

# MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE ENGLISH JACOBIN NOVEL

Politics, Gender, and Sentimentalism in Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798)

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Vanessa Van Puyvelde

Student number: 01502739

Supervisor: Dr Koenraad Claes

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**Epigraph**

“The Revolution [...] was not merely an event that had happened outside her; it was an active agent in her own blood. She had been in revolt all her life—against tyranny, against law, against convention. The reformer’s love of humanity, which has so much of hatred in it as well as love, fermented within her”.

—Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 1932

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## Introduction

The 1790s were a decade of social and political crisis for France as well as Britain. Not only did the French Revolution polarize British society into supporters and opponents of the Revolution, but the heated discussions over its significance for Britain electrified the nation and triggered a large-scale cultural response. Both British writers who sympathized with the democratic ideals of the French revolutionaries as well as loyalist and conservative writers, who did not take the French Revolution as an inspiration, turned to imaginative literature as a way of expressing and channelling their political suspicions. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of these authors to capitalize on fiction's suitability for social criticism by way of writing her posthumously published novel *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798). This paper will not only discuss what may have inspired Wollstonecraft to write a so-called "Jacobin" novel, but it will also explore the manifold ways in which she deployed the novelistic conventions of the eighteenth century in order to have the novel serve her political radicalism.

The French Revolution was a profoundly transformative event of social and political significance for Britain. As the Revolution "[inspired] a renewal of social criticism directed at the system of court politics" (Kelly, *English Fiction* 24), late-eighteenth-century Britain witnessed the proliferation of debates about political issues to do with natural rights and social reform. Over the course of this war of ideas, which is more commonly referred to as the Revolution Controversy, British writers who sympathized with the French revolutionaries quickly identified the value of literature as a vehicle for the critical discussion of reformist ideas. This proximity of the literary and the political, however, was presumed dangerous by the British government upon which there was "a significant increase in the coercive powers of the State" (Hilton 65). By the middle of the decade, Pitt's repressive measures against British radicals had subdued many of the pro-Revolutionary

voices, and “the old latitude and tolerance of political controversy was gone” (Philip 257). Especially during the war with France, British writers could no longer openly show their support for the French Revolution considering that such signs of solidarity could be interpreted as unpatriotic behaviour. In addition to these political concerns, British writers of the loyalist side contemptuously portrayed both the French revolutionaries and their English sympathizers as extremist republican enthusiasts, or Jacobins. Even though “the [so-called] English Jacobins’ ideas had much more in common with the moderate, late-Enlightenment values of the French Girondins” (Kelly, *English Fiction* 30), the fear of mass mobilization through popular forms of literature made it necessary for their opponents to use the term “Jacobin” as a pejorative for radical politics.

As a consequence of this counter-revolutionary effort, late-eighteenth-century radicalism found expression in mass-produced literary genres, such as the Gothic-sentimental novel, instead of more controversial non-literary texts like the pamphlet or the philosophical treatise. The literary developments into the area of Jacobin fiction distinctly illustrate the existence of such an inextricable relationship between political activism and affective cultural production. At the same time as the French Revolution “revivified the ideological battles of the seventeenth century” (Blakemore 15), British novelists recognized the political efficacy of pre-Revolutionary sentimental fiction considering that the novel, “with its emphasis on subjective experience in private life, usually pretended to depict only the private aspects or consequences of public and political affairs” (Kelly, “Women Novelists” 374). That is to say, “in its guise as ‘mere’ entertainment, [...] prose fiction was ideally suited for the role of ideological communication [during the 1790s]” (Kelly, *English Fiction* 11).

Because of the French Revolution, then, “women writers and “their” genre—the novel— [were enabled] to intervene in the public and political sphere from which both had long been

excluded” (Kelly, “Women Novelists” 374). Writing in the wake of the French Revolution and the subsequent Reign of Terror, Mary Wollstonecraft became one of the leading figures of the Revolution Controversy in Britain. Championing her radical views to do with gender equality and women’s advancement in her conduct manuals and polemical pamphlets, it is in fact Wollstonecraft’s ambiguous relationship with the novel that has attracted increasing attention from a wide range of scientific interests.

Although Wollstonecraft’s literary career did not develop around a single genre, the fact remains that novels frame her career as a professional writer. In turning to the literary form of the novel in *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), Wollstonecraft inaugurated her career by way of articulating the political arguments that she would later advance in her polemical works. *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798), then, was written in the context of the late Revolution debate, revising some of the central arguments previously discussed in her political writings. As Claudia Johnson asserts, “[t]he novel’s [...] relatively wide public, and its formal suppleness made it a natural choice for an aspiring writer interested in treating the subjects of virtue, desire, education, [...] sensibility, and justice” (190). Having said that, however, the fact remains that Wollstonecraft warned against the corrupting influence of novels in earlier works, “[specifically attacking] the novel for reproducing women’s cultural and social inferiority by depicting and disseminating court culture and emulation” (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 206). In a similar vein, Wollstonecraft argued against the dangers of excessive Sensibility in producing “a romantic twist of the mind, which has been very properly termed *sentimental*” [emphasis in original] (VRW 271). Of particular interest, then, is Wollstonecraft’s novel *The Wrongs of Woman*, which, in spite of her scathing remarks about novels and her severe critique of the ideology of sentimental fiction, not only seems to advocate Sensibility, but also draws on various fashionable styles of the period such as sentimental and Gothic fiction.

Wollstonecraft's complicated attitude towards sentimental literature and its pernicious effects is addressed more elaborately in Daniel O'Quinn's article "Trembling: Wollstonecraft, Godwin and the Resistance to Literature". After establishing the logic of Wollstonecraft's polemic against sentimental fiction, O'Quinn argues that *The Wrongs of Woman* dramatizes the ideas of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). His article contains a detailed discussion of the ways in which Wollstonecraft emphasizes how Maria's domestic and educational confinement cause her to fall prey to the delusory effects of sentimental novels. O'Quinn goes even further in his exploration of the connection between Maria's literary confinement and her seduction by both Venables and Darnford by suggesting that women's excessive fondness for novels makes them liable to romantic fancies and highly susceptible to men's acts of seduction (766).

Even though a number of critics have explored the similarities between Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* and her *Wrongs of Woman*, there has been little discussion of the difference in form, and the complex ways in which the narrative account of her novel differs from her polemical prose. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine in what ways *The Wrongs of Woman* follows the novelistic conventions of the eighteenth century in order to authenticate its political message. This essay will also add to previous research by way of investigating what may have encouraged Wollstonecraft to write a fictional addendum to her *Vindication* in spite of her exclamations against novels in earlier works.

This paper will contrast Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* with her *Vindication* against the intellectual and political backdrop of the French Revolution. Whilst *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was written at the height of Wollstonecraft's radical optimism about the French Revolution and shortly after the success of her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), *The Wrongs of Woman* was written in the feverish atmosphere of the late-1790s, "after the disappointment of



[Wollstonecraft's] political hopes" (Johnson 190). The historical context of the social and political crisis of the 1790s will be taken into account as well as the literary developments into the area of Jacobin fiction. Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* can in fact be argued to fit into this trend for Jacobin novels considering that it dramatizes revolutionary themes and issues, such as the legal exclusion and social oppression of women. By means of juxtaposing these two works and considering them in relation to the French Revolution, this study will not only elucidate the specific impact of the Revolution on Mary Wollstonecraft; it will also provide more general insights into its effects on British novelists of the 1790s.

