

Misogyny and Feminism: The Case of Mary Wollstonecraft

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Misogyny and feminism: a provocative pairing. And to attach the misogynist label to Mary Wollstonecraft, heroine of western feminism, seems provocation indeed. In 1994 Susan Gubar published an article on Wollstonecraft offering precisely these provocations. In her “Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradoxes of ‘It Takes One to Know One,’” Gubar took a coolly irreverent look at Wollstonecraft and the western feminist tradition that succeeded her, and concluded that for the last two hundred years “the histories of feminism and misogyny have been (sometimes shockingly) dialogic.”¹ From 1792 on, feminists, fondly believing they were marching to their own political drum, have in fact all too often been engaged in an elaborate *pas de deux* with women-hating contemporaries, matching idea to idea in an “uncanny mirror dancing that repeatedly link[ed] feminist polemicists to their rivals and antagonists.”² Hence the “Takes One to Know One” of her subtitle: the feminist knows at whom to hurl the charge of woman-hater because his features are so shockingly like her own; the adversarial hailing is a repudiated self-recognition. Accuser and accused are one.

This article begins from Gubar’s provocations. If Mary Wollstonecraft can be described, as Gubar emphatically does, as a misogynist, how are we – as inheritors of Wollstonecraft’s project – to understand the origins and implications of this anti-womanism for her emancipationist aspirations? What kind of heretical historical writing is capable of addressing such difficult issues? Heroic versions of the feminist past of the sort popular during the heyday of women’s liberation clearly will not do, but integrating a misogynist element into the feminist story will require more than just abandoning these earlier idealizations. If Gubar’s argument is even partly right – as I think it is – a radical revision of approach is needed.

The necessary revision I am proposing here is toward a method that combines traditional modes of historical enquiry – the intensive scrutiny of sources and context – with an interpretive theory capable of tackling what I will call the deep agenda of feminism, by which I mean the unconscious fantasies as well as the conscious intentions fuelling feminist ideals. Every political agenda is driven by unacknowledged and unacknowledgeable wishes as well as by more or less realistic ambitions: desire in the social/political sphere is no more reason-governed than desire in any other area of life. This may seem so obvious as to hardly be

worth saying, except that its implications have barely begun to register in histories of political thinkers and movements. In my own research I explore how fantasies of gender shaped Wollstonecraft's ideas about women, and here I draw on some of this work to probe the issues raised by Gubar's provocative essay.

Gubar's discussion of Wollstonecraft begins with the question "What images of women emerge from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*?" to which she replies:

Repeatedly and disconcertingly, Wollstonecraft associates the feminine with weakness, childishness, deceitfulness, cunning, superficiality, an overvaluation of love, frivolity, dilettantism, irrationality, flattery, servility, prostitution, coquetry, sentimentality, ignorance, indolence, intolerance, slavish conformity, fickle passion, despotism, bigotry, and a 'spaniel-like affection.' The feminine principle, so defined, threatens – like a virus – to contaminate and destroy men and their culture. For, as Wollstonecraft explains, 'Weak, artificial beings, raised above the common wants and affections of their race, in a premature, unnatural manner, undermine the very foundation of virtue, and spread corruption through the whole mass of society.'³

She goes on to give additional examples in the same mode, and I could add plenty more: denunciations of women's fanatical piety and superstition; contemptuous dismissals of their passions for shopping, lap-dogs, and romantic novels; fierce tirades against their exploitation of sexual charm to trap and tyrannize men in private life, and to obtain illicit influence over public affairs; and so on and so forth. The tone, as Gubar indicates, is so severe as to be strongly reminiscent of male misogynist satire. Gubar acknowledges that these "derogations of the feminine...are framed in terms of [Wollstonecraft's] breakthrough analysis of the social construction of gender," which emphasized "the powerful impact of culture on subjectivity"; but she goes on to point out that:

although...*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* sets out to liberate society from a hated subject constructed to be subservient and called 'woman' it illuminates how such animosity can spill over into antipathy of those human beings most constrained by that construction.⁴

The aim then of the feminist enterprise as Wollstonecraft inaugurated it (as Gubar might have said, but does not) was less to free women than to abolish them, an aspiration certainly suggested at various points in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It is the "desire of being always women" which is the "very consciousness which degrades the sex," Wollstonecraft writes,⁵ while again: "Men are not always men in the company of women; nor would women always remember that they are women, if they were allowed to acquire more understanding."⁶ The woman of wisdom and virtue, she tells her readers at one point, is the one who can "forget her sex" even at that time of life when sexual consciousness is most insistent, promoting in herself instead those capacities common to all humanity, "regardless of the distinction of sex."⁷

