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Mary Wollstonecraft's Mask of Reason in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Underneath the tough talk of the speaking voice in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* hides a number of concessions to male readers and covert strategies for the defense of Wollstonecraft's sex and person. In a century in which philosophers and artists dissociated Reason and Sensibility and in which the upholders of Reason began to win important political victories, Wollstonecraft's awareness of audience shows astuteness. Moreover, her emphasis on Reason to the virtual exclusion of passions from human faculties serves to strengthen her credentials as thinker, to separate her from the general run of women, and to mask her own vulnerability to passionate impulses.

To an extent surprising for those of us primed to look upon *A Vindication* as a feminist manifesto, the book proves to be written for men. Its revolutionary import remains unquestionable (note Wollstonecraft's rapid overthrow of monarchy, army, navy, and clergy as institutions necessary for society¹), yet *A Vindication* also occasionally upholds the sanctity of marriage, rigidly defined sex roles, class privileges in education, as well as a host of age-long prejudices about women's inferiority. The unevenness of the book, its unclear organization, and its repetition of arguments have less to do with Wollstonecraft's lack of formal education—she can be formidable in argument when she allows herself to be—than with her attempt to bring about a bloodless revolution.² She appeals to the men she hopes will be shaping the new world, but who, despite their ardent fight for men's rights, adhere to the same attitudes about women as those propagated by the outgoing order. Wollstonecraft seems to have decided to avoid alienating these men. Clearly, she cannot at all times hold back, and her mask drops, forcing her to retreat, recover, and start anew. To keep the mask she had to make certain concessions, but the mask allowed her to persuade by flattering and cajoling no

less than by covertly threatening the men of Reason to whom the book is for the most part addressed.

In order to show herself worthy to be heard, Wollstonecraft adopts a tactic many women have been forced to use, namely, dissociating herself from other women. She legitimately saw herself as different from the common run, but she viewed her isolation with an ambivalent mixture of bravado and fear: "I am then going to be the first of a new genus—I tremble at the attempt,"³ she wrote her sister after her arrival in London to begin earning her livelihood by her pen. In *A Vindication*, however, she consistently used the third-person plural to discuss women. Although there is one instance when she specifies, "reader, male or female" (p. 146), women are usually "they", not "we". When the author in the last chapter decides to "expostulate seriously with the ladies," though she does so with superstitious women, her tone is condescending, even insulting, and one can hardly suppose that she expected the ladies to read and approve of a work in which they are addressed as "ignorant women . . . in the most emphatical sense" (p. 180). Despite the rhetorical distance she creates, Wollstonecraft announces early in *A Vindication* that she abandons all pretenses to rhetoric; the simplicity of her style as well as the dignity of her purpose distinguish her writing from genres perceived as women's domain:

Animated by this important object, I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style;—I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected . . . I shall be employed about things, not words!—and, anxious to render my sex more respectable members of society, I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation. (p. 10)

The most important way in which Wollstonecraft attempts to dissociate herself from other women in order to be taken seriously as a thinker is through the argument she advances for the innate equality of the sexes. She seems to accept fully the premise that women exist in a state of mental retardation. To save her work from charges generally leveled at women and their enterprises, such as frivolity, sentimentality, sensuality, and cunning, Wollstonecraft exalts Reason as the supreme faculty, and, except in rare slips, derides the passions and emotions in the life of men and women and even in the relationship between parents and children. Reason, she writes, distinguishes humans from "brute creation" (p. 12). It is innate to all beings, and the stage of its development in the individual gives a just measure of

his/her freedom (p. 121). All of woman's shortcomings stem from the system of education and of social intercourse which deprives women of developing and using Reason and hence deprives them of human rights (pp. 22, 64, 87, 92).

