mother was trying to express: to escape, deny, reinvent the body was the only hope for women if they were ever to be rational and reasonable creatures.

If the first weak servant woman to die substituted for Mary's childhood hopes, Ann's declining state and eventual demise represent the destruction of Mary's adolescent dreams of spirituality, Nature, and beauty. Just as Mary becomes an 'heiress' and property to be bartered by her father in a profitable marriage, so do both Ann and Eliza begin to decline. It would appear that neither is necessary any longer, since

Mary is moving out of her dependent period and into the mature stage of marriage. Or so she thinks. In fact, Mary is unable to move out of her childish identifications with parental figures, and so she just keeps constructing one parent-substitute after another, never being able to accept the demands and realities required for marriage. Again, what one senses in the portrait of Mary is an intense sexual anxiety, a dread of the female body, a loathing of sexual passion, and almost a nausea toward men not coded as fathers. But if Mary is unable to find a suitable male counterpart, so is she unable to accept any other woman as anything other than flawed. Ann is not simply coded as 'mother' to Mary, she is also the epitome of the 'delicate' and 'truly feminine': 'timid and irresolute', and 'rather fond of dissipation', drawn not to the 'great, but the beautiful, or the pretty' (13).

But the ultimate test of the Female Gothic heroine is how she maneuvers her way out of the forced marriage. As a residual trace of the sentimental novelistic tradition still operating, the forced marriage to the odious suitor for purely mercenary motives is the ultimate indignity meted out to young women in a capitalistic society. To be nothing more than objects of barter between powerful men is to be rendered as nothing but lucre, coded as nonhuman. The scene in which Ann's mother is virtually forced out of her home, Ann is found 'in an hysteric fit', and Mary is impotent to play the role of provider, suggests the displaced sexual dynamic operating here. Ann has functioned until this period in Mary's psyche as a substitute mother, and Mary has clearly seen herself in the role of a child. But a gradual shift has occurred in the relationship. Mary is now better read, more controlled, more rational and in possession at least in the potential of a fortune. We are intended, that is, to read Mary as 'masculine' to Ann's overt and increasingly debilitating 'femininity'. The crisis arrives as Mary's father appears at Ann's house to tell her that Mary must marry Charles as quickly as possible (and notice that no one seems to have a last name in this novelistic terrain, suggesting the interchangeability or the mutual disinheritance of all the characters).<sup>8</sup> Mary does not take this news well. She 'rolls her eyes', in imitation of Ann's earlier 'hysteric fit', and experiences 'extreme horror at taking – at being forced to take, such a hasty step' (14). Now Mary is the child being beaten, and she is conscious of all eyes on her. While claiming that she has no 'prior attachment', she quickly admits to herself that she does: 'She loved Ann better than any one in the world' (15). In

fact, Mary enters into this marriage of convenience because it allows her to provide a home for Ann: 'To have this friend constantly with her; to make her mind easy with respect to her family, would it not be superlative bliss?' (15).

The marriage of Mary and Charles occurs only after the service for the sick is performed for the declining mother: 'Mary stood like a statue of Despair, and pronounced the awful vow without thinking of it; and then ran to support her mother, who expired the same night in her arms' (15). The confluence here of money and marriage and death makes manifest the ideology that Wollstonecraft was on one hand attacking and on the other hand reifying. Clearly Mary has been forced into an odious form of legal prostitution for dynastic and property reasons, and clearly such a marriage was for the heroine and her author a form of living death. But the marriage is also highly attractive to the heroine because it provides her with a respectable cover to live with her true beloved, Ann. The husband, a mere 'boy she [Mary] seldom took any notice of' (15), quickly and conveniently disappears to the Continent for a proper education, and Mary and Ann are allowed the freedom to continue to play-act their gender games with each other in safety. They sketch, play music, and appreciate Nature, but Mary is increasingly dissatisfied with Ann. Like Eliza, Ann provides only 'a negative blessing' because the only thing Mary can truly give Ann is a respite from poverty. As her dissatisfactions grow, so does Ann's fatal cough (16).