Being able to forget one's sex may not seem a very life-enhancing ambition. It is, however, one with serious staying power in the feminist tradition. Ann Snitow, another American literary critic, some years ago wrote a splendid personal reflection on the paradoxes of female identity in second-wave feminism. Recalling her first experience of attending a consciousness-raising group in the early 1970s, Snitow remembered thinking exultantly, "Now I don't have to be a woman anymore.... 'Woman' is my slave name; feminism will give me freedom to seek some other identity altogether." Another woman asked Snitow, "How can someone who doesn't like being a woman be a feminist?" to which Snitow replied, "Why would anyone who likes being a woman *need* to be a feminist?"⁸

Gubar cites this, along with other, similarly complex anti-woman comments from feminists as diverse as Olive Schreiner, Kate Millett, Denise Riley, and Germaine Greer, to make the case that "as a genre, feminist expository prose inevitably embeds itself in the misogynist tradition it seeks to address and redress."⁹ In Cora Kaplan's words, which Gubar quotes, "There is no feminism that can stand wholly outside femininity as it is posed in a given historical moment. All feminisms give some hostage to femininities and are constructed through the gender sexuality of their day as well as standing in opposition to them."¹⁰

Kaplan's point is clearly right. Yet in the rest of her essay, Gubar (unlike Kaplan) makes little attempt to look at the historical moment in which Wollstonecraft was writing. She has little to say about early-modern misogynist traditions, or why such rhetoric might have appealed to eighteenth-century feminists. The word "inevitably" – as in "feminist...prose inevitably embeds itself in the misogynist tradition" – simply closes an explanatory door which must be pried open if we are to explore these difficult issues.

What kind of history of feminism can grapple with such matters? Three levels of historical inquiry are needed to illuminate Wollstonecraft's anti-woman rhetoric:

First, the study of intellectual and cultural context. This is presumably uncontroversial, but worth emphasizing since the kinds of detailed investigations necessary for a properly historical account of feminist thinkers are still, in most cases, at a fairly early stage.

Second, individual and (in appropriate cases) collective biographies, which in turn cannot be separated from,

Third, the exploration of feminist mentalities, or what I would call a psychic history of feminism. This is, I need hardly say, a much more contentious area of inquiry, particularly when it is linked, as I think it must be, to a psychic history of femininity, that is to an account of the unconscious fantasies as well as conscious aspirations which go into the making of feminine identity, and how these fantasies and aspirations are in turn reflected in feminist politics.

Once we begin to think in terms of the third dimension of historical method, that is, in terms of feminism's motivating fantasies, we can begin to explore a

question that Gubar strikingly fails to ask: what is misogyny? Using this term to describe Wollstonecraft's invective is perfectly accurate if what is meant by misogyny is any expression of hostility to women as a sex; but is this really adequate? After all, just who is being hated when something called Woman is hated: the mother, the lover, the wife, the whore, the castrating bitch, or the Amazon man-woman (as Wollstonecraft herself was so often represented)? In the case of men, misogyny is now generally understood as a phobic response to feared and repudiated aspects of the male personality which are designated as feminine in order to be consigned to others (women or other men, notably male homosexuals). What is hated is a fantasy, or fantasies, of the feminine which are projections of whatever is most frightening or unsettling in the male psyche, particularly feelings of disorder, helplessness, humiliation. As one interpreter of early-modern satire observes, the satirist "hopes, almost prays, that whatever out there threatens him does not by a stretch of his own imagination absorb him"¹¹ and that fearful hope, it has been argued, is what can generally be detected behind male hatred of women.

But what about misogyny in women, if such a thing can be allowed to exist? Who or what is hated when a woman hates women? Experiencing oneself as being "woman," I want to propose, is not a natural fact but an act of the imagination that draws on fantasies of femininity which are not necessarily more welcome to women than they are to men. This point is developed further on; let us turn first to the world in which Wollstonecraft's *Philippics* against her sex were formulated and received.

