Tyranny of Sentimental Form: Wollstonecraft’s Mary and the Gendering of Anxiety

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I.

Historian G. J. Barker-Benfield has asserted that the rise of the culture of sensibility can be explained by examining the feminization of English society that occurred—along with an increase in commercial trading and consumerism—during the long eighteenth century: "[t]his culture was brought into existence in decisive part by the public 'awakening' of a critical mass of Englishwomen" (xviii). But, as Barker-Benfield's study reveals, the radical promise of sensibility to transform the relationship between the sexes was not fulfilled, largely because women such as Mary Wollstonecraft failed to trust sensibility's transformative effects on gender and society. If Sensibility can be identified with the female virtues of empathy and sympathetic feeling, then it foregrounded women's physical weaknesses, emotional delicacy, and cloistering in the private domain. And if Sense can be identified with male virtu, then it privileged the realm of the public—the mind, Reason, and Enlightenment values such as emotional control and rational discourse. Therefore, as a woman aligned herself with sensibility over sense, she became complicit in her own exclusion from the public realm. Hence, 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? What we might recognize as the valorization of the masculine woman first assumed widespread circulation in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, while to
read Wollstonecraft's two quasi-sentimental novels—*Mary, A Fiction* (1788) and *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798)—is to realize that what we now call "victim feminism" originated in the female gothic novelistic ideology: the hyperbolic gestures, the frenzied poses of victimization that tip these novels over the edge from sentimentality into gothicism.

In writing these two novellas Wollstonecraft exposed the tyranny of sentimental literary formulae for women and at the same time 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. And as the majority of her critics have noticed, in the fictions we see in only slightly veiled terms the biography of Wollstonecraft herself, the continual disappointments in the weak mother, the failing father, the dependent sisters and disappointing female friends. At times, in fact, the baldness of the narratives becomes strained and embarrassing, as if the author could not bring herself to conceal in even the most rudimentary manner her personal pain. Failing to distance herself from her narratives in what we would recognize as a socially acceptable (read: literary) manner, Wollstonecraft virtually slaps her reader in the face with her anger, her impotence, her frustration. At times when reading the novels 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 works of propaganda, systematic creations of an ideology that was to shape female consciousness for the next two centuries? I have to conclude that the novels are and are intended to be both—personal and at the same time historically significant for what they originated: the ideology that I have labeled "gothic feminism."

Traditionally, critics have 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. 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 liberty, equality, and fraternity. 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. There is no denying the fact that Wollstonecraft
consciously identified herself primarily with male writers, indeed, that she adapted masculine codes of behavior for herself, at least before she met Imlay. She also made some extravagantly rational recommendations in her *Vindication*, primarily in her advocacy of republican marriage:

This [sexual] passion, naturally increases by suspense and difficulties, draws the mind out of its accustomed state, and exalts the affections; but the security of marriage, allowing the fever of love to subside, a healthy temperature is thought insipid, only by those who have not sufficient intellect to substitute the calm tenderness of friendship, the confidence of respect, instead of blind admiration, and the sensual emotions of fondness. This is, must be, the course of nature.—Friendship or indifference inevitably succeeds love. (30)

Later Wollstonecraft claims that she “do[es] not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves” (62). That sort of self-possession, as the pre-Imlay Wollstonecraft well knew, was possible only if women received the same educations that men did, and if they learned to moderate their emotions instead of being enslaved by them: “Women subjected by ignorance to their sensations, and only taught to look for happiness in love, refine on sensual feelings, and adopt metaphysical notions respecting that passion, which leads them shamefully to neglect the duties of life” (183). These admirable sentiments were all contradicted when Wollstonecraft herself fell deeply in love for the first time with a man who awakened all of her “sensual feelings” and later caused her shamefully to neglect her own duty not only to herself but to her own pride, not to mention her self-possession.

In her early desire to assert the sameness of the sexes, Wollstonecraft attempted to align herself, at least in her prose writings, with the ideal of what Anne Mellor calls the “rational woman,” the woman whose education has given her the same moral code and ability to discern and judge as men possess. But alongside this revolutionary ideal of education and rationality was Wollstonecraft’s continual ambivalence toward the female body and the emotions, an attraction/repulsion syndrome that finally was resolved only in her painful life experiences with both Imlay and Godwin. The configuration of this dialectical dilemma is prefigured in the intense shadow-boxing she conducts with Rousseau throughout the *Vindication*, an easily discerned obsession
indicating that her identification with him was stronger and more compelling than any she had with the various female writers of her time. She protests just too much about Rousseau for us to believe that she was anything other than enthralled by his vision of women and sexuality (we are not the least surprised when we learn that she confessed in a letter to Imlay that she had always been "half in love with Rousseau").

But finally Rousseau is not the issue, nor is Catherine Macaulay or any of the other intellectual mentors to whom Wollstonecraft owed allegiance at some time in her life. What is at stake in Wollstonecraft's career is her attempt to merge deeply felt personal experiences of pain and trauma 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 both of her novels, or rather that the novels are buried as the subtexts in the *Vindication*. The ideology that I recognize operating in all of 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.