Mary's acquaintances have a tendency to die with uncanny regularity and with such convenient timing, juxtaposed as these deaths are to Mary's need to move on to a new stage of her life. As her hatred for her husband increases even in his absence, so does Ann languish and fade. If Mary cannot kill the husband, she will kill his substitutes. Poor Ann. She has played stand-in for Mary's mother and husband most of her adult life. One senses in this relation, as in all of her others, that Mary does not recognize Ann's real otherness to Mary anymore than she has with anyone else. Ann is, like Mary's mother, father, brother, and husband, a disappointment because like all of them she fails to possess 'a congenial mind' (16). But what seems to be at stake in this relationship is the status of other as 'transitional object' in Winnicott's definition of the concept.<sup>9</sup> Mary holds onto Ann the way a child holds onto a blanket, only to discard the object once

she is able to move securely into the next phase of her emotional development. Ann's usefulness is that she allows Mary to hold for a bit longer onto her childhood self and reject her identity as a married woman with a female body that very possibly will bear children and thus participate in the cycle of birth and death that Mary views with such horror.

But Ann is not the only substitute who is ultimately sacrificed in this text. The next calamity to strike concerns Mary's father, who dies after being thrown from a horse. Mary, it would appear, is earning her status as victim with a vengeance: 'It was the will of Providence that Mary should experience almost every species of sorrow' (17). What the author fails to add would more appropriately complete the thought: for a woman. The father's death and Ann's increasingly desperate situation are all dwarfed, however, by the most dreadful news Mary could possibly receive: her husband was returning home in the Spring. As if to find a plausible reason to flee from him as quickly as possible, Mary suddenly finds herself infatuated again with Ann, the woman she had found so tedious just a few weeks before.

Now when she is confronted with dealing with a man she suddenly finds '[h]er friendship for Ann occup[ying] her heart, and resembl[ing] a passion' (18). As she tries to describe this friendship to an unnamed 'man of genius', she presents herself as the mother of Ann, but he quickly sees through the ruse and responds by way of recognizing and pointing out the obvious 'romantic' nature of friendship, which is apparently more than Mary was capable of doing (18). And once in Portugal they live as a virtual couple: 'Mary always slept with Ann, as she was subject to terrifying dreams' (20). We might legitimately ask, to whom does the 'she' refer?

While living in England Mary had concerned herself with a trio of female types: her mother, Ann, and Ann's mother, all weak and dependent on her in various ways. Similarly, while living in Lisbon she meets with another trio of women, symbolic of the traditional varieties of feminine roles: 'a mother, her daughter, and niece' (21). Paragons of British propriety, shackled by conventions, empty headed, pretty but flawed by 'habits of folly', they were characterized by 'stupid gravity', 'weak minds', and 'narrow souls' (22) – just like the women she was later to characterize as representative of the sex in her

*Vindication*. Unable to 'relish the sublime', they have succumbed to worshipping the trivial and mundane (22). But clearly what they are unable to relish is the spectre of a married and wealthy woman travelling around Europe with a penniless older woman. When Mary breaks down and tells her new acquaintances that she fears she will not be able to live if her friend Ann dies, they are more than incredulous. '[H]ave you not a husband?' they ask. Alternating between shame and anger, Mary is unable to respond (23). She has just been reminded of the reality of her female body, and it causes her 'reason' to become 'bewildered' (23). Wanting to define herself as a mind without a body, she has just been rudely informed that however she may define herself, the world sees her merely as a married woman, a woman who has bartered her body for the privilege of possessing a man.

Ann has been dying for several pages, but her demise is sealed when Mary meets her next soulmate, Henry, the nephew of the very proper British women staying at the same rooming house. We know that Henry is Mary's ideal man because he is a 'man of learning' as well as a man who 'knew many of the intricacies of the human heart'. Like Mary, he communes with Nature, discusses 'very important subjects', and holds 'rational religious sentiments' (24). Neither superstitious like the Roman Catholics Mary observes with such disdain, nor trivial like his female relatives, Henry is 'pious'; he is, in short, the perfect husband for Mary. But, alas, she is already married to a foolish boy, and so she begins touring convents. Surely the timing of these visits is not a coincidence, but neither is the emphasis on the convent itself, which is presented throughout female Gothic novels as a complicated form of communal escape for women.<sup>10</sup> Wollstonecraft does not present a positive portrait of life in the convent, seeing the nuns instead as creatures of 'discontent', the 'most selfish creatures in the world' (25). Clearly the implication is that choosing celibacy as a way of avoiding the pitfalls inherent in sexuality is finally no solution at all for women. The passion one renounces in the body will only resurface as 'sorrow, the rust of the mind' (25).