"Is it possible," Gubar asks, "to view Wollstonecraft's description of femininity in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as a portrait of any middle-class woman of her age...?"¹² The answer is clearly meant to be yes, but in fact must be – no, it is not. The portrait of femininity which Wollstonecraft draws is, by and large, a depiction *not* of ordinary women of her own class but those of the wealthy landed elite. Wollstonecraft was *addressing* women and men of the middle-class, but representing women of a higher strata – "ladies" as she scornfully dubs them – partly as a way of flattering the cultural sensibilities of men and women of her own background, but more importantly because elite women played a central symbolic role in eighteenth-century political thought. Viewing Wollstonecraft's writings on women as documents in early democratic radicalism (which is partly how they must be viewed), we can see in them metaphorical usages of Woman common to virtually all oppositionist political rhetoric. The figure of the idle lady of fashion, her languorous days passed in a "hot-bed of luxurious indolence,"¹³ wallowing in the sybaritic pleasures of the table, the body, and steamy French novels, was a favorite symbol of aristocratic decadence not only for Wollstonecraft, but for writers as varied as the Country polemicist John Brown,¹⁴ the radical James Burgh,¹⁵ the Evangelical Hannah More,¹⁶ and feminists such as Catherine Macaulay¹⁷ and Mary Hays. "[S]poiled by prosperity and goaded on by

temptation and the allurements of pleasure, [women of fashion] give a loose rein to their passions, and plunge headlong into folly and dissipation...to the utter extinction of thought, moderation, or strict morality," Mary Hays wrote sternly, adding that "[i]f this sentence, which I presume to pronounce on a considerable portion of my own sex, be deemed severe; let me be permitted to appeal to the votaries of fashion themselves; and let their own hearts tell, whether or not I judge harshly of their conduct."¹⁸

As in this quotation, what was particularly denigrated in such polemics was the erotic engrossment of fashionable women, which Wollstonecraft attacked at length and with a severity which has led many commentators to describe her as a sexual puritan. As in the writings of other political moralists, however, Wollstonecraft's target here was not women only; rather, the image of a corrupt, eroticized femininity was extended to all parasitic groups in society, most notably the professional military and the male rich. Throughout the late eighteenth century, political reformers¹⁹ had equated elite culture with what was dubbed "effeminacy," a polysemic term whose meanings all circulated around a feminized sexual subjectivity – weak, passive, penetratable rather than penetrating – to be found both in women and the sexually incontinent, foppish, francophiliac, and possibly homosexual men of the ruling class. Political virtue and vice were sexualized through a series of symbolic connections in which heterosexual manliness was identified with a life of public duty and set against the luxuriously self-involved lives of the effete idle rich.²⁰ At one point in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, for example, Wollstonecraft described the French nobility as "the profligates of rank, emasculated by hereditary effeminacy,"²¹ while in a 1794 text she condemned the entire *ancien régime* as a "nation of women."²² The English ruling class and all its various hangers-on – politicians, clergy, the professional army – have all been unmanned by rank and fortune, she writes: "supinely exist[ing] without exercising mind or body, they have ceased to be men."²³

The derogation of femininity involved in such rhetoric of course demands explanation, as does Wollstonecraft's perpetuation of it in a text dedicated to the promotion of female status. Hostility to the sexual woman, as Gubar indicates, is the dominant motif, and it is here that Wollstonecraft reads most like earlier misogynist satirists. But again, when this issue of satire is examined more closely, matters appear more complex than Gubar indicates. As Alice Browne has noted, misogynist satire was seen by some women as an inspiration to self-improvement: the moralist and educator Sarah Trimmer, for example, claimed to have been set on the right moral track in her youth by reading Young's satires against women.²⁴ Further, these satirical traditions need to be set alongside the alternative literary tradition of chivalry or gallantry in which women were praised for those qualities in which they were deemed superior to men: wit, beauty, compassion, etc. If satire was the language of disgust, as Browne observes, gallantry was the language of desire²⁵; yet feminists tended to be much more impatient with gallantry than with misogyny, viewing it – as Wollstonecraft did – as more patronizing toward women

in its sentimental idealizations than the language of sex-war insult found in satire. “Why are girls to be told that they resemble angels; but to sink them below women?” as Wollstonecraft demanded.²⁶ Listening to her rebut the sexual attitudes of her male contemporaries – particularly those of Edmund Burke, Drs. Gregory and Fordyce, and of course Rousseau – we hear very clearly the stern feminist voice, harshly condemning the demerits of her sex, taking on those chivalric sentimentalists whose praise of female beauty and frailty barely masked an anxious revulsion. The *Rights of Woman* opens with the hopeful declaration that “My own sex...will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood” since such “soft phrases” of praise “are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness...and those beings who are [its] objects...will soon become objects of contempt.”²⁷ And later: “If women be ever allowed to walk without leading-strings, why must they be cajoled into virtue by artful flattery and sexual compliments? Speak to them the language of truth and soberness, and away with the lullaby strains of condescending endearment!”²⁸