But, given her own context, can Wollstonecraft use her reason to advance such an argument and remain a woman? The question is not frivolous, for an examination of Wollstonecraft's tactics to establish her credibility reveals the extent to which she had to compromise her ideas about humanity. The bug-a-boo that haunts women's intellectual ventures—the charge of emotionalism—forced her to adopt the mask of tough reasoning from behind which she resorted to positions and theories which do not bear scrutiny in light of human experience, her own very much included. Love, particularly when involving sexual passion, falls victim to Wollstonecraft's insistence on Reason. She writes:

. . . master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion . . . they ought not to indulge those emotions which disturb the order of society, and engross the thoughts that should be otherwise employed. (Pp. 30-31)

More outrageously, she proposes that "an unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and that the neglected wife, is, in general, the best mother" (p. 31).⁴ She also argues that a woman whose reason is sufficiently developed will achieve the equanimity necessary to bear whatever character her husband might possess, even if "a trial . . . to virtue" (p. 32), a position she will later challenge in her unfinished novel, *The Wrongs of Woman*. At times the mask of Reason becomes so rigid as to reject the desire for "present happiness" (p. 32) as an acceptable motive for human actions.

Despite her attempts to present herself as a new genus—a woman of Reason persuading men of Reason—Wollstonecraft resorts to a variety of covert tactics for convincing her readers of the justice of her argument. Often she reasons plainly, particularly when in exasperation she sets aside the mask, but she is not above using the proverbial feminine weapons of flattery and dark hints involving issues about which men feel least secure. Wollstonecraft tries to establish her equality with men from the dedication to Talleyrand to the concluding apostrophe to "ye men of understanding." She makes men feel in control of the proposed "REVOLUTION in female manners" (p. 192). They are the "sagacious reader" (pp. 58, 191), "reasonable men" (p. 149), "men of understanding" (p. 194) who can be moved

by appeals to reason.⁵ Apart from flattering men's intellects,⁶ Wollstonecraft makes it clear that her revolution will not challenge men in physical combat. She acknowledges the notion—cherished by many—of women's physical inferiority to men (p. 8) and goes so far as to assert that, "in some degree," such weakness makes women dependent on men (p. 11). She then turns to the men to whose intellectual and physical superiority she has bowed and asks them to become the liberators of women: "would men but generously snap our chains"; "I entreat them to assist to emancipate their companion, to make her a *help meet* for them" (p. 150); "women must be allowed" (p. 173); "make them free" (p. 175); and finally "be just then . . . and allow her the privileges of ignorance, to whom ye deny the rights of reason" (p. 194).

At the same time that Wollstonecraft adopts a pleading tone to soften the resistance of her male readers and a stern tone in condemning the foolishness of her sex, she subtly awakens men's fears about women's dominance over them in a state of inequality and alleviates those fears in her visions of a freed humanity. One of the leitmotifs of *A Vindication* is the sheer ineptitude of unliberated women for the roles of wife and mother, and the improvement of domestic welfare, infant survival, and effective education of children attendant upon women's freedom to strengthen their minds and bodies. These arguments strike a note of modernity which makes *A Vindication* speak to readers almost two centuries later. But Wollstonecraft's appraisal of her male readership led her to think that a bit of terror mixed with optimism about perfectibility would give firmer ground to her argument than direct statement alone. She explains to men of Reason that as long as women are educated to be mentally deficient, they will fall for the "rakes" instead of men of solid character. She both consoles such men for their lack of amorous success and threatens them with the fact that a pretty girl may never look at them (p. 118) until women develop intellectual discernment. She proposes that women raised to please and attract men will continue to exercise their charms after marriage as well, especially after husbands' sexual passion has cooled. The desire for sexual attentions—the only measure of their worth—renders women unfaithful (p. 73). More frighteningly, their lapse from virtue produces a "half alive heir to an immense estate [who] came from heaven knows where" (p. 132). Wollstonecraft cautions men that "weak enervated women . . . are unfit to be mothers, though they may conceive," so that when the man of their choice—a libertine

naturally—"wishes to perpetuate his name, [he] receives from his wife only a half-formed being that inherits both its father's and its mother's weakness" (p. 139). Even if submissive women are faithful, they prove either foolish mothers, who turn their children against the father, or spendthrifts or both (pp. 68, 73, 132, 152, 167).

Not content with awakening men's fears about the problematic nature of paternity, Wollstonecraft warns them against women who, taught that their sexuality is their only asset, use this weapon to obtain power over them:

... the state of war which subsists between the sexes, makes them employ those wiles, that often frustrate the more open designs of force.

When, therefore, I call women slaves, I mean in a political and civil sense; for, indirectly they obtain too much power, and are debased by their exertions to obtain illicit sway. (P. 167; see also P. 117)

By contrast, free women do not aim at vanquishing men: "I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" (p. 62), declares Wollstonecraft.