### **Eighteenth-Century Associations of Gender and Genre**

Although literature became a site of ideological contestation in the face of the cataclysmic events of the French Revolution, the traditional associations of gender and genre continued to shape Britain's literary sphere. Considering that "intellectual and public activity were still associated with men and the emotions still associated with women" (Kelly, *English Fiction* 25), the question of female authors' access to male-controlled forms of textual production produced intense anxieties about political unrest and cultural effeminacy. Women writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, in fact continually "exploited existing literary opportunities in order to promote the condition of women" (Keen 173). Needless to say, Wollstonecraft's alternative position as a woman allowed her to observe the asymmetrical power hierarchy which subsisted in the cultural conventions of the eighteenth century. Considering that "all forms of writing were already strongly associated with either 'masculine' or 'feminine' culture" (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 108), the gendering of writing compelled Wollstonecraft to combine existing 'feminine' and 'masculine' discourses in order to empower her political radicalism. With her two political pamphlets, for instance, Wollstonecraft challenged the boundaries of female publication and transgressed into the male intellectual domain by means of participating in those fields of textual production that were conventionally reserved for men. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, on the contrary, Wollstonecraft turned to the novel of Sensibility in order to propagate her political ideas.

Considering that "Sensibility was dominated by private, domestic values and well-populated by women writers" (Kelly, *English Fiction* 37), Wollstonecraft to all appearances abided by the eighteenth-century laws of genre and gender. Sensibility was a site of authenticity and authority for women writers considering that the language of Sensibility was seen as a suitable mode for female self-expression (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 108). By way of the morality that Sensibility

propagated, the domestic sphere became a direct influence on the politics of the public sphere. That is to say, by writing a novel of Sensibility, Wollstonecraft enabled herself to engage in political discussions outside the authorized 'feminine' sphere. In turning to the sentimental novel, therefore, Wollstonecraft used to her advantage the complicity of gender and genre by means of "converting the [sentimental] novel's scene of seduction into a site of instruction" (Keen 173).

Having said that, however, Wollstonecraft, despite turning its characteristics to her own political purposes, embraced a contradictory stance vis-à-vis the culture of Sensibility, denouncing it as the principal source of women's oppression in her second *Vindication*. According to Alex Schulman, Wollstonecraft's continuing ambivalence about the politics of Sensibility "[had] to do with her realization that it [could] be employed as much in the service of the French Revolution as in the Burkean counter-revolutionary project" (43-44). Late-eighteenth-century Sensibility was in fact a "Janus-faced concept" which, "apparently an appeal to unconditioned natural feelings, [...] was also a social construction which translated prevailing power-based relationships into loyalties upheld by 'natural' feelings" (Jones 7).

Nevertheless, although Wollstonecraft was nothing if not critical of the eighteenth-century cult of Sensibility, she was equally aware of its progressive tendency. Sensibility, as Gary Kelly has observed, "[t]o some extent, [...] expressed a reaction against certain Enlightenment views, values, and ideas; [whilst] in other respects [it] was a continuation, development, and further expression of them" (*English Fiction* 12). Especially the idea of sympathy as the social bond testified to the ongoing centrality of Enlightenment thought in late-eighteenth-century cultural production. As a matter of fact, sentimentalism—or moral sense theory—emphasized the constructive role of the emotions in moral judgment. This theory "was part of an Enlightenment celebration of humane feeling which attempted to base the moral life itself on feeling" (Bell 2) by means of arguing that

the capacity for sentiment involved the ability to display an appropriate and sympathetic reaction to an impression which in turn enabled the attainment of “moral sense”. As the arguments of moral sense theory developed, British writers soon attempted to put the philosophical into practice, and the political efficacy of the language of Sensibility was soon detected. As Chris Jones affirms, even though “the ideas of Sensibility were not radical in themselves, [...] they were capable of being applied in a radical way” (59). Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance, incorporated sentimentalism in her writings, utilizing the affective power of Sensibility to advance women’s rights.

### **The Politics of Sensibility**

Sentimentalism’s rhetorical effectiveness relied upon the ability to provoke sympathy on the part of the reader. Wollstonecraft’s deployment of the rhetoric of sympathy in *The Wrongs of Woman* lays bare the political efficacy of sentimental literary production. In her novel, Wollstonecraft presents her readers with a preface that alters and expands the significance of the narrative that follows. The inclusion of such a guiding preface can be tied to Wollstonecraft’s aims as a political writer. In this preface, for instance, Wollstonecraft states that her primary objective is to “[exhibit] the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society” (WWM 67). Wollstonecraft, here, essentially voices her ambition to present the reader with a fictional reality that nonetheless constitutes a description of the current state of society. Like the eighteenth-century notion of Sensibility more generally, Wollstonecraft’s depiction of these “wrongs” attempts to elicit a strong emotional response on the part of the reader. By means of showing the reader in what ways these “partial laws and customs of society” (WWM 67) have the power to destroy individuals—here, a woman of Sensibility—Wollstonecraft solicits her reader’s sympathy.

The preface goes on to signal that “the history ought rather to be considered, as of woman, than of an individual” (*WWM* 67). Rather than focusing solely upon Maria, the narrative of *The Wrongs of Woman* is supposed to be descriptive of the wrongs of womankind. Wollstonecraft, here, attempts to invest Maria’s pain with political significance by way of alerting the reader that Maria essentially embodies the unjust suffering of women more generally. Considering that Maria “[functions] as a generalized figure of social injustice rather than as an individualized character” (Weiss 54), it follows that it is the ideological dimension of the sentimentalized image of the suffering female that points to the radical potential of Sensibility. As Andrew McCann states, “[p]ublic sympathy in the face of such images was implicitly understood to be a natural expression of an irreducibly human Sensibility” (36). Through the emotive descriptions of the sufferings of its heroine, then, *The Wrongs of Woman* not only appeals to the reader’s emotions; it also engages the reader’s mind. That is to say, these descriptions and their appeal to Sensibility allow the reader to imagine Maria’s misfortunes and to participate in her sufferings. This experience of another’s perspective invites reflection on the part of the reader and facilitates moral insight. Through the politicization of sentimental discourse, Wollstonecraft attempts to instigate an internal revolution in the hearts and minds of her readers, “[seeking] to move the text of [S]ensibility beyond the realm of the merely *affective* to being politically *effective*” [emphasis in original] (Matthews 87).

