Reading Mary Wollstonecraft in Time

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I'm sure I had heard of her or encountered her some time earlier, but I really began to get to know her in the stacks of the Graduate Library at the University of Michigan sometime in 1973. I was doing an independent study focusing on the connections between Enlightenment and early liberal theory and the rise of social science. Exploring English observations of the American and French Revolutions offered fertile ground for this study. These were complicated and provocative political phenomena to observe and understand, fraught with danger and promise for those who mined them for implications concerning social experiments of human thought and action, authority and resistance, the invention of political formations, and changing contexts of human action.

And then, serendipity. There she was—a woman among men vigorously debating the causes and meaning of the ongoing French Revolution. Not merely holding her own, but firing the first return shot in what became a historical debate among worthies. Thus, my first serious encounter with the works of Mary Wollstonecraft was, unusually, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, her response to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, by the influential member of Parliament Edmund Burke.

The Basis of Attraction

I was drawn in immediately. First, of course, this was a woman writing political theory, when only a couple of times in my study of political science and intellectual history had anyone suggested that women did such a thing. There was Hannah Arendt, whose latest book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, was the most riveting text in my introductory political science course, reinforced by a class trip to New York to see

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Robert Shaw's play, *Man in the Glass Booth*, directed by Harold Pinter and starring Donald Pleasence. I had been told about Rosa Luxembourg. I think I was told about Emma Goldman. That was it. So finding a woman engaged in the work of a political theorist, doing what Thomas Paine did, but earlier (although not backwards and in heels), was exciting and revelatory. After all, in those days there were few women in political science, a lot of our elders were not convinced we belonged there, and few in our discipline believed there was anything about women and politics worth studying.

It was not just Wollstonecraft's sex that drove me to seek out more of her writings. I was taken by the way her serious analysis was laced with her passion for the subject. Much as I loved reading political philosophy, seeing glimpses of the author who created these texts shining through moved me. It recalled to my mind visits to my undergraduate professors in political theory and intellectual history (after reading Sir Leslie Stephen's *The History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*) to ask why these people wrote political theory. What motivated them? What were they trying to do? Both professors misunderstood my question, and seemed to interpret it as evidence that I didn't understand the premises and argument of the books. I'm sure I understood their intellectual aspects as well as any young college student might have done. But I wasn't asking about the texts; I was asking about the writers. Why write? Why write political theory? This question, formulated while reading political theory in the politically turbulent years of 1968 to 1970, prefigures my longtime preoccupation with communication as political action. Certainly, beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft, as I became aware of women who spoke and wrote in arenas and of matters in which they were supposed to remain silent, the force of communication as political action became ever more obvious and fascinating.

As I moved on from the *Rights of Men* to the (I learned) more famous *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, I felt the presence of a person with whom I could carry on a conversation in my mind. I was already rather taken with the notion of a Republic of Letters, but reading the work of proto-feminist and feminist writers took on an increasing urgency—an intellectual, personal, and political commitment—in those early days of the regeneration of the women's movement on and off campus. For those of us who had chosen paths that had not yet been forged or, at least, had little traffic ahead, these mental conversations with voyage partners from other times and places were almost unspeakably important. And in those early days, without a feminist canon, without courses and curricula, without guides other than friends and colleagues who were likewise finding their way in what we thought was uncharted territory, the conversation partners

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we found were the result of happenstance. In my case, my earliest band of fellow travelers in the early 1970s was quite a crew: Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1966), Emma Goldman (Shulman 1972), Margaret Fuller (1970), Mary Beard (1971), Shulamith Firestone (1970), Sheila Rowbotham (1970), Gayle Rubin (1975), Susan Brownmiller (1975) . . . and within a very few years, a large host of others. Wollstonecraft's personal story was fascinating and titillating enough, certainly, but what made her personally compelling to me was what I could only imagine were the frustrations of trying to develop her ideas and say her piece, even among the impressive group of democratic writers with whom she spent her time. I wanted her to know, sometimes, that we were still listening.