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. The ideology taught its audience the lessons of victimization well. 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 far 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 undergirds 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—I would contend—originated in the fictional works of Mary Wollstonecraft.

II.

Let me begin by examining Wollstonecraft’s earliest attempt at a novel, *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. 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, nor a Rousseauistic 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. So much for the first introduction of a woman with a “man’s brain.” 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, any more than her reading audience did, that women were primarily emotional and intuitive, while men were inherently 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 notion that they 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.
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 woman possessed of nothing but "negative good-nature: her virtues, indeed, were all of that stamp" (5). Uneducated, prejudiced, concerned only with the "shew" of things, she has no notion of what "relative duties" she should perform. 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. Clearly Wollstonecraft believed that this situation was a common one during the period, and in the portrait of Eliza 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 attempt at portraying overdetermined femininity, 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.” This is a bit like claiming “the personal is political,” and for Wollstonecraft, certainly she had what we can recognize as a grandiose 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 playact 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 of “genius” 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 Emile, at this date she imbibes more blatantly his philosophy than she might like us to notice.

The jealousy that the mother displays towards her daughter reminds us all too clearly of fairy-tale conventions in which an older woman’s anxieties about sexual displacement are projected onto a younger version of herself, her maturing and attractive 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 drunk 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). Wollstonecraft’s personal disappointment in her own father was deep, if not pathological. When he remarried after her mother’s death it was to a woman named Lydia, whom Mary called “an artful kind of upper servant.” She confessed later to her sister Eliza that it would “blister her tongue” to address her as “Mrs. Wollstonecraft.” The shame that the Wollstonecraft sisters experienced due to their father’s remarriage to this younger woman would appear to be played out in the portrait we have in Mary of the “passionate” father.

At this early point in her life, however, Mary practices for the first time the characteristic defense 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 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, so obviously a displaced representation of Mary’s own familial despair, 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. The death of the anonymous maid begins the psychological process that we will see continue throughout both of Wollstonecraft’s fictions. In killing off the maid Mary exterminates her childish self. She is not the target of the family’s anger and disappointment, 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 now begun in earnest.

“Several years older than Mary,” her neighbor Ann, daughter of a widow and 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 could 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 and the intense gendered anxiety that are 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.10 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 (read honorary men).

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 as the originating core 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 Ann, like Mary’s biological mother, is just too weak to be an effective female role model. Mary seems to imagine that she is alone of all her sex in having both an intellect and a sensitive and feeling spirit. We might recall here that Wollstonecraft exploded on more than one occasion: "What a fine thing it is to be man!"

But the ultimate test of the female gothic heroine is how successfully she manages to maneuver 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. During 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. Both displays suggest 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). 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). 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 dead 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, 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,” quickly and conveniently disappears to the Continent for a proper education, and Mary and Ann are allowed the freedom to continue to playact 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 the other as “transitional object” in D. W.
Winnicott’s definition of the concept. 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 due back 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 “[her] 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:

I love her for her agreeable qualities, and substantial virtues. Continual attention to her health, and the tender office of a nurse, have created an affection very like a maternal one—I am her only support, she leans on me—could I forsake the forsaken, and break the bruised reed—No—I would die first! (18)

Her correspondent 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 worshiping the trivial and mundane (22). But clearly what they are unable to relish is the spectre of a married and wealthy woman traveling 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 and financial security.

Ann has been dying for many pages; 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.

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 that 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 in stead of my 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, 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 reanimate 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. Naturally delicate about discussing her feelings, she reveals all to Henry with the same sort of naivety 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.”

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.14

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 platonically 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 23 we know that Mary has stumbled into a full-blown gothic tableau, 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." The high-flown 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, and all of them, unfortunately, are escapes from or denials of the world of death that she knows all too well. The ultimate indignity, however, is that all of them are used as bait to attract an older and intelligent man, nameless but sufficiently fatherly to appeal to 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. Wollstonecraft's limited narrative repertoire and
her fixation on setting quasi-siblings up to take the punishment for her heroine is betrayed most obviously in the need to kill Mary's love interests in as sentimental and displaced a manner as possible.

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. The triangular situations, however, 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). A 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 fairytale 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.

III.

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 defense-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 so 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 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 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.

*A Vindication* calls on women to have power over themselves, to unfold their faculties and to vigorously exercise their minds as well as their bodies, to recognize, despite the legitimate claims of various relationships and the duties associated with them, that a woman's first duty is to herself. If trifling occupations have made woman a trifler, then other more rational activities can make her something more. Wollstonecraft's optimistic solution for women was that they could, with a formal education, become more rational, and therefore more like men. But this optimism faded when she picked up the pen to translate that hope into fictional portraits and found herself trapped instead in the Sentimental literary landscape. In her fiction, Wollstonecraft's heroines are helpless victims of the legal, social, and political systems that have been designed by a cruel and arbitrary Nobadaddy, the "Patriarchy." If the patriarchy did not exist in public consciousness before this date, it would have had to be invented by Wollstonecraft in order to make her case for women. She succeeded in creating a powerful trope—female victimization—but she only half-glimpsed the way out. Wollstonecraft's fictional heroines want the freedoms and the educational and cultural opportunities that are routinely doled out to men, and surely this is only just. Her heroines, also, however, disdain marriage and claim to want sexual freedom, but as soon as their men choose to avail themselves of the same sexual freedoms, her heroines are distraught, nay suicidal. Contradictions taint Wollstonecraft's feminism, largely, I would claim, because she still clung to the vestiges of an outmoded Sentimental tradition. Her vision of sexual freedom was inextricably bound up and complicated by notions of "the tender heart" of women, so that her heroines stake everything on love, only to be persistently disappointed. The head/heart split, overvaluing the life of the mind while grudgingly accepting the body, led finally to the impasse that neither Wollstonecraft nor her heroines could escape.
APPENDIX