One of the chief strengths of *A Vindication* resides in its vivid portrayals of women in straitened circumstances. These thrust upon our consciousness the absence of alternatives available to women without husbands. But for whom are these examples created? There's the widowed woman, the former feminine ideal of the docile wife, who left alone "falls an easy prey to some mean fortune-hunter, who defrauds the children of their paternal inheritance" so that the sons cannot be educated, or worse, "the mother will be lost in the coquette, and, instead of making friends of her daughters, view them with eyes askance, for they are rivals" (p. 49). Wollstonecraft again emphasizes the fate of the progeny rather than the psychological anguish of the widow. Men married to women who fulfill the feminine ideal may be supplanted after death by rakes, who will leave the children—the continuance of name and reputation—penniless and unprotected. Similarly, the example of the maiden sister forced to live with her brother and sister-in-law presents a vivid image of intolerable domestic tension between the two women, with the man helplessly caught between and swayed at last by his wife's connivances to throw his sister "on the world," "into joyless solitude" (p. 65). Both women, like the widow, appear in a less than favorable light. Our sympathy is with the poor man in the grave or the one caught between his affection for his sister and loyalty to his wife. The solutions Wollstonecraft proposes have less appeal for women than for the worried husbands.

The widow educated in the principles of Reason "in the bloom of life forgets her sex—forgets the pleasure of an awakening passion, which might again have been inspired or returned" and devotes herself to managing the inheritance for the benefit of the children, working only for the reward beyond the grave (pp. 50-51). In the second illustration, "reason might have taught her [the wife] not to expect, and not even to be flattered by, the affection of her husband, if it led him to violate prior duties," while the sister might have been able to support herself and thus not disturb either the brother's domestic tranquility or his conscience (p. 66). Free women, Wollstonecraft tells her readers, make life easier for men.

But where behind the mask of Reason is Mary Wollstonecraft the "hyena in petticoats," the fiery revolutionary whose book eminent contemporary women refused to read? In *A Vindication* the mask of Reason slips off now and again and the author has to retreat, restate, and recover the ground she may have lost with her readers. The thread of the argument gets tangled, and we hear from biographers and critics the kind of criticism she tried to stave off: the charge of lack of intellect, of too much passion, of inability to organize and present an argument coherently.⁷ Is Wollstonecraft wearing a mask at all? Her statements in letters, events of her life during the time she was composing *A Vindication*, and internal evidence show that she placed a much higher value on human relationships, on their passionate nature, than she allows for in her advocacy of Reason. Her indignation about the lot of women, her sympathy with them, and her disdain for men who wield power over other men and women are also greater than the mask allows her to express. Wollstonecraft's last works, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, measure the growth of her confidence in herself as an author able to command a reader's interest regardless of sex; these works use few subterfuges, few poses in presenting conditions which cry out for reform.

In her writings as well as her life Mary reveals herself as a passionate, bright, impatient being who tries to use first the tenets of religion and then of Reason (without, however, discarding religion) as brakes upon her heedless impulses. With her customary imaginative acumen Virginia Woolf describes Mary as a dolphin rushing through the waters,⁸ and we sense from her writings and glean from her life an indomitable life force which made her triumph over vicissitudes (among them two suicide attempts) that broke other women, and which kept her struggling for ten days, to the amazement of her

physicians, against the puerperal fever to which she finally succumbed. From the earliest records of her thoughts—her letters to Jane Arden—we see a girl who craves affection (*Coll.*, p. 60). She reproaches her sister for turning pretty phrases in her letters instead of writing “one affectionate word . . . to the heart” (*Coll.*, p. 76). She devotes herself to the welfare of the Blood family to the detriment of her own interests for the love she bears her soulmate, Fanny Blood. She despises Fanny’s half-hearted suitor for his lack of passion, and she acknowledges her own need of love (*Coll.*, pp. 93, 108), analyzing astutely her repression; in a letter in which she describes her literary endeavors, she writes:

Many motives impel me besides sheer love of knowledge . . . it is the only way to destroy the worm that will gnaw the core—and make that being an isolé, whom nature made too susceptible of affections, which stray beyond the bounds, reason prescribes. (*Coll.*, p. 173)

But the worm whose existence she denied in *A Vindication* was, at the very time she was gathering her strength to reply to Burke and to compose the companion *Rights of Woman*, gnawing its way with a vengeance. Mary fell in love with the newly married Fuseli, continued to hope for reciprocal feelings from Fuseli for two years,⁹ and finally went so far as to propose to Sophia Fuseli that she move in with the couple. In a letter which Wardle dates as immediately following Sophia’s rejection, Mary agonizingly writes, “I am a mere animal, and instinctive emotions too often silence the suggestions of reason . . . There is certainly a great defect in my mind—my wayward heart creates its own misery” (*Coll.*, pp. 220-221). The mask of Reason in *A Vindication* clearly serves as a shield for her own vulnerability.