If there is no escape from the body, what is a woman to do? Ann chooses to die. While touring the Portuguese countryside with Mary and Henry, Ann is surprised by a sudden rain shower which drenches her and her companions. Daring to walk on damp grass, Ann

aggravates her tubercular condition and returns to the boarding house to die peacefully in Mary's arms. Once again a sudden death is accompanied by a marriage, and once again we have a maid positioned in a substitutive role, although in this variation it is Mary's maid who marries immediately after Ann's death. The repeated structural similarities, the leitmotif of marriage coupled with the death of a woman, the beating fantasy of another woman standing instead of her sufferings, reinforces our awareness of the heroine's intense fear and ambivalence toward sexuality and the corrupt and corruptible female body. Marriage is associated in Mary's mind with the inevitability of female death. In her psychic configuration there would appear to be no way a woman can survive the conditions of marriage, either intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, or physically.

But as if to deny that her fear is of men and the sexual demands of marriage, Mary becomes immediately involved with Henry, the safely 'pious' man with a 'naturally weak' constitution and an abundance of 'sensibility' (29). Henry is the first of many weak, feminized men who populate female Gothic novels and win the heroine only after the ruder, more threateningly phallic males in the Gothic novel have been punished and destroyed. In Henry's case, his childhood resembles Mary's in a mirror-like fashion. He too had a mother who favored the elder brother, and he too possesses a refined and reflective mind, sensitive to music, literature, and Nature. Like Ann, serving as a substitute for Mary's inadequate mother, Henry now makes an irresistible offer: 'He then looked Mary full in the face; and, with the most insinuating accents, asked if he might hope for her friendship? If she would rely on him as if he was her father; and that the tenderest father could not more anxiously interest himself in the fate of a darling child, than he did in her's' (30). Safely positioned in a quasi-oedipal relationship with a man she finds emotionally and intellectually attractive, Mary has found someone who is as frightened by his body as she is of hers. But Mary finds herself 'unhinged' by the offer of paternity from a contemporary. Instead, she is filled with 'passion' and unsettling 'wishes which obtruded themselves' continually on her mind. As soon as she thinks about Henry, she is immediately reminded of her dead mother as well as her dead beloved Ann. In other words, sexual feelings for a man reactivate in Mary the terror of being female, of inhabiting a flawed and fatal female body. According to Mary, women, like the other female passenger on the

boat to England, are 'vulgar' (30). The physical realm of the body is fraught for Mary with anxiety, premonitions of death and disaster, decay and disappointment. Mary dreams of escape, not she claims from the 'contending elements' of the sea, but from 'herself' (31).

Mary's character is nothing if not predictable. She now realizes that she is able to use her husband as a barrier against her growing passion for Henry, just as she had used Ann earlier as a buffer against her husband. So flushed with growing passion that even Henry notices the change in her appearance, Mary quickly tells him that she has entered into a 'fatal tie' with a man she finds disgusting (32). Naturally delicate about discussing her feelings, she reveals all to Henry with the same sort of naïveté that we saw in her letter to a friend about Ann: 'Her delicacy did not restrain her, for her dislike to her husband had taken root in her mind long before she knew Henry' (32). Her dislike of her husband, indeed, was not personal because she does not and has not known the man, or rather 'boy'. Her dislike stems from the fact that she recognizes only too well the financial basis for what should be a sublimely emotional and spiritual arrangement, and that crude detail makes her unable to respond to him with anything other than disgust. Caught in a web of metaphysics of her own spinning, Mary spends her time on the boat journey back to England musing on the frailty of all flesh, the 'traitors lodged in [our] own breasts', the hopeless 'warfare of life' (38). Mary would appear to have embraced the belief that the only escape from the material realm can be found in the platonically-inspired illusion that human beings are primarily spiritual entities trapped in contemptible and corrupt physical bodies. We hear an echo of Blake's *Thel* here, just as earlier we heard Wollstonecraft condemn marriage, as Blake's poetry also does, as a form of legalized prostitution.<sup>11</sup>