As objects of desire and derogation, women are denied any independent intellectual or moral existence: they are merely, to use Wollstonecraft’s word, “chimeras” of the male erotic imagination, manufactured into social existence through romantic conventions and cultural codes (“manners,” in her eighteenth-century vocabulary). Against this objectified, eroticized version of femininity, Wollstonecraft set the ideal of a rational womanhood dedicated to knowledge of truth and performance of duty. Love in such women would exist not as a fever of the appetites or as romantic sentiment, but as a higher passion for all that is beautiful and good – in other words, as a devotion to God. As I have shown elsewhere, the tradition on which this sublimatory ideal drew was Christian Platonism²⁹ – and here again Wollstonecraft’s thought was marked by a legacy of androcentric assumptions. Milton and Rousseau were the primary sources of her Platonism; yet in *Paradise Lost*, it is of course Adam who is enjoined by the archangel to redirect his earthly passion for Eve toward heavenly love; while in *Emile*, it is the eponymous hero who must learn to sublimate his desire for Sophie into divine ardor – never the other way round. Male spirit transcending the temptations of female flesh is an awkward paradigm of moral redemption for a feminist to work with. But in seizing on such ideas Wollstonecraft also – often very effectively – reworked them, designing a program for female moral emancipation which was genuinely, in some respects breathtakingly, new.

This achievement on Wollstonecraft’s part highlights a problem with Gubar’s notion of what she calls a “patrilineal literary inheritance.”³⁰ This concept, which serves as her main explanation of feminist misogyny, describes a tradition of anti-woman writings by men to which feminist theorists become hostage: in Wollstonecraft’s case, the chief culprit is of course Rousseau. This is a very big topic on which much needs to be said, but suffice to note here that the positions of men and women writers in the eighteenth century were much less fixed than

this idea of “an alien and alienating aesthetic patrilineage” implies. Both Rousseau and Milton, for example, were seen as friends to women because they attacked the sexual double standard, promoted companionate marriage, and – in Rousseau’s case particularly – celebrated women’s maternal role as moral educators. Rousseau’s ideas about gender were far more complex and ambiguous than Gubar’s presentation of them suggests, which is why they proved so important to Wollstonecraft. And the notion of women writers in this period being supinely indoctrinated by men is merely risible when one considers the numbers of these women, the range of genres in which they worked, and the cultural authority which they were capable of wielding. Wollstonecraft spoke from the intellectual century of Pope and Swift and Rousseau but also from that of Johnson and Richardson – both strong supporters of women writers – and of Catherine Macauley, Elizabeth Carter, Fanny Burney, Hester Thrale, Elizabeth Montagu, Anna Barbauld, Elizabeth Inchbald, Anna Seward, Mary Hays, Charlotte Lennox, Maria Edgeworth, Joanna Baillie, Hannah More – all of whom, by the way, shared her stringent views on the need for a “revolution in female manners” to eradicate the vices of modern women.

That women have often been women’s sternest critics is probably no news to most women reading this article; but the specific issue of Wollstonecraft’s misogyny is clearer now that we see that it was the eroticized lady of fashion at whom her hostility was largely directed, as it was in the writings of most bourgeois moralists, male and female. Along with the ideological mileage to be gained by such sentiments, there were important social factors contributing to them. The first chapter of the *Rights of Woman* denounced the spread of “false refinement” from the aristocracy to the middle class, and particularly to newly affluent women who now, Wollstonecraft writes, “all want to be ladies,” that is, to ape the leisured lifestyle of the rich in place of the modest, work- and home-oriented lives of the traditional middling orders. Wollstonecraft’s book is redolent with nostalgia for an idealized *petit bourgeois* world of craft manufactories, small shops, and independent businesses in which women could fully participate both as workers and wives, rather than living as the “voluptuous parasites” they now aspired to be. The reality behind this ideal was much more complex than Wollstonecraft’s rhetoric allowed, but the impact of commercialism and consumerism on the lives of Englishwomen was clearly evident in her views, as were the attendant changes in women’s position in a highly competitive marriage market.³¹ Women’s increased dependence on marriage, and the miserable fate suffered by many single or widowed women without independent sources of income, was a major stimulus behind Wollstonecraft’s feminism – as it had been central to her own life experience.³² Poised between the gentry to which her parents aspired and the poverty of self-supporting spinsterhood, Wollstonecraft knew all too well the degradation of a life spent in the respectable grind of teaching, governnessing, seamstressing, companioning – those badly-paid, disregarded employments which were often all that were available to genteel women of small means. Bitter at her parents’ overt