The internal evidence of *A Vindication* supports the split Mary perceives in her life between the dictates of Reason and the compelling motions of the heart. Despite her attempts to placate, entrap, and disarm the reader, she occasionally gives voice to her burning indignation. Following a particularly offensive excerpt from *Sermons to Young Women*, Wollstonecraft bursts out: “such a woman ought to be an angel—or she is an ass—for I discern not a trace of the human character, neither reason nor passion in this domestic drudge, whose being is absorbed in that of a tyrant’s” (p. 96). Although throughout her argument she ascribes women’s enslaved condition to their atrophied reason, Wollstonecraft cannot refrain from voicing at least once the envy women have felt for men’s scope of action, for their freedom to go beyond the bounds “reason prescribes”:

. . . they [men] give a freer scope to the grand passions, and by more frequently going astray enlarge their minds. If then by the exercise of their own reason they fix on some stable principle, they have probably to thank the force of their passions, nourished by *false* views of life, and permitted to overleap the boundary that secures content. (P. 110)

Mary herself moved on to overleap practically every boundary prescribed by Reason and the society of her day. The stories of her affair with Imlay, her two pregnancies out of wedlock, and her liberated marriage to Godwin gave her a notoriety which made her work sink into near-oblivion for almost a century. But her experience, which encompassed more than many a man's scope, gave her the assurance to drop the mask and address the reader intimately and calmly in *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* and to turn finally to the large readership of women in her purposely didactic novel *The Wrongs of Woman*. She learned to turn a biting aside into a significant social comment about class and sex oppression by enhancing editorial statements with minute and eloquent details:

. . . a man may strike a man with impunity because he pays him wages . . . Still the men stand up for the dignity of man, by oppressing women . . . In the winter, I am told, they [the women] take the linen down to the river, to wash it in the cold water; and though their hands, cut by the ice, are cracked and bleeding, the men, their fellow servants, will not disgrace their manhood by carrying a tub to lighten their burden.¹⁰

In the public *Letters* as well as her private correspondence in the years following the publication of her manifesto, Mary increasingly recognizes the role of emotions, of grand passions in shaping a human being's mind and experience.¹¹ *The Wrongs of Woman* portrays a heroine unthinkable in *A Vindication*, a woman who discovers her mistake in her choice of a mate after marriage, who rebels against the tyranny of wedlock, and who is not seduced but willingly plunges into a love affair with a man who proves to be less worthy than she had hoped. To a friend who ventures the opinion that Maria's situation is not "sufficiently important," Mary replies in the firm and confident manner of an author who knows that her choice of subject may limit her audience but who remains entirely committed to her cause, even if it alienates male readers:

These appear to me (matromonial despotism of heart and conduct) to be the particular wrongs of woman; because they degrade the mind.

What are termed great misfortunes may more forcibly impress the mind of common readers, they have more of what might justly be termed *stage effect* but it is the delineation of finer sensations which, in my opinion, constitutes the merit of our best novels, this is what I have in view; and to shew the wrongs of different classes of women equally oppressive . . . (*Coll.*, p. 392)

That last declaration of purpose not only moves Mary away from *A Vindication* with its pleas to men in power and its consideration of middle-class women only, but propels her as political thinker and feminist into our century, our very decade. It also taunts us with a promise of the works of Mary's maturity, whose fulfillment was prevented by her death at the age of thirty-eight.