Mary's "rhapsody on sensibility" from Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary: A Fiction*:

She observed the change in herself, tried to account for it, and wrote with her pencil a rhapsody on sensibility.

"Sensibility is the most exquisite feeling of which the human soul is susceptible: when it pervades us, we feel happy; and could it last unmixed, we might form some conjecture of the bliss of those paradisiacal days, when the obedient passions were under the dominion of reason, and the impulses of the heart did not need correction.

"It is this quickness, this delicacy of feeling, which enables us to relish the sublime touches of the poet, and the painter; it is this, which expands the soul, gives an enthusiastic greatness, mixed with tenderness, when we view the magnificent objects of nature; when the flowers unfold themselves, and exhale their sweets, and the voice of music is heard in the land. Softened by tenderness; the soul is disposed to be virtuous. Is any sensual gratification to be compared to that of feeling the eyes moistened after having comforted the unfortunate?

"Sensibility is indeed the foundation of all our happiness; but these raptures are unknown to the depraved sensualist, who is only moved by what strikes his gross senses; the delicate embellishments of nature escape his notice; as do the gentle and interesting affections.—But it is only to be felt; it escapes discussion." [from the Penguin edition, ed. Janet Todd, 43]

NOTES

England—the problematic essentialism to be located in identifying the “masculine” with rationality and the “feminine” with the emotions and the body—is remarkably complex and contradictory. Major discussions of the problem of Wollstonecraft’s lack of authorial distance on this issue can be found in Mary Poovey, The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984). Poovey explores how rhetorical figures display the tension that exists between Wollstonecraft’s attempts to deny the idea that women are essentially sexual beings and her own belief that they need sexual and emotional relationships. Cora Kaplan explores Wollstonecraft’s identification of the rational woman with the eradication of female sexual desire in her “Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class, and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism,” in Making a Difference, ed. Gayle Green and Coppelia Kahn (NY: Methuen, 1985) and “Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism” in Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism (London: Verso, 1986). On the same subject, see Anna Wilson, “Wollstonecraft and the Search for the Radical Woman,” Genders 6 (1989): 88-101. Gender stereotypes are displayed in Wollstonecraft’s own letters. When she praises her dearest friend Fanny Blood, the biographical model for Ann in Mary, she tells her correspondent Jane Arden that Fanny “has a masculine understanding, and sound judgment, yet she has every feminine virtue” (her italics). Later she observes that women are weaker and inferior to men, “the weakest as well as the most oppressed half of the species. ... I have been led to imagine that the few extraordinary women who have rushed ... out of the orbit prescribed to their sex, were male spirits, confined by mistake in female frames” (her italics; quoted in Emily Sunstein, A Different Face: The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft [Boston: Little, Brown, 1975], 55; 211).


Tyranny of Sentimental Form


7. Emily W. Sunstein begins her insightful biography of Wollstonecraft with the chapter, “The Original Defect,” an analysis of Wollstonecraft’s flawed relationship with her parents as the originating wound in her psyche. She concludes, “the parental flaws of Elizabeth and Edward John Wollstonecraft and the influences of Mary’s early life, instead of training her to acceptance, brought about a protest unusual in degree and kind that dominated the rest of her life” (20).

9. Wollstonecraft’s troubled relationship with both her parents forms one of the central concerns in the many biographies we have of her. The discussion of her attitude toward her stepmother can be found in Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), 22. For a different position, see Mitzi Myers, “Pedagogy as Self-Expression in Mary Wollstonecraft,” in *The Private Self*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988).

10. Wollstonecraft’s statement can be found in Ralph M. Wardle, ed. *Godwin and Mary: Letters of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft* (Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 1966), 94. I do not intend to suggest that Wollstonecraft was a borderline personality or even particularly neurotic. Those positions have been advanced most notoriously by the infamous latter-day Freuds, Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham, M.D., in their classic diatribe *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (New York: Harper, 1947). Their chapter on Wollstonecraft, “The Feminist Complex,” condemns Wollstonecraft as one of “the most devout phallic worshipers of all time” (148), a woman suffering from an intense case of “penis-envy” (149). As annoying as this book is, it is an interesting historical document charting post-World War II attempts to pathologize women who wanted to
continue working outside the home after their men had returned from the war.

12. “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.

13. See Nina Auerbach’s *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 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” (15). 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* 60).


15. 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*, 122) [Reproduced Appendix 1]. 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 (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 of a willful victim, with no redemptive influence and no power of cure” (123).