preference for her elder brother (who was educated to the law) and yet determined not to marry for economic support, Wollstonecraft was typical of that small army of bright, undereducated women who found their way into the eighteenth-century world of letters and then began to raise a protest against the social and economic conditions which had taken them there. It is worth remembering that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was, among other things, a potboiler – written to satisfy Wollstonecraft's commitments to her employer (the radical publisher Joseph Johnson) and to keep the wolf from her family's door.

Wollstonecraft's resentment of women whose lives were easier, sexier, and happier than her own is very evident in her early writings and correspondence, particularly when she was working as a governess to the aristocratic Kingsborough family in Ireland. Her caricatures of elite women clearly drew on the Kingsborough women, particularly the beautiful Lady Kingsborough. Letters to her sister Everina written at the time spoke disparagingly of the silly ways of pretty women who use their looks to attract potential husbands, something to which Wollstonecraft herself, she made clear, would never, ever stoop. Her disapproval, as well as her insistent tone of cultural superiority, reek of envious unhappiness, occasionally mixed with rueful self-mockery. "I am like a *lilly* [sic] drooping – Is it not a sad pity that so sweet a flower should waste its sweetness on the *Desart* [sic] Air. ... Yours an Old Maid. ... Alas!!!!!!!!!!"³³ she wrote to Everina in 1787. Five years later, at the time she wrote the *Rights of Woman*, she was probably still a virgin and there can be little doubt that some of the hate directed at sexy women in that book originated in a sense of sexual exclusion. Gubar refers to the self-hate revealed by Wollstonecraft in her personal writings, and speculates that her debased portrait of womanhood was partly self-representation: "the misogyny of Wollstonecraft's work," she proposes, "dramatises the self-revulsion of a woman who knew *herself* to be constructed as feminine, and thus, it proposes a kind of 'anti-narcissism.'"³⁴ Knowing herself to be as prone as any woman to the vicissitudes of female emotional life, Gubar seems to be suggesting, Wollstonecraft projected these feelings onto other women in order to retrieve for herself an image of rational self-control. Her misogyny, as Gubar puts it, was a desperate attempt to "negotiate the distance between desire and dread."³⁵

This argument seems to me partly right. Certainly Wollstonecraft experienced savage self-dislike, enough to try and murder herself twice over.³⁶ The reasons for this would fill another essay, but her feelings for her parents – a drunken, abusive father and a cold, ineffectual mother – must have been a major factor. Being a woman was not something for which Wollstonecraft had been given any happy preparation.³⁷ But to suggest, as Gubar does, that she *knew* herself to be Woman, whether by nature or culture, and then turned against her womanhood, is a difficult position to adopt. For what kind of knowledge is this, this knowledge of one's sex? Whatever it is, Gubar is assuming that all women, including all feminists, possess it, and that feminist politics reflect it. The object of feminism is this

Woman, and the correct feminist stance is pro-Woman. These are all assumptions which, at the very least, deserve to be questioned.

As a politics with Woman as both its agent and object, feminism has always been beleaguered by uncertainty about who Woman is, can be, should be. Actually existing women are either seen as too much Woman, as Wollstonecraft is accusing her maligned ladies of fashion of being, or too little, as Gubar's charge of misogyny implies in the case of Wollstonecraft herself.³⁸ Ann Snitow, whose autobiographical account of the women's movement I referred to above, argues that these difficulties reflect the paradox at the heart of feminism: that is, the paradoxical drive to seek emancipation as women while at the same time experiencing powerful wishes not to be women at all. This is a paradox, Snitow claims, which "will only change through a historical process."³⁹ I want to suggest, however, that this is one area of human difficulty which is, in certain respects, beyond history; that the tensions which Snitow describes are in fact the inevitable, insuperable dilemmas intrinsic to having a sexual subjectivity at all. "Only the concept of a subjectivity at odds with itself," Jacqueline Rose has written, "gives back to women the right to an impasse at the point of sexual identity" – the impasse which can be heard throughout the feminist tradition.⁴⁰