It should be noted that the novel’s preface also states Wollstonecraft’s additional objective to “show [that] the wrongs of different classes of women [are] equally oppressive” (*WWM* 68). Wollstonecraft, here, explicitly signals that she strives for inclusiveness, which is why “[her] descriptive project is accomplished by having a number of different women tell of their personal wrongs in inset narratives of different length” (Kelly, *English Fiction* 38). To this end, Wollstonecraft also includes the chapter which details the history of Jemima’s lower-class

experiences. In this manner, all of the novel's inset narratives illustrate what Debora Weiss refers to as "the commonality of female experience" (78): "undistinguished by any extraordinary characteristics, [all of the women Maria meets or knows] represent the experiences Wollstonecraft [believed] all women had in common" (78). The novel goes on to argue that the wrongs from which women suffer are found in every class because they are "rooted in the false consciousness of a society dominated by court and gentry notions of property, family, and gender, and in the internalization of that false consciousness by women" (Kelly, *English Fiction* 40). In her second *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft had already expounded her theory that women's internalization of this aforementioned false consciousness was "especially marked in that culture of courtliness in disguise—Sensibility" (Kelly, *English Fiction* 40). Wollstonecraft's disgust for Sensibility specifically originated in the "feminine interpretation of sentimental virtues like modesty, delicacy, passive fortitude, and honour" (Jones 64) considering that the language of Sensibility degraded women to objects of male desire. Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* can therefore be read as "a sustained attempt to redefine the terms of conservative Sensibility [...] in ways which suggest equality, self-respect, and independence, rather than following the code of feminine propriety, and in ways which are applicable to men as well" (Jones 106). By asserting that "all the causes of female weakness, as well as depravity [...] branch out of one grand cause—want of chastity in men" (VRW 131), Wollstonecraft essentially argued for a less sexualized application of such conventionally 'feminine' virtues as modesty and chastity.

Wollstonecraft returns to denounce contemporary ideologies about women in her novel by way of representing the painful consequences of society's insistence on the attainment of 'feminine' virtues for women. The novel's sympathetic treatment of the injustices from which women suffer as a result of the inculcation of such virtues did much to promote Wollstonecraft's political ideas.

Rather than abstracted in a philosophical treatise or pamphlet, *The Wrongs of Woman* details the public implications of domestic oppression and the private consequences of social injustice by means of restructuring some of the central arguments of her *Vindication* in fictional narrative form. As Gary Kelly asserts, “[t]he English Jacobin novelists [...] thought the novel could carry ‘truth’ to a wide readership, with a persuasive force that ‘philosophy’ could not equal” (*Revolutionary Feminism* 206). One of the reasons for this belief in the political effectiveness of fiction was the fact that philosophical writings attempt to convey the author’s political truths without referring to personal feelings. Novels, on the other hand, attempt to persuade readers of a certain political point of view by way of forging a sympathetic link between the reader and the text, or, more specifically, between the reader and the novel’s characters. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, for instance, “the persuasive relationship between polemicist and reader is represented in certain of the personal relationships within the novel”, such as the relationship between Maria and her daughter (Kelly, *English Fiction* 41). Novels, however, were also able of persuading their readers by way of having them reflect on the interplay between plot and character. Jacobin novelists, in fact, devoted significant time and attention to the integration of plot and character in the sense that they “tried to show how their characters had been formed by circumstances, and how character and incident were linked together” (Kelly, *English Jacobin Novel* 16). As mentioned before, Daniel O’Quinn’s reading of *The Wrongs of Woman* identifies Maria’s literary confinement to sentimental novels as a corrupting force. He proceeds to clarify the logic of Wollstonecraft’s polemic against Sensibility by specifying that, as a result of this corrupting influence of sentimental novels, Maria’s unregulated imagination brings about her inevitable downfall. O’Quinn’s reading of the novel draws attention to the fact that “an excessive taste for novels among women causes them to replace historical events with fictional situations” (766) in such a way that it makes them more vulnerable objects for

seduction. In the case of Maria, the animation of her imagination by sentimental novels is dangerous up to the point where “[she] fancies herself in love with Venables” (771), not realizing that “fancy is the treacherous agent of [this] projection [of fiction onto reality]” (773). In this manner, *The Wrongs of Woman* attempts to show the reader in what ways Maria’s susceptibility to men’s acts of seduction has in fact been shaped by her lack of education and her confinement to sentimental literature (O’Quinn 766). Wollstonecraft’s novel is thus profoundly informed by the English Jacobin principle that circumstances form character. Isolated from the outside world and educated by sentimental novels, Maria is represented as necessarily ignorant of both herself and of society, which is why she is so easily seduced by both Venables and Darnford. Wollstonecraft’s novel, in other words, presents the reader with a study of the corruption of women’s understanding by courtly culture by exposing the harrowing consequences of sexual inequality and women’s domestic oppression.

The aforementioned connection between the fictional world of *The Wrongs of Woman* and the actual world is of crucial importance to this project of politicization. The novel is full of brief interventions and philosophical considerations by Maria and the third-person narrator which strategically point to the novel’s underlying political purpose. This intermingling of political language and the manifold ways in which both narrators reflect on the general condition of women encourage identification with late-eighteenth-century Britain. This correspondence between the novel’s fictional reality and Britain’s social reality is vital to Wollstonecraft’s project of politicization. The reader will become supportive of her emancipatory project only insofar as s/he recognizes that Maria’s misfortunes are a fictional representation of the current state of society. Wollstonecraft, in other words, by means of showing what she would like to see fixed within society, attempts to mobilize her readership. This fictional representation of “things as they are” in *The*



*Wrongs of Woman* “[is in fact] an inversion of things as they theoretically should be, and [...] enveloped within the wrongs of woman are the rights of woman” (Rajan 232).

The novel’s use of the epistolary form seems well suited to this political purpose, considering that it allows Wollstonecraft to provide first-person narratives of the character of Maria. Wollstonecraft’s vindication of inner identity and subjective experience through these personal narratives is in fact vital to the novel’s political aims. The reader’s insight into Maria’s inner life creates a sense of intimacy and sympathy, as s/he gets caught up in her mental and emotional processes. Ideally, the reader is then moved to action by Maria’s personal narrative of victimization. *The Wrongs of Woman*, however, also stages an omniscient third-person narrator, who has the ability to penetrate the mind of Maria and interpret her private mental states. The presence of such an omniscient narrator in Wollstonecraft’s novel can also be tied to her goal of promoting her political agenda considering that this type of narrator both assumes the voice and fulfils the role of the polemicist in philosophical treatises. With *The Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft attempts to depict the political truth of women’s oppression by way of the sentimental seduction plot. The omniscient narrator’s philosophical discussion of the dangers of the imagination in the scene depicting the blossoming love of Maria and Darnford essentially corroborates what the repeated seduction narratives of Wollstonecraft’s novel already demonstrate—that is, the degradation of women’s minds at the hands of sentimental novels. One of the instances in which Wollstonecraft writes polemically without neglecting the emotive descriptions of woe typical of sentimental fiction is the following passage: “[f]ive minutes sooner, and she should have seen his face, and been out of suspense—was ever any thing so unlucky! His steady, bold step, and the whole air of his person [...] pleased her, and gave an outline to the imagination to sketch the individual form she wished to recognize” (WWM 81). Although Maria has not yet formally met Darnford at this point in the novel,

her imagination, roused by readings in sentimental novels, “began to sketch a character, congenial with her own” (*WWM* 78).

