



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Mary Wollstonecraft **by Wendy McElroy**

*O, why was I born with a different face?
Why was I not born like this envious race?
Why did Heaven adorn me with bountiful hand,
And then set me down in an envious land?*

William Blake's poem "Mary" (1803) could have been an epitaph for Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) — a woman born with a "different face" in a society hostile to her modern-minded views.

Wollstonecraft is a founding mother of feminism. Her most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), is widely viewed as the first great feminist treatise. She wrote in the classical liberal tradition, which promoted individual rights, especially against the restrictions of political power. Her primary concern was the rights and status of women against the claims of society and law. But the drama of her life, no less than her work, is responsible for her enduring fame.

Wollstonecraft was born in London on April 27, 1759, into modest working-class circumstances. The tyrannical personality of her father left the young girl suspicious of marriage. The advantages her family showered on a far less talented brother made her burn with awareness of how much more deeply society valued men than women. Her rejection of marriage and the privileges of men deepened when, in 1783, she helped her sister Eliza to flee from a brutal marriage and arrange a legal separation.

In 1784, she and Eliza founded a school in the village of Newington Green, where Wollstonecraft befriended the minister Richard Price. Price, along with the scientific genius Joseph Priestly, headed a group of intellectuals known as Rational Dissenters. The Dissenters sought to demystify religion and to improve the conditions of life through reason. Believing in the perfectibility of men, they were avid social reformers. Price's extremely influential book, *Review*

of the *Principal Questions of Morals* (1758), argued that conscience and reason should determine a person's moral choices. He became Wollstonecraft's mentor.

Through Price, Wollstonecraft became acquainted with the leading reformers of England. One of them was the publisher Joseph Johnson, who commissioned her to write her first work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), in which she rejected the traditional method of teaching girls, which treated them as the intellectual inferiors of boys. In 1788, Johnson published both her biographical novel, *Mary, a Fiction*, which depicted the social limitations oppressing women, and a children's book entitled *Original Stories from Real Life*. Moving to London, Wollstonecraft worked as a translator and reviewer for Johnson from 1788 to 1792; her work appeared in his journal, the *Analytical Review*, which she helped to found.

Thus, she acquired the intellectual and financial independence that she advocated for all women. In a letter to a woman friend, she wrote, "Struggle with any obstacles rather than go into a state of dependance [sic].... I have felt the weight, and would have you by all means avoid it." Wollstonecraft declared herself to be a pioneer in the era of liberated womanhood: "the first of a new genus."

The French Revolution (1789) was a pivotal event for classical liberals and for Wollstonecraft, who viewed it as a struggle for individual liberty against tyrannical monarchy. Price came under heavy criticism when he praised the French Revolution and argued that the "British People, like the French, had the right to remove a bad king from the throne." (Earlier he had incurred public wrath by embracing the American Revolution.) The British statesman Edmund Burke took great exception to Price's argument and penned a heated response entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in which he defended the "inherited rights" of monarchy.

Defending human rights

Outraged by Burke's attack, Wollstonecraft responded with the pamphlet *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790) in support of Price and of revolution and in opposition to a range of social practices such as the slave trade. (Thomas Paine's response to Burke was *The Rights of Man* in 1791.) Through her pamphlet, Wollstonecraft took the principle of equality beyond personal application and addressed the broader issues of human rights and international politics. The pamphlet set the stage for *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by sketching the broader moral and political context of human rights within which her views on woman's rights would naturally fit.

Wollstonecraft hinted at this evolution in the pages of *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* when she took Burke to task for sympathizing with the aristocratic women of France who had been "victimized" by the Revolution. She wrote,

Your tears are reserved, very naturally considering your character, for ... the downfall of queens ... whilst the distress of many industrious mothers, whose helpmates have been torn from them, and the hungry cry of helpless babes, were vulgar sorrows that could not move your commiseration.

Female authors were not rare in the late 18th century but their work was generally confined to novels and children's stories. The political tract was a male domain. Nevertheless, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* was well received by the circle of radicals in London within which Wollstonecraft assumed her rightful place. The circle included Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Godwin, Samuel Coleridge, Joseph Priestly, William Blake, Thomas Paine, and William Wordsworth. The London radicals embraced the Enlightenment — a social revolution that celebrated reason as the core of human identity. Enlightenment intellectuals sought to redefine social institutions such as the family, the state, and education according to reason and human perfectibility. Wollstonecraft applied these goals especially to the sexual realm and insisted that women were “rational creatures” who were equally endowed as men with souls from God. In short, they were by nature the moral and intellectual equals of men.

The London circle was also a social network. At one dinner, which was held to introduce Paine to the radicals, Wollstonecraft is reported to have dominated the conversation so completely that no one else could insert a word. This was memorable largely because she and the political philosopher William Godwin took a deep dislike to each other as a result. Years later, they would marry and become one of the most famous couples in political history.