Back in England Mary lives out the existential imperatives of such a philosophy. All she sees around her is 'vulgarity, dirt, and vice'. Her 'soul sickened' when she was confronted with drunken women and sailors, both of them living more comfortably in their skins than the tastes of the platonic Mary would allow (39). In fact, Mary soon refuses to live on her inherited estate with her husband, choosing instead to earn her living as an independent woman: 'I will work, she cried, do any thing rather than be a slave' (40). But she has no opportunity to work because she has no training, or at least she has

no training to do anything other than play the Lady Bountiful, wandering around the village helping the sick and poor. By the time we enter Chapter XXIII we know our heroine has stumbled into a full-blown Gothic tableaux, complete with crumbling old mansion-house, broken windows, and 'tattered shreds of rich hangings' decorating the walls (40). At the center of this Gothic scene, this beating fantasy, is a sick and dying young mother, surrounded by her five young and very dirty children. Mary's worst nightmare for herself – rampant fertility and the decay it inevitably produces – is reified in front of her. But does she flee? Of course not. She is drawn to the place and returns so continually that she herself contracts the woman's fever. Rejecting marriage for herself, she chooses to suffer the same debilitating illness that has almost killed her poor neighbor. Now the substitute formations that we have seen operating throughout this text are coming uncomfortably close to Mary herself. The maid or lower-class woman is again substituting for Mary, living out Mary's worst fears about maternity and marriage, but Mary no longer walks away this time unscathed, offering up Ann or her mother or a maid as the sacrifices instead. Mary is weakened by her illness, but emerges from it only to be in thrall to another pernicious philosophy. This one goes by the name of 'Sensibility' (43).

When Wollstonecraft presents Mary's written 'rhapsody on sensibility' to her readers we confess that we are hard pressed to take it as anything but camp, although it was taken quite seriously in its day as a particularly effective statement of 'Sensibility'.<sup>12</sup> The highflown sentiments, the denial and denigration of the body, the idealized belief in the perfect unification of reason with the passions – all of these are just so many statements of wish-fulfillment for Mary. All of them are tenets she would like to believe are true and achievable in this life. All of them, unfortunately, are escapes from or denials of the world of death that she knows all too well. And all of them are used as bait to attract an older and intelligent man, nameless but sufficiently fatherly to appeal to our Mary. No sooner, of course, does Mary realize that she is attracted to this man than a death occurs. Henry materializes just long enough to go out on a boating trip with Mary, a storm again comes suddenly on them, and he coughs his way to death in Mary's arms. Henry's death mirrors Ann's in ways that bespeak compulsion.

In losing Henry, however, Mary gains a mother, or more precisely, his mother. Henry's mother is made to suffer for the loss of her son, and confesses upon his death that she deserves this blow because of the favoritism she lavished on his older brother. Wollstonecraft's personal anger and disappointment in her own mother's favoritism of the elder brother is played out here, with the mother duly punished for her neglect of maternal duty to all her children equally. But notice that the triangular situations just keep proliferating here. No sooner does the beloved Henry die than the odious husband reappears and almost in tandem with the kindly and intelligent 'man who took so much notice of Mary, soon after her return to England' (52). The spiraling sense of doom here is played out in Mary's hysterical overreaction to her husband's presence:

Mary fainted when he approached her unexpectedly. Her disgust returned with additional force, in spite of previous reasonings, whenever he appeared; yet she was prevailed on to promise to live with him, if he would permit her to pass one year, travelling from place to place; he was not to accompany her. (52)

We might ask, why not make it one year and one day? That formula would make the passage conform more closely to the fairy-tale conventions that operate vaguely on the edges of the Sentimental tradition. But why exactly does Mary hate her husband so intensely? Her overreaction bespeaks obsessive-compulsive behavior, but notice that she gives us one clue when she tells us that he had chosen to remain on the continent, not to prolong his education, but to attend 'masquerades' and other 'burlesque amusements' (46). This last piece of information is delivered with such contempt that we know it reveals what it purports to conceal. Mary is disgusted by her husband's unthinking and unanguished acceptance of his body, the world of the senses. Unable to appreciate the realm of the mind, he lives instead in a world Mary rejected because of her femininity. A woman cannot accept the world of the senses because she would have to accept at the same time the inevitable decay and disappointment inherent in her female body. Mary hates her husband because he is male. She hates herself because she is female.

Returning to her husband and home after the proverbial year's absence, Mary finds herself sickened by his touch. If he takes her hand or 'mention[s] any thing like love, she would instantly feel a sickness,

a faintness at her heart, and wish, involuntarily, that the earth would open and swallow her' (53). Immersing herself in her role as Lady Bountiful of the village, Mary sinks even deeper while she thinks she's floating. Falling further and further into 'a void', she realizes there is no escape except through death. She finds her only happiness in imagining that by dying she will be 'hastening to that world *where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage*' (53; Wollstonecraft's italics). The Miltonic and Biblical imagery of androgynous angels is used later by Blake to represent the escape from gendered warfare that was to characterize the poetic figures in his entire poetic corpus. But what specifically does it mean for women to escape the body? The hysterical denial of maternity, the fear and loathing of genital sexuality, and the nauseous response to the physical body that suffuse this text could be seen as just the peculiar neurosis of one rather unhappy but intelligent woman. Instead, however, I would argue that these responses were endemic in a culture that validated reason, the life of the mind, over the emotions and the body.