In addition to the correspondence of the fictional text to the outside world, it should be noted that the novel was an accessible literary form with a wide appeal. Bearing in mind “the popularity of [...] affective works towards the end of the century” (McCann 11), it becomes apparent in what ways *The Wrongs of Woman* exploits imaginative literature’s democratizing potential. Polemical prose, as used by Wollstonecraft in her two *Vindications*, was ideally suited for the delineation of a philosophical project primarily targeted at an intellectual elite inclined to read pro-Revolutionary pamphlets. Affective literature’s appeal to Sensibility, on the other hand, made it more appropriate for a depiction of the deplorable state of affairs concerning the condition of women in eighteenth-century Britain. By means of adopting the sentimental mode, Wollstonecraft set out to propagate her political ideas and to raise public awareness. Considering that the sentimental novel was predominantly read by women in the 1790s (Ty 44), Wollstonecraft enabled herself to extend her influence beyond the narrow circle of intelligentsia and reach out to a female audience in an attempt to convince them of the necessity of social reform.

Considering that the novel was an accessible and malleable form, British novelists of the eighteenth century were continually experimenting with the novel’s commercial reach in order to explore the most serious issues and in order to get their readers to engage with them politically. Negotiating the boundaries of the novel like other Jacobin writers of the 1790s, Wollstonecraft redeployed the conventions of contemporary Gothic and sentimental fiction in order to position the novel as a progressive political tool. Drawing on the late-eighteenth-century vogue for Gothic fiction, Wollstonecraft deftly plays on audience expectations, availing herself of the Gothic’s adaptability to contemporary conflicts of constraint and oppression. Like Jacobin novelists more

generally, Wollstonecraft contemporized the conventions of Gothic fiction in order to use the subgenre for her own political ends. As Eleonor Ty asserts, “because of the conventions of the [Gothic] genre, Wollstonecraft’s Maria would be associated with its innocent, sensitive, and virtuous heroines” (35). Venables, on the other hand, would be “equated with the despotic, evil villains of Gothic fiction who deprive the victim of their right to liberty, and frequently of their property” (Ty 35). The political truth of Maria’s thoughts and fears, in other words, is in part generated because of her status as a Gothic heroine, and because her Sensibility is so sharply contrasted with Venables’s corrupted consciousness. Ronald Paulson’s argument that “Gothic conventions functioned as a way of making Revolutionary politics intelligible” (qtd. in McCann 109) can therefore be linked to this politicizing potential of the sentimental mode considering that “[t]he Gothic atmosphere and opposing sets of characters intensify the arguments Wollstonecraft had already articulated elsewhere” (Ty 35)—that is, in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

In Wollstonecraft’s case, the foremost Gothic symbol in *The Wrongs of Woman* is the “mansion of despair” (*WWM* 69) in which Maria has been incarcerated at the beginning of the novel. Giving new political potential to the Gothic mode, the novel begins *in medias res* as Maria has been cruelly imprisoned in a private mental asylum by her diabolical husband. Heightened by Maria’s sense of hopeless isolation, the metaphorical significance of this setting for the condition of women more generally is made explicit near the end of the first chapter as Maria exclaims: “Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?” (*WWM* 73). Wollstonecraft reveals this metaphorical significance in order to have the reader recognize that “Maria’s chronicle demonstrates that the hardships of women bereft of legal and economic rights are the rule rather than the exception” (Meyers 30).

Wollstonecraft, however, not only capitalized on the Gothic's suitability for social criticism; she also explored some of the connections between the novel and other forms of contemporary cultural production by way of actively appropriating the conventions of the eighteenth-century conduct manual. *The Wrongs of Woman* unravels the mystery of Maria's unlawful confinement by way of *analepsis*, and Maria's story is told through her memoirs to her daughter. In these memoirs, Maria essentially writes a conduct manual—one that “indicts patriarchy and undermines an adherence to feminine behaviour and the idealization of marriage” (Davison 150). Maria, in other words, does not write a conduct manual in the traditional sense of the word, considering that “[i]n contrast to the conduct materials popular in the mid- to late eighteenth century, [Maria's] letter is not meant to dictate a course of action, but rather to [teach independent thought]” (Weiss 56). In a desperate attempt to educate her daughter on the value of intellectual autonomy, Maria provides her with information pertaining to the deplorable state of the condition of women in contemporary British society. By way of allowing her daughter to come to her own conclusions on the basis of this information, Maria essentially urges her daughter to rely on her own sense of justice instead of complying with the unjust laws of a partial society. Maria's memoir, therefore, is primarily concerned with the issue of women's rights—or, the lack thereof—and she shares her grievous story in the hopes of preventing her daughter from making the same mistakes as she did. At the same time as Maria advocates for the importance of independent thought and individual judgment, however, “the tone of [her memoir] seems to indicate [Maria's] consciousness of the futility of her own advice” (Weiss 57). Maria's guidance not only concentrates on the importance of women's intellectual independence, it also prepares her daughter for the harrowing consequences of pursuing such autonomy as a woman within a society that inhibits female emancipation. In the section organized as a memoir, then, Maria essentially instructs her daughter—in much the same way as

Wollstonecraft instructs the female reader—that Britain’s legal system does not protect married women, but allows men to treat their wives like property. In this manner, *The Wrongs of Woman* not only stages the conflict between the individual woman and the social order, but the novel also keeps a critical pressure on Britain’s legal institutions.

The political potential of autobiography, however, should not be overlooked when taking into account Wollstonecraft’s critique of women’s subordination in British society. Considering that Wollstonecraft was one of the British writers of the 1790s to ideologically mobilize Sensibility, it comes as no surprise that she, too, engaged with autobiography to validate her radical politics. As Gary Kelly has observed, “biography and autobiography were used increasingly, in themselves and as elements of other genres and discourses, in the literature of Sensibility” (“Politics of Autobiography” 21). As highlighted in the previous paragraphs, *The Wrongs of Woman* explicitly universalizes the experiences of Maria in order to have the reader acknowledge that the injustices from which she suffers are in fact widespread. Considering that Wollstonecraft’s radical politics were “born of her personal experience [as a woman]” (Matthews 86), Maria’s fictional experiences to a large extent reflect those of Wollstonecraft. As Debora Weiss affirms, “Maria’s family life is patterned after Wollstonecraft’s own; her lover is modelled on Gilbert Imlay; and the concluding fragments of abandonment, pregnancy, and attempted suicide echo episodes in Wollstonecraft’s own life” (78). As a consequence of this drawing upon her own experiences with patriarchal society, Wollstonecraft infuses Maria’s judgements and feelings with autobiographical authority. By way of the inclusion of an autobiographically inspired protagonist, then, Wollstonecraft enabled herself to contend for the importance of female knowledge and experience to the success of her own emancipatory project. That is to say, Wollstonecraft’s rhetorical strategy of invoking personal experience to contextualize her social criticisms is part of a wider deployment of female knowledge

to authenticate her political radicalism. In the section organized as a memoir, for instance, Wollstonecraft explicitly “uses the maternal [...] to exemplify the unique knowledge derived by women from victimization by an illiberal society and state” (Kelly, “Politics of Autobiography” 26) by stating that “[t]he tenderness of a father who knew the world, might be great; but [it cannot] equal that of a mother—of a mother, labouring under a portion of the misery, which the constitution of society seems to have entailed on all her kind?” (WWM 110). The focus in *The Wrongs of Woman* on themes of uniquely or predominantly female experience serves as a way of linking the subjective to the political. As Gary Kelly affirms, “in Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman*, the autobiographical is used rhetorically, as part of a large political vision and social critique” (“Politics of Autobiography” 25). Wollstonecraft’s experience with the institutionalized “wrongs of woman” is textualized in *The Wrongs of Woman* and, ideally, “[t]he autobiographical text then becomes enlightening and thus reformative for others” (Kelly, *English Fiction* 41).