Freedom and equality for women

In 1792, Wollstonecraft's famous *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (hereafter *Vindication*) appeared to a world rocked by the French Revolution. But did the calls for freedom and equality include women, or only men? In France, Olympe de Gouge — a woman some view as Wollstonecraft's French counterpart — declared that women had been excluded from revolutionary dreams of freedom. In response, she wrote *Declaration of the Rights of Women* (1791), which challenged the exclusion of women from the revolutionaries' Declaration of the Rights of Man. As a result of insisting upon women's rights, de Gouge was guillotined for treason.

In this political climate, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* called for a “revolution in female manners.” The book was to serve as a rebuttal to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's immensely influential book *Emile*, which relegated the education of girls to a role that supported men. But *Vindication* was more than this. In it, Wollstonecraft exploded a political double standard and applied the concept of inalienable rights to women as well as men. The new *Vindication* became her manifesto.

Over and over, she stressed the right and need of women to be educated in the same manner as men in order to become emancipated. In the introduction, she stated her “profound

conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures [women] is the grand source of the misery I deplore.”

The equal education of girls and boys, she believed, would dissolve the destructive ideal of woman as a docile and decorative companion to man. In this vein, Wollstonecraft penned what may well be her most famous sentiment: “To marry for a support is legal prostitution.” She pleaded for intellectual companionship to be the ideal of marriage. She argued for an end to social prejudice against women which would, in turn, lead to women’s being defined by their character and work rather than by their marriages.

A Vindication also provided broader social commentary on the role that domestic life played in politics, on the relationship between the private and public spheres. In essence, Wollstonecraft argued that morality and stability in the public sphere required respect for women in the private one.

In 1792, Wollstonecraft moved to France to witness firsthand the revolution that had been her inspiration. She arrived just as the “Jacobin Terror” — the bloody fourth year of Revolution that saw mass executions and the rise of arbitrary power — was poised to begin. Her book, *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794), documents her disillusionment. The book attempted to reconcile her horror at the Revolution’s massive violence with her belief in the perfectibility of man, which the Revolution was supposed to embody. What emerged, however, was disillusionment over the destructiveness, chaos, and unrealized goals.

Personal life

The *Historical and Moral View* may have also reflected her state of mind over personal matters. Even as insistence on reason dominated her writing, her passion for a married man overwhelmed her life. In England, she had fallen in love with the painter Henry Fuseli, a passion that ended badly.

Now in France, amid political chaos and physical danger, she fell tragically in love with another married man, the American Gilbert Imlay, by whom she bore a child named Fanny. It was a doomed relationship. Despondent, she attempted suicide twice.

In 1795, with her newborn daughter, Wollstonecraft followed a footloose Imlay back to London. The atmosphere there was not altogether welcoming. Her *Vindication* had received both applause and outrage. Arguably, the outrage was louder. When the author Horace Walpole called Wollstonecraft “a hyena in petticoats” he was expressing a commonly held sentiment.

Yet Wollstonecraft continued to write. In 1796, her book *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* was published; it mixed travelogue with political theory and emotional outbursts, especially about the problems encountered by women with “desire.”

Wollstonecraft also rejoined the circle of London radicals and reestablished contact with Godwin, who had been deeply impressed by her book *Letters*. Later in life, he wrote, “If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book.” They became lovers and, then, married in 1797 even though both of them had publicly repudiated that institution. At the time of their marriage, Wollstonecraft was pregnant.

Soon thereafter she gave birth to a second daughter, Mary, who would later marry the poet Shelley and write *Frankenstein*, among other novels. Less than two weeks after Mary’s birth, Wollstonecraft died of septicemia, a type of blood poisoning then called “childbed fever.”

In 1798, a heartbroken Godwin published both the *Posthumous Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* — which included the unfinished novel *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman, A Fragment* — and his own *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. *Maria* likened the life of working women to imprisonment.

One of the most insightful eulogies to Wollstonecraft was written more than 100 years later by another iconoclastic female author, Virginia Woolf. Of Wollstonecraft, Woolf wrote,

She whose sense of her own existence was so intense, who had cried out even in her misery, “I cannot bear to think of being no more — of losing myself — nay it appears to me impossible that I should cease to exist,” died at the age of 38. But she has her revenge. Many millions have died and been forgotten in the 130 years that have passed since she was buried; and yet as we read her letters and listen to her arguments and consider her experiments, above all that most fruitful experiment, her relations with Godwin, and realize the high-handed and hot-blooded manner in which she cut her way to the quick of life, one form of immortality is hers undoubtedly: she is alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living.

Wendy McElroy is the author of *The Reasonable Woman: A Guide to Intellectual Survival* (Prometheus Books, 1998). For additional articles on current events by Ms. McElroy, please visit the [Commentary](#) section of our website.

This article was originally published in the February 2006 edition of *Freedom Daily*.