Like Rose and other psychoanalytic theorists, I have used the concept of unconscious fantasy in my own work to understand how this impasse occurs. The process of becoming a woman leads not only through biology, but also through fantasies of masculinity and femininity which shape every child's selfhood. Everyone occupies a body which is biologically sexed, but the psychological gender with which mind and body are invested is not inborn but acquired – a trickier business altogether. The fantasies which give birth to the ego are a conflux of gender identifications – derived in the first instance from parental figures – whose outcome is never Man or Woman in some absolute sense but a sexual identity which is always partial, defensive, wishful. We feel ourselves to belong to one sex because of our fantasies about what it would feel like to belong to the other, imaginings which pull us to and fro along the gender axis.⁴¹

Such fantasies, to return to Snitow's point, are certainly open to historical change at the level of *content*; that is, what constitutes imaginary maleness or femaleness will differ in important respects between periods and cultures. The presence of a soul within the human subject, for example, or changing views of bodily sexual difference, or shifting boundaries between the animal and the human, all transfigure inner maps of gender. What does not change, however, is the mapping process itself – those deep mechanisms of fantasy formation, particularly identification, which are the precondition to having *any* sexed subjectivity, and indeed to becoming human at all.

The politics of gender, I am arguing, are inevitably embedded in these fantasmic identifications and the conflicting emotional postures – love/hate, acceptance/repudiation, idealization/denigration – to which they give rise.

Fantasy belongs to individuals, but within cultural communities it can take related forms and produce shared effects. The love and hate which women feel for the varieties of femininity inscribed on our imaginations have shaped our political visions and the radical projects generated by them. In Wollstonecraft's case, we obviously know far more of her political project than the deeper wishes behind it. But her husband William Godwin, referring to her feelings for her father, described her as a "very good hater,"⁴² and I suspect the description applied just as well to her feelings for her mother, whose unloving figure surely hovers behind the savage caricatures of the *Rights of Woman*. All her life Wollstonecraft displayed ambivalent attitudes towards female acquaintances, particularly her intimates. The pattern of her friendship with her beloved Fanny Blood, beginning in adoration and ending in disappointment, may have extended more generally (her depiction of this relationship, in her first novel, *Mary, a Fiction*, setting it within a wider picture of romantic losses and disenchantments, hints at this).

On the other hand, Wollstonecraft frequently imagined herself into an idealized male position – a stance which is most obvious in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, where she pits her manly democratic voice against Burke's effete elite apologetics, but is also clearly audible in the *Rights of Woman*, where manly courage is seen as a prerequisite to women's emancipation and those "few extraordinary women who have rushed in eccentric directions out of the orbit prescribed to their sex" are viewed as "male spirits, confined by mistake in female frames."⁴³ A central hope for women in the *Rights of Woman*, that they should achieve an authentic moral subjectivity through amorous identification with God, evoked a female selfhood molded in the image of a sacralized paternalism. At other times, however, she spoke from the position of the mother, describing maternal sentiments as true womanhood and setting the good mother – particularly the breastfeeder – against the sexualized woman whose body is for pleasure rather than reproduction. But in her final writings, in the years when Wollstonecraft herself had found sexual happiness, the erotic woman – the woman who can both acknowledge and act on her sexual feelings – is at last allowed to speak out on behalf of female desire.⁴⁴ In other words, what Wollstonecraft discovered in the course of her lifetime is that there is no single way of being Woman, and it is this understanding – intuited rather than explicated – which motivates the most radical impulse in her feminism: the wild wish, in her own words, to see the "distinction of sex confounded in society"⁴⁵ in order that women may experience all their varieties of being. Only with the death of Woman, in other words, do real women come to life in their own minds as well as in the wider culture. That the wish for this transformation was often driven as much by hate as by hope, seems to me simply to underline what we already know: that the feelings which fuel political visions are neither purer nor sweeter than any other, and that the feminist personality – no matter how charismatic or visionary – is never more than vitally, ordinarily human.