In the light of the novel’s autobiographical grounding, it is also important to discuss the novel’s propensity for sensationalism. Although the preface to *The Wrongs of Woman* underscores Wollstonecraft’s sacrifice of narrative pleasure for political purposes, the repression of dramatic literary qualities in her novel remains but partial. Juxtaposing *The Wrongs of Woman* with “what may justly be termed *stage-effect*” [emphasis in original] (WWM 68), Wollstonecraft declares that the objective of her novel is purely political. *The Wrongs of Woman*, however, remains a Gothic-sentimental novel, and its plot is arranged in such a way as to cultivate an emotional response on the part of the reader. In spite of her professed aim of realism, then, Wollstonecraft fully exploits the dramatic potential of Maria’s unlawful confinement and Jemima’s personal narrative of sexual violence. By way of having recourse to sensationalism, Wollstonecraft enables herself to “critique the evils of a society and its institutions that [drive] women to transgressive behaviours as their only

recourse” (Pedersen 32). Wollstonecraft, in other words, primarily appeals to the sensationalist mode in order to problematize how women, because of their psychological and political oppression, are left only two options—submission or transgression.

In addition to Wollstonecraft’s redeployment of such sensationalist tropes to cultivate the reader’s ability to take up her position of truth, it is important to take into consideration the controversial qualities of the fantasy courtroom scene in the final chapter of the novel. The trial was a heavily complex and politicized figure in the Revolutionary decade, “given additional significance by French Revolutionary tribunals and British treason trials of the mid-1790s” (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 219). In *The Wrongs of Woman*, however, Wollstonecraft adapts the figure of the trial to her political radicalism in order to educate her readership. Maria’s written testimony can be considered a provocative element in its own right, considering that criminal conversation actions were ordinarily a man-to-man case between the husband and the other man (Binhammer, “Sex Panic” 422). Wollstonecraft, however, chooses to have the wronged wife tell her story, and she has Maria “[take] up the task of conducting Darnford’s defence” (*WWM* 170). In this final completed scene of the novel, Wollstonecraft exploits the provocative potential of criminal conversation by having Maria defiantly confess to adultery as well as having her justify her crime by attempting to reveal the hypocrisy of conventional married domesticity. After a detailed description of her financial exploitation and unlawful imprisonment at the hands of her tyrant husband, Maria bitterly reflects on the legal privileges of husbands. The polemical tone of Maria’s written appeal to the court to some extent resembles the confident tone in Wollstonecraft’s second *Vindication* (Rajan 234), and the passage “has dramatic validity by being placed before her declaration of independence from her husband” (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 216). Wollstonecraft, in other words, includes a criminal conversation trial in which the novel’s heroine desperately tries to claim the right to her

heart, whilst targeting Britain's legal system and exposing it as a patriarchal injustice system. The abrupt refusal of Maria's appeal to the court is where the radical power of the provocative element of the criminal conversation trial can be located. As Gary Kelly asserts, "[t]he reader would share Maria's 'strong sense of injustice' at the lawyer's account and feel that his discourse exemplifies the law's formalization of (mistaken) social conventions at the expense of individual motive and merit" (*Revolutionary Feminism* 220). Rajan, in turn, argues that the judge's "naked assertion of prejudice is [so] inflammatory [...] [that] the text [...] provides an antithetical stimulus to the reader to [...] reverse the judge's decision [in his or her mind]" (232).

### **The Dangers of Female Sexuality**

At the same time as women writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, used the French Revolution as a means of introducing sexual politics into reformist discourse, their feminist demands were discredited by the panic over the meaning of the Revolution for British politics. Because the French Revolution "was often represented as the ultimate corruption of an illicitly sexualized nation; the events in France [...] provided a direct rationale for women's exclusion from public and political life" (Binhammer, "Sex Panic" 413). That is to say, whilst the Revolution in France multiplied the debates in England about gender issues to do with female education and women's roles in the home, "the moral panic of the 1790s [simultaneously] used political events to consolidate and promote the domestic ideal of women" (Binhammer, "Sex Panic" 413). As a consequence of this panic over the significance of the Revolution for Britain, sentimental and political discourses became increasingly connected over the course of the 1790s. Because of this convergence of sexual and political crises, "both conservative and radical writers [used] seduction as a tool in the polarized war for political truth" (Binhammer, *Seduction Narrative* 139). Late-eighteenth-century literature, in fact, not only



displayed a cultural fascination with the seduction of a virtuous young heroine; “[t]he narrative depicting the ruin of innocence and virtue [also] came to stand in for a threatened political plot” (Binhammer, *Seduction Narrative* 139).

By the 1790s, “the dominant narrative for representing the French Revolution in England was the sentimental seduction plot” (Nicola Watson qtd in Binhammer, “Political Novel” 208). It should be noted, however, that, by the end of the decade, British writers had considerably reduced the seduction narrative to a conventional tale of female victimization. In the representational wars surrounding the French Revolution, the political appropriation of the sentimental novel’s seduction plot eventually led to the rise of an exclusive image of femininity which assumed a view of sexual passivity. That is to say, both political sides “[invoked] seduction as a shorthand for an essentialized image of femininity as sexually passive” (Binhammer, *Seduction Narrative* 140). Katherine Binhammer, however, argues that Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman*, amongst other novels of the period, “[exposed this] static understanding of female sexuality, [...] [and claimed] seduction as a story that weaves [women’s] affective and erotic agency together” (*Seduction Narrative* 138). In other words, *The Wrongs of Woman*, although it defines its seduction narrative as a tale of female victimization, still offers the reader a sexually active representation of its heroine.

Although Wollstonecraft’s depiction of Maria presupposed an active view of female sexuality, her other writings—such as *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—upheld a more prejudicial attitude towards women’s sexual agency. Her *Vindication* in fact begins with Wollstonecraft proclaiming her absolute independence all the while declaring that she would “live on a barren heath” to preserve her autonomy (VRW 65). In *The Wrongs of Woman*, however, the character of Maria, formally charged with adultery, proclaims that her own sense of justice has always been the primary factor motivating her sexual behaviour, and that she would ever deem

herself free—free “to consult her own conscience, and regulate her conduct [...] by her own sense of right” (*WWM* 172). Even though both works defend women’s right to self-determination and individual judgement with conviction, the differences between the two texts remain fundamental.