Perhaps most astonishing to me as I came to know Wollstonecraft's work better was the presence of a gendered, palpably (proto-) feminist framework used to discuss something other than the rights and status of women. This analysis became stronger and clearer as she progressed through her very short writing career—it is easy to forget that it was contained within a single decade—culminating in the fragments of her novel published by Godwin as *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*. She analyzed the cultural and historical creation of both men and women as gendered and sexual beings. She analyzed social organizations and processes—as diverse as the family, education, the military, and class and race structure—as parallel and interlocked forms of difference and domination. She reached toward a linkage of historical, social, and psychological forces in the understanding of these institutions as well as revolution. And the leitmotif throughout *all* her work was gender—not "women's rights," but gender (as we would now call it) as a key element of the warp and woof of social organization. This is a point that scholars of Mary Wollstonecraft understand well, and most value in her work, but one which casual readers unfortunately often miss entirely. To underscore this point, in my book *A Vindication of Political Virtue* (1992) I did not focus on "women's rights" and the condition of women until well into the book, and used the antiquated conceit "The Same Subject Continued" as the chapter title.

It was exciting to know our generation was far from the first to reach toward a larger framework of analysis of the role of gender and sexuality. We knew that there had been generations of women who fought for women's rights in at least some arenas. But without courses, curricula, library collections, or other access to the history of women's writing, especially on political and social analysis, that recognition across generations was crucial. More came later as feminist students of the history of women's political writing created and restored the conversation by rediscovering our

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rightful conversation partners—those I mentioned above as well as many others who are more commonly read today, and some who have still not received recognition as political thinkers, like Ida B. Wells Barnett (Wells and Dunster 1991) and Anna Julia Cooper (1990), both of whom offered sophisticated analyses of race, gender, and political domination.

I thought that someday I would write on Wollstonecraft, treating her work as the oeuvre of a serious political thinker. I began to take notes, yet one thing led to another, and the notes remained on the shelf.

Reading Wollstonecraft and Taking Women's Lives Seriously

As 1992 approached—the 200th anniversary of the publication of the *Rights of Woman*—I began once again to turn to those notes. There was a burgeoning literature on Wollstonecraft's work from the point of view of literary history and criticism, and a growing number of biographies, but still, little analysis from the point of view of the history of political thought and analysis. I could not let that pass, and thus I returned to Mary Wollstonecraft, the political philosopher. Nevertheless, it was easy to be misinterpreted. Countless times people asked how my *biography* of Mary Wollstonecraft was going. It seemed that if a woman was the subject, it must be about her life, not about her body of work.

But her life did influence my research strategy. How should I read and interpret the political thought of a late eighteenth-century woman with little formal education, no access to great libraries, and only the mentorship and comradeship of her interesting and influential—but quirky—group of acquaintances in Newington Green and London? I could not make the usual assumptions about what she might know. I could not follow the often-used technique in political theory of drawing connections between her texts and previous others' on the basis of similarity, a strategy that rests on assumptions about contact. Women's lives were not like men's. Their knowledge of the intellectual past had to be more haphazard.

I began with months of immersing myself in the various currents of political theory and history of the century leading up to her life that might have influenced this woman in some way. Then I read all of the biographies. I compiled my "Wollstonecraft's Likely Reading List" by identifying the works of her acquaintances as well as those she mentioned or viewed, and I read those. I wanted an empirical basis for determining the connections between her work and that of others. I searched the field of social history

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for works that might help me understand the social and political milieu in which Wollstonecraft lived. Especially important were those that focused on the gendered construction of daily life, because it was—and is—all too easy to interpret writings on women through an anachronistic set of understandings of family, work, community life, and even politics. The relatively few works that fit that need, like Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's then very new (1987) *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, were godsends.[1]

Because gender and sexuality are so widely viewed as natural and ahistorical, even among social science and humanities scholars in those days, it was even more critical to take care to approach this project on political thought with one's historical imagination turned on, as much as the concept of "historical imagination" is controversial. Even today, for example, in teaching this text, it is too easy to allow students' observations that Wollstonecraft was simply reinforcing the role of women as "mothers and housewives," without any recognition of the realities of work done by the members of a typical household. (How does the role of being "just a housewife" compare to anything we understand today when the first order of business of the day might be to light the fires and throw the bedpan slops out the window? How many men left for the day to an office job, leaving women to run the washing machine?)