It is worth concluding on this point, because the figure of Wollstonecraft herself has been so mythologized that her mere humanity is frequently forgotten. The palpable sense of betrayal detectable in Gubar's essay is a good indication of this. For two hundred years, Mary Wollstonecraft has been *the* iconic figure of early western feminism, a central symbol of Woman in revolt. Yet as the feminist pioneer par excellence, she has elicited a very divided response from her successors, ranging from the anxiously repudiatory attitude of Victorian feminists – fearful of her reputation for political extremism and sexual license – through to the madly idealizing portrayals of her produced by early twentieth-century feminists like Virginia Woolf, Emma Goldman, and Ruth Benedict.⁴⁶ Since the 1980s, both her importance and her ambiguity have continued to increase as feminist scholars have scrutinized her work and life for the secret of our ancestry, the true meaning of our collective history. Writings pour out; conferences are held; debates erupt over her class attitudes, her view of empire, her sexual philosophy, her Enlightenment perspectives. Critics of present-day feminism evoke her white, middle-class background as indicative of the narrowness of the western feminist tradition, while others accuse her of complicity in the patriarchal attitudes she ostensibly opposed. And now Gubar has charged her with the darkest treachery of all – hating those whose cause she is seen to represent. No pedestal is capable of bearing the weight of this, but the passion with which Wollstonecraft's heroic stature has been attacked, defended, attacked, and so on surely reveals more about the fantasies with which she has been invested than the woman herself. As a symbol of dissident womanhood, Wollstonecraft has been freighted with the ambivalent visions of femaleness which haunt the feminist imagination, and then idolized and punished for them – an inevitable fate for a heroine.⁴⁷

“Why would anyone who likes being a woman *need* to be a feminist?” the young Ann Snitow wanted to know, and the question still deserves consideration – not only because *being* a woman is so tough in many respects, but because *becoming* a woman is a process fraught with ambivalence, with hostility and repudiation as well as affirmation and love. To say that part of Wollstonecraft loathed being a woman is perhaps, then, to say no more than that she *was* a woman, that her so-called misogyny, while probably more extreme than in happier women, was as inevitable a feature of her female selfhood as it has been of the feminist tradition as a whole. Gubar thinks there is a case to answer here, but surely this is not a matter of culpability, but rather of the self-recognition essential to the maturity of a politics whose heroines can never be more or other than the complex fantasies they embody, the “wild wishes” and troubled aspirations that have fashioned the modern feminist imagination.

NOTES

1. Susan Gubar, “Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradoxes of ‘It Takes One to Know One,’” *Feminist Studies* 29, no. 30 (1994): 454.
2. *Ibid.*, 462.

3. *Ibid.*, 456. The sentence of Wollstonecraft's quoted by Gubar here is not a description of women, but of "the great": it is this symbolic equation between women and the ruling elite that I go on to discuss in this article. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; Penguin, 1992), 81.

4. Gubar, "Feminist Misogyny," 457.

5. Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 202.

6. *Ibid.*, 234.

7. *Ibid.*, 140.

8. Ann Snitow, "A Gender Diary," in M. Hirsch and E. Fox Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1990), 9, 33.

9. Gubar, "Feminist Misogyny," 462.

10. Kaplan, "Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism," in Jameson et al., *Formations of Pleasure* (London: Routledge, 1983); quoted in Gubar, "Feminist Misogyny," 459.

11. Michael Seidel, *The Satiric Inheritance: Rabelais to Sterne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 12, quoted in Felicity Nussbaum, *The Brink of All We Hate: English Satires on Women, 1660–1750* (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 4.

12. Gubar, "Feminist Misogyny," 460.

13. Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 162.

14. "Estimate" Brown, as the Reverend John Brown was known after the title of his famous jeremiad against the evils of the times, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (1757), fulminated against the "vain, luxurious and selfish effeminacy of the age" which eroded the "peculiar and characteristic" differences between the sexes: "the one Sex having advanced into Boldness, as the other has sunk into Effeminacy."

15. See James Burgh, *The Dignity of Human Nature* (1754) for denunciations of the spread of female fashionable manners – frivolity, idleness, self-indulgence, etc. – downwards from elite women to those of the rising middle class: "The ladies of our times give themselves up too generally to an idle and expensive manner of life, to the great detriment of economy, and the vexation of prudent masters of families" (51). Burgh was a very influential advocate of parliamentary reform; his widow, Hannah Burgh, was Wollstonecraft's neighbour and friend in Stoke Newington in the 1780s.

16. Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799). Although More was a fierce opponent of Wollstonecraft's "jacobinical" radicalism, she was also – like many Evangelicals – a sharp critic of elite impiety and immorality.