Bearing in mind the French Revolution as the background to Wollstonecraft’s writings, it becomes apparent in what ways her radical politics are indissociably bound up with the context of the Revolution Controversy. The French Revolution, as it engaged the attention of radical and conservative British writers alike, “was being written even as it was unfolding” (Blakemore 14). Over the course of the early 1790s, women writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, “saw the democratic theories that inspired the Revolution [...] [and] the events in France prompted them to enter into public debate and voice their feminist demands” (Binhammer, “Sex Panic” 413). Written at the beginning of the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was a hasty response to the political moment. Dedicating her work to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord after his publication of a pamphlet in which he argued that women should only receive a domestic education, Wollstonecraft frantically wrote an elaborate response in which she attacked sexual double standards, arguing for improved conditions of female education. Defending the revolution in France in her earlier works, the complexity and volatility of the Reign of Terror compelled Wollstonecraft to revise her previous representations.

Whilst her second *Vindication* was written in 1792, Wollstonecraft only started writing *The Wrongs of Woman* near the end of the 1790s—that is, in the context of the late Revolution debate. By then, the French Revolution had degenerated into the Reign of Terror and “this climate of violence [...] [had signalled] an end to the emancipatory promise of the French Revolution” (McCann 5). Instead of political changes, the British government had introduced repressive measures in order to keep out French revolutionary ideas, and “war and the political and social crisis

[...] were being used to justify greater control of dissenting social groups, including women” (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 206). By the end of the century, then, British radicals were “generally constrained [...] to play down [their] democratic and egalitarian ambitions” (Philip 257).

Whilst the optimistic tone of Wollstonecraft’s second *Vindication* underscores that it was written at the height of her optimism about the success of the French Revolution, the bleak and pessimistic ending to *The Wrongs of Woman* seems to signal a significant shift in Wollstonecraft’s perspective. Although the novel’s sentimental conventions upheld the reader’s expectations that the narrative’s tensions would eventually be resolved through marriage and a happy ending, Wollstonecraft forecloses such reassurance by way of depicting how the progress of women is eventually refused. Her novel essentially stages a blameless female heroine who despite her strategies of actively trying to take control of her own existence does not triumph over a male-dominated system of oppression and corruption. The catastrophic ending to Maria’s story of private intellectual enfranchisement, with the judge tyrannically refusing her request for a divorce, in fact seems to “[suggest] that [Wollstonecraft] lacked confidence in the success of her project [as expounded in her *Vindication*]” (Weiss 55).

Wollstonecraft attached a political argument to this fantasy courtroom scene as Maria’s radical demands to the court actively engaged with the issue of the suppression of female desire through legal structures. In this final completed scene of the novel, Maria not only demands recognition of her right to divorce her husband, she also claims her sexual agency in her relationship with Darnford by stating that “[she] voluntarily gave [herself]” to him (*WWM* 172). Maria, here, essentially fights for the acknowledgement of her right to love whomever she wants, actively asserting her own erotic desire through stating her willing participation in an adulterous relationship with another man of her own choosing. The ending to this courtroom scene, however, is anything

but optimistic, as Maria's freedom of expression is eventually denied when the judge declares "the fallacy of letting women plead their feelings" on the grounds that this would signal "[the] opening of a flood-gate for immorality" (*WWM* 174). Despite the judge's concession that the decision might have been different in a different court, Maria remains unable to rise above the common condition of women. The political significance attached to this catastrophic ending essentially shows how British society does not allow Maria—and, by consequence, women more generally—to have an autonomous legal or social identity. In stark contrast to her second *Vindication*, in which Wollstonecraft looked forward to a "revolution in female manners" (*VRW* 113), *The Wrongs of Woman* "suggests a reversal of Wollstonecraft's optimism about the possibility for change on a national scale" (Weiss 55). As Debora Weiss continues, "foreseeing only failure in an attempt to further reform at a societal level, Wollstonecraft [created] an alternative in *Wrongs*—a scenario through which to explore the possibility of greater intellectual, moral, and sexual autonomy for individual women" (55-56). In this manner, "Maria can be understood as a character created in a political environment in which Wollstonecraft's [...] radical agenda for female intellectualism had to be scaled back" (Weiss 56).

In addition to the political context of the Revolution Controversy, the differences in form should be taken into account as well when juxtaposing these two works. Whilst *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a pamphlet, *The Wrongs of Woman* is a novel—a novel designed to instruct its audience by way of evoking sympathy instead of merely advocating possible change. As mentioned before, during the eighteenth century, sentiment was seen as a site of moral authenticity which is why novels conventionally relied on emotional responses from their characters as well as their readers. Naturally, appealing to the readers' hearts by way of exploiting the sympathetic relationship

between the novel's heroine and the reader is more easily achieved by depicting the present "wrongs of woman" rather than portraying the as yet "rights of woman".

When juxtaposing the language in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* with that of her novel, another fundamental difference between the two texts is foregrounded. In her *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft seems to argue predominantly for ungendered Reason considering that women's lack of mental independence has prevented their moral development. Arguing that "it is vain to expect virtue from women till they are, in some degree, independent of men" (VRW 221), Wollstonecraft, in her *Vindication*, "was at pains to argue for and demonstrate women's ability to generalize ideas" (Weiss 52). Because this affirmation of ungendered Reason could prove an important first step in the process of political change, there is a negative construction of women's feelings and desires just as female sexual desire is seen as one of the principal sources of women's oppression. Wollstonecraft, in other words, decidedly favours Reason as the essence of the self, whilst female sexuality is depreciated as a counter-revolutionary force that impedes women to claim their intellectual independence.

Whilst Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* puts forward a desexualized ideal dependent upon the disciplining of female desire, *The Wrongs of Woman* shows considerably less antagonism towards the sexual. Arguing for women's feelings and the importance of expressing them, "Maria is [both] a woman of Sensibility and a philosopher, a person of great feeling and imagination with a powerful analytical mind" (Weiss 52). As mentioned before, Debora Weiss goes on to argue that "one of the most striking differences [between these two texts] is the idea of the commonality of all female experience" (78). As Steven Blakemore affirms, "to rewrite is to turn paradoxically to former materials that are reconceived anew" (20). Wollstonecraft, in *The Wrongs of Woman*, does not return to her model of domesticated female desire as expounded in her *Vindication*. Maria's sense of

autonomy is not represented in the figure of an exceptionally emancipated woman who “[lives] alone on a barren heath” (VRW 65). Her independence, on the contrary, is represented in the figure of a private woman of authentic Sensibility, who attempts to live according to her own principles, and who is similar to other women in that she cannot rise above the common condition of women.

Arguably, despite the fact that Maria’s attempt to achieve both legal and affective rights is mercilessly denied by the judge, Wollstonecraft’s novel still represents an empowering female sexuality. Still arguing in part for ungendered Reason in her novel, Wollstonecraft comes at the problem with a different approach. By way of staging female sexual agency as proof of women’s equality with men (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 215), the novel to some extent revises the *Vindication*’s view of female sexuality, offering a more radical account of. During the trial, Maria accepts the charge of adultery but refuses that of seduction because she voluntarily consented to sex with Darnford. Maria’s feelings have always been the primary motivators of the sexual behaviour, and she stands by her principles to the end. In this manner, *The Wrongs of Woman* essentially “argues that [women’s personal] feelings and inner principles, [instead of] unjust laws, ought to guide women’s actions” (Weiss 59).