A Vindication therefore remains Wollstonecraft's most solid monument, a work of extraordinary vision whose great strength the author dissipated somewhat by diverting the central argument into dead-end channels of audience watching and defensiveness about sex and self. Despite her efforts to placate her readers, Wollstonecraft's work suffered censure through judgments she tried to anticipate and answer, judgments that have more to do with her life than her writing—emotionalism, immorality, extremism.¹² The parts of *A Vindication* which have withstood the test of time are those in which she drops the mask in order to speak freely of women's oppression and in which she prophetically envisages women entering careers, being represented politically, and, most importantly, being educated alongside men so that they may cease to be The Other and become human beings.

NOTES

1. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1975), pp. 16-18. All further references are to this edition.
2. Lest we, who in the last decades of the twentieth century still await the passage of ERA, consider her naive for having thought to tap men's good will by means of a mere book, we must consider that Mary was living in a time of two successful revolutions—the American and the French, the latter having not yet turned to terror. Civil rights had not yet been abridged in England as a consequence of fear of Jacobinism, and Mary associated with a group of visionaries who firmly believed that in time social justice might be achieved.
3. *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Ralph M. Wardle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 164. References to this edition will be cited in the text as *Coll.*
4. For the same argument see also pp. 27, 37, 50, 118-119.
5. Wollstonecraft covertly emasculates the men whom she attacks, such as Burke and Rousseau, by depriving them of Reason—the masculine trait—and endowing them with Sensibility, the province of women. For a detailed analysis of this aspect of *The Rights of Man* and *The Rights of Woman*, see Elissa S. Guralnick's "Radical Politics in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," *Studies in Burke and His Time*, 18 (1977), 155-166.

6. Carol Poston notes that Wollstonecraft's language about respected men's works such as Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to His Son* changes from outright dismissal ("frivolous correspondence") to neutrality ("epistles") in revision (p. 106, n. 5), a move which could serve no other purpose than placating male readers.
7. Chief among Wollstonecraft's modern-day detractors is Richard Cobb, who in "Radicalism and Wreckage," *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 Sept. 1974, pp. 941-944, goes so far as to propose that her very name makes her unfit for study (for an analysis of the detractor tradition in Wollstonecraft studies see Janet M. Todd's "The Polwhelean Tradition and Richard Cobb," *Studies in Burke and His Time*, 16 [1975], 271-277). In the biographies, Margaret George, one of the most sympathetic of Mary's biographers, avoids discussion of anything but the main ideas in *A Vindication (One Woman's "Situation": A Study of Mary Wollstonecraft* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970], pp. 84-96); Eleanor Flexner in *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Biography* (1972; rpt. Baltimore; Penguin Books, Inc., 1973) roundly takes Mary to task for her shortcomings in logical argument (p. 164), as does Ralph M. Wardle in *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1951), who attributes the book's "worst fault"—its lack of organization—to Mary's "intense feelings," to "her usual want of mental discipline" (pp. 147, 156); Claire Tomalin dispenses with the method in *A Vindication in The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974) by declaring that it is "a book without any logical structure: it is more in the nature of an extravaganza" (p. 105); these biographers, with George's exception, follow Godwin's lead in his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798; rpt. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1974), who declares the book to be "a very unequal performance, and eminently deficient in method and arrangement" (p. 83).
8. *The Second Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brade & World, Inc., 1932; rpt. 1960) p. 145.
9. For the most recent account of the Fuseli episode and the extent to which it preoccupied Mary, see *Coll.*, p. 190, n. 1, p. 199, n. 5, pp. 202, 203, 205, 220 and 221, including n. 1 on p. 221.
10. *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, ed. Carol H. Poston (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), p. 26. All references to this edition will be cited in the text as *Letters*.
11. See pp. 35, 55, 99, 109, 160 in *Letters* and pp. 263, 302, 308 in *Coll.* for Mary's changed
12. For an informative summary of contemporary resistance to *A Vindication* see Godwin, pp. 81-82, in which he fears the censure of Mary as political extremist rather than as an emotionalist. In *Revolution and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), Howard Mumford Jones also separates Wollstonecraft's "revolutionary" thinking from "romantic individualism" only to satirize her emphasis on freedom by briefly listing her free actions as her becoming Imlay's mistress and giving birth to "an illegitimate daughter" (pp. 252-253). By contrast, Eleanor L. Nocholes in "Mary Wollstonecraft" (*Romantic Rebels: Essays on Shelly and His Circle*, ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973] maintains that Mary's writing style is intensely personal, and that she anticipates the "attitude and tone" of the Romantics (p. 45).