17. Catherine Macaulay, *Letters on Education* (1790).

18. Mary Hays, *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain on Behalf of Women* (1798), 82–3.

19. I am using the term "political reformer" loosely here to refer both to "Country" opponents of the Whig establishment and to more liberal-minded radicals. Both attacked elite effeminacy, although the specifics of the attack differed somewhat. Foremost in the minds of most oppositionist politicians when they condemned "ladies of fashion" were the wives and mistresses of the Whig nobility. An important factor behind hostility to these women was the "illicit" influence they were seen to wield over their lovers and husbands, to which Wollstonecraft refers to when she repeatedly attacks women who "not taught to respect public good," "intermeddle with...weighty affairs, neglecting private duties only to disturb, by cunning tricks, the orderly plans of reason which rise above their comprehension." (*Rights of Woman*, 88).

20. For the importance of "effeminacy" in eighteenth century political discourse, see Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Philip Carter, "An 'effeminate' or 'efficient' nation? Masculinity and 18th century Social Documentary," in *Textual Practice* 11, no. 3 (1997). Claudia Johnson's *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender and Sentimentality in the 1790s* (1995) contains a very illuminating discussion of the shaping of Wollstonecraft's feminism by radical ideals of civic manliness.

21. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790; London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989), 40.

22. Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794; London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989), 121.

23. Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 10.
24. Alice Browne, *The Eighteenth Century Feminist Mind* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987),
22. Browne's brief but well-informed and subtle remarks on the relationship between misogynist satire and feminism are typical of this excellent book.
25. *Ibid.*, 23.
26. Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 197. See Nussbaum, *Brink of All We Hate*, ch. 9, for a discussion of the shift from satire to idealisation in the mid- to late eighteenth century.
27. Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 81, 82.
28. *Ibid.*, 196.
29. Barbara Taylor, "For the Love of God: Religion and the Erotic Imagination in Wollstonecraft's Feminism," in Eileen Yeo, ed., *Mary Wollstonecraft and 200 Years of Feminisms* (London: Rivers Oram, 1997).
30. Gubar, "Feminist Misogyny," 462.
31. For illuminating discussions of these changes, see Harriet Guest, "The Dream of a Common Language: Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft," *Textual Practice* 9, no. 2 (1995); Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping and Business in the 18th Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter* (London: Yale University Press, 1998); John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the 18th Century* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).
32. Amy Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993); Ruth Perry, "Women in Families: the Great Disinheritance," in Vivien Jones, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
33. Mary Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, 24 March 1787; in Ralph Wardle, ed., *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 145.
34. Gubar, "Feminist Misogyny," 460.
35. *Ibid.*, 461.
36. Her personal correspondence reveals many instances of intense self-loathing. See, for example, Wardle, *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 221.
37. The most recent biography of Wollstonecraft is Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1974).
38. For a very influential discussion of the problem of too little "Woman" vs. too much "Woman" in feminist discourse, see Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), esp. ch. 1. My approach differs substantially from the one offered in Riley's important book. See also Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman* (London: Virago Press, 1994) for very illuminating explorations into the psychic life of feminism. And – on a highly provocative note – Donald Winnicott's "This Feminism" (in his *Home Is Where We Start From* (New York: Norton, 1986) contains an infuriating but fascinating discussion of what he regards as the roots of misogyny in both sexes and its impact on feminism.
39. Snitow, "Gender Diary," 19.
40. Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso Books, 1986), 15.
41. "To fully appreciate being a woman one has to be a man, and to fully appreciate being a man one has to be a woman." Winnicott, "This Feminism."
42. William Godwin, *A Memoir of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798; London: Penguin Books, 1987), 207.
43. Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 120.
44. See *The Wrongs of Women, or Maria* (1798), Wollstonecraft's final, unfinished novel, for a passionate if highly ambiguous endorsement of female desire.
45. The full quotation is: "A wild wish has just flown from my heart to my head, and I will not stifle it, though it may excite a horse-laugh. I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society, unless where love animates the behaviour." *Rights of Woman*, 148–9.
46. For Virginia Woolf, see her "Mary Wollstonecraft" (1929) reprinted in *Women and Writing* (London: Women's Press, 1979); for Emma Goldmann, see Alice Wexler, "Emma Goldman on

Mary Wollstonecraft,” *Feminist Studies* 1 (1981): 132; for Ruth Benedict’s view see her “Mary Wollstonecraft” in Margaret Mead, ed., *An Anthropologist at Work: Writings of Ruth Benedict* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959).

47. Barbara Taylor, “An Impossible Heroine? Mary Wollstonecraft and Female Heroism,” in *Soundings* 3 (1996).