Earlier in the novel, Maria had already defiantly claimed her right to refuse sex with a husband she no longer desired by means of declaring that “personal intimacy without affection, seemed, to [her] the most degrading, as well as the most painful state in which a woman of any taste [...] could be placed” (WWM 129). Maria’s recognition of her right to refuse sex, however, did not conform to the conventional views towards female sexuality, considering that chastity and compliance were considered the defining features of the eighteenth-century codes of female sexual propriety. In order to give force to Maria’s subversive statement, “Wollstonecraft ‘acts out’ Maria’s degradation through the use of graphic physical description” (Binhammer, *Seduction Narrative*

152), for instance, by stating: “I think I now see him lolling in an arm-chair, in a dirty powdering gown, soiled linen, ungartered stockings, and tangled hair, yawning and stretching himself” (*WWM* 130). By way of an appeal to the reader’s senses in order to represent Maria’s sexual repulsion, Wollstonecraft tries to justify Maria’s right to divorce her husband, in an attempt to “overwhelm the reader into a sensational recognition that Maria had no moral choice but to flee” (Binhammer, *Seduction Narrative* 152).

In the light of late-eighteenth-century sexual attitudes, the absence of any condemnation of Maria’s sexually transgressive behaviour on the part of the narrator must have shocked Wollstonecraft’s readership. By way of having sex outside her legal marriage, Maria transgresses social conventions, and Wollstonecraft unknowingly enabled the conservative side to reduce her novel to pro-Revolutionary propaganda in support of an illicit female sexuality. As Katherine Binhammer observes, “Wollstonecraft tried to challenge the assumptions of the sexual discourse at the same time as she presented a radical politics, but, significantly, it was precisely the heroine’s sexual transgressions that were used to dismiss the novel’s Jacobin politics” (“Political Novel” 222). That is to say, Wollstonecraft’s attempt to reclaim the sentimental novel’s seduction plot for a feminist agenda fails precisely due to the fact that Maria acts outside the norms of feminine propriety.

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft’s assigning of political significance to the sentimental novel’s plot of seduction ultimately reveals how the difficulties she experienced when writing the novel were in large part due to the problems she had with finding the right form for her feminist address. The plot of seduction served Wollstonecraft’s political radicalism considering that the repeated seduction narratives substantially endorsed the arguments that she had already communicated in her *Vindication*. Nevertheless, by way of choosing a conventionally feminine mode of writing,

Wollstonecraft seemed to implicitly accept the existing subordination of women in both culture and society, even though she was trying to inscribe an image of femininity which was wholly at odds with the assumptions of that discourse. In other words, despite Wollstonecraft's continuous exploitation of the power of affect in order to disseminate her political agenda, her appropriation of the language of Sensibility brought with it "its own political assumptions that [interrupted] and [contaminated] the text's progressive politics" (Binhammer, "Political Novel" 222).

### **The Perils of the Female Imagination**

As previously stated, imaginative literature occupied a central place in the political conflicts of late-eighteenth-century British society. As a consequence, the idea that the novel functioned as a vehicle for ideological communication considerably influenced contemporary criticisms of this literary genre. Defenders of the novel were in a minority considering that "[n]ovels were condemned for corrupting the morals, taste, and intellect of their readers and then these effects were supposed to have further, social consequences" (Kelly, *English Fiction* 8). In addition to the subordinate cultural status of the novel, "moralists, essayists, and critics [...] pronounced [...] that novels [predominantly] corrupted, seduced, and poisoned the minds and bodies of young female readers" (Binhammer, *Persistence of Reading* 1). These criticisms are testimony to the power fiction—and sentimental fiction in particular—was perceived to have in "shaping the inner self of the reader and thus affecting ethical action and social relations" (Kelly, *English Fiction* 9). As Janet Todd has observed, "from the '1780s onwards, sentimental literature and the principles behind it were bombarded with criticism and ridicule'" (qtd in Matthews 87). Mary Wollstonecraft herself attacked the sentimental novel on several occasions in her *Vindication*, "[focusing] on literature's ability to 'overstretch a woman's sensibility to the point where it impinges on her capacity for understanding'"



(O'Quinn 762). As Chris Jones has pointed out, "Mary Wollstonecraft objected [...] to the general tendency of all sentimental novels to provide exhibitions of violent emotions, preposterous sentiments, and wild scenes which debauched the minds of female readers" (71). According to Wollstonecraft's logic, novels of Sensibility caused women to identify with the sentimental heroines depicted in them, and, "reading themselves into sexual scenarios played out between dashing gallants and swooning coquettes, women succumbed not just to the seduction of the text but to the images of femininity inscribed in them" (Taylor 72).

If, however, by the 1790s, it had been firmly established by critics that women's consumption of novels was considered dangerous, the question arises why Mary Wollstonecraft decided to pursue writing her novel *The Wrongs of Woman*. In the light of formulating a possible answer to this question, it is interesting to first have a look at the distinction between active and passive female readers that Katherine Binhammer introduces in her article "The Persistence of Reading: Governing Female Novel-Reading in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*". According to Binhammer, the main difference between an active and a passive female reader "involves two contrasting understandings of the interaction between the text, the self, and the world" (2). Whilst "[t]he model of a passive reader equates the self with the text, [...] [t]he active female reader [...] distinguishes between real and fictive worlds and by reading with her mind creates a critical distance that allows interpretive thinking" (2). From these observations, it becomes evident that Wollstonecraft's Maria can be categorized as a passive female reader, who "reads transparently" in the sense that "she collapses reality with imaginative fiction" up to the point where "the words simultaneously become sensations she feels" (2). By way of constructing a passive female reader in her novel, Wollstonecraft enabled herself to thematize some of her *Vindication's* central arguments pertaining to the detrimental effects of novels on the female imagination.

As Gary Kelly asserts, English Jacobin novelists “used quotation and allusion [...] to draw parallels from classic English literature and history to support their fictional arguments” (*English Fiction* 16). The range of reference of the Jacobin novel was thus surprisingly broad, causing literary allusions to be profoundly embedded in the novels’ workings, in the minds of its characters, and in the minds of its readers. Mary Wollstonecraft, too, introduced both historical and contemporary references in her novel, quoting key passages from the Bible as well as Shakespeare, and alluding to figures of Greek mythology as well as contemporary loyalist and radical thinkers. Of all these references, it is Wollstonecraft’s explicit mentioning of one of the works of Enlightenment thinker and sentimental novelist Jean-Jacques Rousseau which warrants individual attention. Due to the novel’s sly reference to Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Wollstonecraft’s portrayal of the blossoming love between Maria and Darnford instantaneously becomes emblematic of the novel’s central theme of the dangers of the imagination. It is important to observe that Maria falls in love with Darnford only after he lends her *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, considering that Wollstonecraft here makes a serious point about the instability of the language of Sensibility, explicitly mentioning Rousseau as a prime example of its pernicious effects. Wollstonecraft refers to Rousseau’s novel considering that “no one novel [appeared] to epitomize the genre’s dangerously seductive character so well as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* [...] with its articulation of female sexuality and desire through Julie’s willing participation in a sexual relationship with her tutor, St Preux” (Grogan 460).