In a radically polarized and polarizing culture, gendered constructions could not fail to follow bifurcated gender lines as they developed and rigidified into ideological forms. If 'masculinity' was characterized by its adherence to rational behaviors and 'femininity' was coded as emotional and physical, then women were in a hopelessly trapped situation. To be a woman meant that one adhered to a system of characteristics that demeaned and sentenced one to a permanently inferior mode of being. The valorizing of 'Sensibility' was a defence-mechanism, a way of trying to convince oneself that the emotions were not inferior to the mind, but only needed to be brought into harmony and unification with reason to be valuable. The fact that Sensibility as a philosophy was fought out over the body of middle-class women evidences its ambivalence as a gendered construction. If 'men of feeling' were becoming fashionable, then so too were women of intellect. The dilemma of being caught between two polarized extremes was more than the Female Gothic heroine could endure. The heroine of *Mary* says at one point that she would like to be 'a heroine, half determined to bear whatever fate should inflict'. But the next moment she realizes she does not have the strength to fight the good fight, 'her mind would recoil – and tenderness possessed her whole soul' (46). Mary is a weak woman because she is unable to balance the powers of her intellect with the claims of her emotions. Try as

Wollstonecraft might, there is just no making a man of Mary. This appeal to the special status of the victimized and persecuted Mary, continually losing all her beloved objects, the innocent witness of these many beating fantasies, reminds us that in fact the sentimental heroine desires suffering as a reified value not only for its own sake but for its exchange value on the market. Mary's delusion is that if she suffers enough, loses enough loved ones, she will somehow finally be rewarded by an escape into the realm of the perfect masculine mind.

And this is the saddest aspect of this rather pathetic novel. Mary as a sentimental heroine is obviously victimized by her parents and their virtual selling of her into an unsuitable marriage. But finally one senses in the character of Mary a real repugnance toward her own body, her own 'passions' and female emotions. This is a woman who is genuinely drawn to the dream of escaping the female body because she has seen the corruption and destruction to which it is heir. This is a woman who actually thinks that becoming as much like a man – 'thinking like a man' – will be her saving grace. This is a woman who cannot bear the thought of becoming a mother because she was never successfully mothered herself. Mary continually seeks love objects, substitute formations for her lacking parents, but the objects she finds desirable are always unattainable. Ann, Henry, the nameless older man – these people are always less real than they are fantasy figures for Mary to love from a safe and non-threatening distance.

But this raises the central problem with the work: how conscious is Wollstonecraft about the psychological compulsions of her heroine? Does she recognize the self-destructive and regressive nature of Mary's psychological makeup? Wollstonecraft as author seems to be divided on her intentions in the work. At times she seems to be satirizing Mary as a weak and foolishly self-deluded prig, while at other points in the work she appears to be celebrating Mary as the victim of unjust social and financial prejudices that have betrayed her mind and her emotions. Surely, the figure can be read both ways, but the text, standing as it does at the beginning of Wollstonecraft's career as a novelist, presents only in the most rudimentary form the celebration of female victimization that will develop into what I have recognized as Gothic feminism. Celebrating a woman because of the trials and tribulations she encounters, rewarding her for enduring the melodrama

that her sex has scripted for her – these are the elements that would come to form Gothic feminism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have explored the development of the ideology I have labelled 'Gothic feminism' in my book *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> The history of modern feminism can be traced to Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston, Second Edition (New York: Norton, 1998). In addition to reprinting an authoritative text of the *Vindication*, this edition contains a valuable collection of essays on 'backgrounds', 'The Wollstonecraft Debate', and 'Criticism'.