As mentioned before, “at the same time as England was fighting a military war against France there was an escalation, on the level of sentimental fiction, of the war over sex” (Binhammer, “Sex Panic” 412). By the 1790s, “Rousseau and his ideas had become associated with the French Revolution and the intense subjectivity—and passionate sexuality—he described seemed implicated

in the social chaos of revolutionary France” (Janet Todd qtd in Bray 16). This politically charged reference to Rousseau, then, allowed for a more general critique of the dangers of sentimental fiction. Inflamed by rapturous readings in Rousseau’s novel, Maria “enters a dangerously delusive state, one that ensures her sexual vulnerability” (Binhammer, *Persistence of Reading* 2) considering that the thoughts and feelings depicted in the novel correspond to her own desires. As a consequence, Maria imaginatively reconstructs Darnford because “her overwrought mind immediately plunges her into a romantic scenario with Darnford as St Preux and she as the adored Julie” (Taylor 135).

The key element which Wollstonecraft examined through Maria’s relationship with Darnford is the role of the unregulated imagination in women’s feelings of romantic love. By means of referring to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Wollstonecraft enabled herself to pass political comments about female reading and to use fiction to affirm, modify, and challenge established views about women’s intellectual capabilities. In her second *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft argued that women were rendered susceptible to the seduction of novels because of their limited reading capabilities, and she claimed that such weaknesses should be remedied not by censorship, but by knowledge. Even though *The Wrongs of Woman* displays a certain hostility towards the female imagination and towards sentimental fiction, it is important to realize that the problem with Maria’s imagination is not its eroticism or the fact that she actively acknowledges her own sexual agency through her romantic feelings for Darnford; it is the “projective capacity” (O’Quinn 771) of Maria’s imagination which causes her downfall. Rousseau’s novel, “through its depiction of an ideal lover, prompts the heroine to seduce herself” (Grogan 470), which is exactly what happens in *The Wrongs of Woman*, as Maria “[donates] all of St Preux's sentiments and feelings, culled to gratify her own" to Darnford (*WWM* 81). It is also important to note that Maria’s physical confinement plays a pivotal role in interpreting this scene of the novel. Finding solace in Rousseau’s work during her unjust

imprisonment, Maria invests Darnford with the traits of the fictional St Preux, considering that “[although] she had read [*La Nouvelle Héloïse*] long since; [it now] seemed to open a new world to her—the only one worth inhabiting” (*WWM* 80-81). In other words, in an attempt to escape the terrifying reality of her incarceration, Maria imaginatively enters the world that Rousseau has constructed in his novel. As Alex Schulman observes, “the [sentimental] novel provides Wollstonecraft's tortured heroine a needed respite, but in the end only a false escapism which in fact corrupts and weakens her character” (52). According to *The Wrongs of Woman*, then, love is only an illusory liberation considering that sentimental novels lead Maria “to identify with hyper-feminine stereotypes” (Taylor 72).

Cautioning against the dangers of indiscriminate novel-reading, Wollstonecraft depicts the atrophying consequences of Maria’s errant imagination. Because of her inadequate education, Maria has allowed her excessive Sensibility to dictate her romantic expectations up to the point where she deludes herself about Darnford’s character by projecting her model of ideal Sensibility upon him. As Daniel O’Quinn argues, “[Maria’s] escape from confinement via works of the imagination mobilizes a desiring mechanism which eventually transforms her self-delusions into real events” (774). Due to miseducation, then, Maria seems destined to transform fiction into reality, and her readings of sentimental novels only enforce her illusions. The larger political significance of this passage is revealed when bearing in mind how Maria’s personal narrative illustrates general social conditions. Because women are refused access to education, they are deliberately kept subordinate in a number of ways. Wollstonecraft argues that women’s educational confinement leaves them liable to romantic fancies considering that they lack the power of a cultivated understanding necessary for governing the imagination. By exercising only the imagination, women are rendered susceptible to the impulsive pleasures of amorous excitement. Wollstonecraft’s novel shows the

harrowing effects of women's miseducation as it portrays "the internal conflicts and external pressures which lead women into amorous idealisations—and the price those idealisations exact" (Taylor 131). The question of educational confinement, however, allows for a critique of confinement as such. The confinement of women in the eighteenth century far exceeded that in educational possibilities as women were essentially deprived of any civil or legal existence. Denied access to the public sphere, women were held captive within the boundaries of the private domestic sphere, unable to gain the experience that would allow them to determine their own happiness.

By way of formulating a critique of the ideology of sentimental fiction and contemporary constructions of femininity, *The Wrongs of Woman* lays bare "the constitutive contradiction that [defined] domestic ideology"—that is, the fact that "women [were] seen as both the perpetrators and the victims of [their] sexual [...] crimes" (Binhammer, "Sex Panic" 419). Women allegedly participated in their fall by preferring the libertines of sentimental fiction to rational men, which is why they are to blame for their ignorance. Wollstonecraft, however, tried to establish a new understanding of female oppression, one that does not blame women for their transgressive behaviour. By way of thematizing the negative alignment between fantasy, fiction, and the imagination, Wollstonecraft attempted to redirect the reader's attention from the blaming of women to the seductive powers of sentimental fiction. Focusing on Maria's miseducation, Wollstonecraft implicitly argued that improved conditions of female education would have been capable of saving Maria from seduction. By way of constructing a passive female reader, then, Wollstonecraft enabled herself to redirect the reader's attention not only to *what* Maria reads and *how* she reads it; she simultaneously encouraged the reader to reflect on questions to do with the deplorable condition of female education.

## Conclusion

This study has described the profound impact of the French Revolution on Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist writings and radical politics. By way of contextualizing Wollstonecraft's changing views on female sexuality, this paper has discussed the difference in form between *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, accounting for the complex ways in which the sentimental narrative of her novel differs from her polemical prose.

First of all, this paper has discussed the manifold ways in which Wollstonecraft availed herself of the novelistic conventions of the eighteenth century in order to reiterate the political ideas that she had already communicated in her second *Vindication*. By depicting the "wrongs" from which women suffer, Wollstonecraft not only attempted to elicit sympathy in her readers; she also forced them to reflect on the connections between the fictional world of her novel and the actual world of late-eighteenth-century Britain. The genre of Wollstonecraft's novel, with its focus on individual subjectivity and Gothic-sentimental plot techniques, effectively served these political objectives.

Next in order, this paper has contrasted Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* with her *Wrongs of Woman*, placing these two different works in the context of the Revolution Controversy in order to examine what may have been the purpose of Wollstonecraft's novel adaptation. In addition to the radical potential of Sensibility, the literary genre of the novel offered Wollstonecraft the advantage of a wider—female—readership. By way of writing a Gothic-sentimental novel, Wollstonecraft attempted to reach out to a female audience in an attempt to render the political truth of women's subordination in British society transparent for her readership. Bearing in mind that *The Wrongs of Woman* was written against a background of internal unrest and political repression, it becomes evident how Wollstonecraft, by the end of the 1790s, was obliged to play down the radicality of her

political views. Turning to the novel of Sensibility in order to show what she would like to see fixed within society, Wollstonecraft ultimately succeeded in writing a carefully constructed and pervasively political Jacobin novel.

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