<sup>3</sup> The most sophisticated recent analysis of Wollstonecraft's feminism and its origins in the late eighteenth-century ambiance of 'gender, class, and cultural revolution', can be found in Gary Kelly's *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992). A summary of the subject can be found in Jennifer Lorch's *Mary Wollstonecraft: The Making of a Radical Feminist* (New York: Berg, 1990). And, for general overviews of the subject, see Katherine M. Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Alice Browne, *The Eighteenth-Century Feminist Mind* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987); Jane Rendell, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780–1860* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> The best discussion of the development of Sentimentality as a change in consciousness can be found in Jean Hagstrum's *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). On the same subject, also see the valuable collection of essays: *Sensibility in Transformation: Creative Resistance to Sentiment from the Augustans to the Romantics*, ed. Syndy McMillen Conger (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990). Of particular interest in the Conger collection is Catherine N. Parke's article 'What Kind of Heroine is Mary Wollstonecraft?', pp. 103–19. And, on weakness as a central

component to Sentimentality, see R.W. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974); Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986); and Syndy Conger, 'The Sentimental Logic of Wollstonecraft's Prose', *Prose Studies*, 10 (1987), 143–58; and her *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from *Mary: A Fiction* will be taken from the Penguin edition, ed. Janet Todd (London: Penguin, 1992). See Todd's Introduction for a useful discussion of the biographical sources for *Mary* (pp. vii–xiv), as well as her longer critical introduction to the life and work co-authored with Moira Ferguson, *Mary Wollstonecraft* (Boston: Twayne, 1984). Both sources draw heavily on Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of the Rights of Woman* (1978).

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 236. Wollstonecraft's conflicted relationship with Sensibility as a genre is admirably analyzed by Stephen Cox, 'Sensibility as Argument', in *Sensibility in Transformation*, ed. Conger, pp. 63–82. Cox concludes, 'the sensibility movement often encouraged social conformism . . . it upheld an ideal of unlimited feeling that could never be fully realized' (79). For a recent discussion of how Wollstonecraft rewrote Sensibility as a literary heritage, see Claudia Johnson's *Equivocal Beings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). The most sophisticated analysis of Wollstonecraft's relation to the literary styles and ideologies of her day continues to be Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> For an insightful reading of Wollstonecraft's attitude toward the body of the mother and the prostitute, see Laurie Langbauer, 'An Early Romance: The Ideology of the Body in Mary Wollstonecraft's Writing', in *Women and Romance: The Consolations of Gender in the Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 93–126. On the same subject, see the exchange between Timothy J. Reiss, 'Revolution in Bounds: Wollstonecraft, Women, and Reason', pp. 11–50, and Frances Ferguson, 'Wollstonecraft Our Contemporary', pp. 51–62, in *Gender*

*and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, ed. Linda Kauffman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> 'Charles' is the name of Wollstonecraft's youngest brother, born when Mary was eleven. After the death of her mother, Wollstonecraft superintended the education and career of Charles, acting as his very indulgent mother-substitute.

<sup>9</sup> D.W. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena', in *Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> See Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), for a brief discussion of Wollstonecraft's suspicion, expressed in the *Vindication*, about all-female communities: 'women ignite each others' grossness only because they are not trained to self-respect' (*Communities*, p. 15). Emily W. Sunstein has a different reading of Wollstonecraft's horror at women mingling together: 'Mary was something of a prude, a consequence, in her case, of overvaluing sex' (see: *A Different Face: The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* [New York: Harper and Row, 1975] p. 60).

<sup>11</sup> Blake provided the illustrations for Wollstonecraft's book, *Original Stories from Real Life*, published in 1791. Blake, of course, knew Fuseli and his wife well, and may have rescripted Mary's frustrated love for Fuseli in a number of his poems. See Thomas A. Vogler, "'in vain the Eloquent tongue": An Un-reading of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*', for a reading of Blake's interaction with Wollstonecraft's sexual politics [in *Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method*, ed. Dan Miller, Mark Bracher, and Donald Ault (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 271–309].

<sup>12</sup> Wollstonecraft's 'rhapsody on Sensibility' was reprinted in *The Young Gentleman and Lady's Instructor* (1809), becoming, as Todd informs us, a '*locus classicus* of sensibility' well into the nineteenth century (*Sensibility: An Introduction*, p. 122). Todd goes on to note a 'shrill sound' in the passage, along with a blatant 'anti-sexual quality' and 'a neurotic recoil' against the body in sentimental works (pp. 122–3). Todd comes closest to my thesis when she notices that '[w]ithout persecution and social purpose, then, and without extreme sexual threat, female sensibility comes perilously close to the self-indulgence

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of a wilful victim, with no redemptive influence and no power of cure'  
(p. 123).