The historical imagination is not just important for comprehending the argument through its social context, but also for understanding the language of the text. Once again, this commonplace observation is especially critical given how rare it is for scholars to attend to the gendered dimensions of language. Wollstonecraft herself explored the meanings of "manly" and "masculine" (Sapiro 1992, ch.6). But following is another example that could transform one's whole reading of the *Rights of Woman*: "Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she know why she ought to be virtuous?" (22). These words form the core of Wollstonecraft's letter to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord that prefaces her book. This sentence is also the crux of much modern feminist criticism of Wollstonecraft. A surface reading of this opening passage seems to compress the reasoning for women's rights into a lowest common denominator, perhaps one calculated for rhetorical acceptability, to make her argument palatable: The reason for according women more dignity and rights will

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help them be better "companions" to men. So, some feminists have asked, how much credit should be given to a writer who merely wanted women to be better, more virtuous wives?

But the words in these sentences are fraught with historical dangers. First, and widely understood among scholars of the history of political thought, is the sense with which we should read the reference to virtue. As long as the confluence of the word "virtuous" with "women" and "wives" doesn't lead us to think only about a special female version of sexual fidelity and modesty of dress, a reader is unlikely to be misled, or at least not for long, because virtue is such an important subject of the book.[2] But while "virtue," as Wollstonecraft used it, would include sexual modesty—for women and for men—she spent considerable effort explaining that the virtue she aimed for is a broader notion of principled self-discipline that creates good (Sapiro 1992, ch.2).

Much less noted, if at all, but at least as important, is the ambiguous meaning of the word "companion," which seems to be widely understood as meaning "wife." In this sense, Wollstonecraft would seem to be saying that women should be educated to be wives. But any reading of the book suggests she would not have meant that. And indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* also suggests a different reading, because there were many common senses of "companion," and "wife" seems to be only a minor one. Rather, a companion was one who associates, shares, or partakes with another; a thing that matches or resembles another as in a matched set; a friend and equal. True, there are senses in which "companion" has connotations of inequality, and when applied specifically to women it could mean "wife." But the use here is ambiguous, and in the context of the whole of the *Rights of Woman*, we might equally read her point as arguing, "that if she be not prepared by education to become the [equal partner of man] [companion of man in raising the level of virtue of society], she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she know why she ought to be virtuous?" A different reading indeed.

Only after probing the history and background for months—talk about delayed gratification—did I begin the serious rereading and study of Wollstonecraft's own works, arranging them chronologically, integrating her long and brief works and correspondence to glean what I could of the development of the thought of this extraordinary political thinker and writer.

It was a challenging time to write a book like this. It was the heyday of poststructuralist and postmodern influences in both feminist and political

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theory, with a consequent hostility to the project of historical recovery. Perhaps more important, and a critical backdrop to understanding modern feminist scholarship on Wollstonecraft, was the profoundly ambivalent relationship of feminist theorists to liberal political theory, often caricatured as a narrow class- and race-bound concern with rights narrowly construed. Thus, far from appreciating even the whole of the *Rights of Woman*, let alone that work in relation to Wollstonecraft's earlier and later writings, interpreters have too often flattened her work into a treatise arguing for women to stop making themselves sex objects, to be extended the rights of men, and to be given an education.

Of course, the string of common potted summaries of the history of political philosophy with which we are all familiar could fill volumes of addenda to *1066 and All That* (Sellar and Yeatman 1930). But we are still not in an era in which the contributions of women to the history of political analysis are yet appreciated and integrated into our stories of our political traditions. The flattened Wollstonecraft is a cultural tragedy. But so is the flattened conception of liberal theory within feminist theory.

There is another problem with readings of the *Rights of Woman*: it is the one text readers interested in Wollstonecraft's "political" theory read, and only rare treatments truly take account of its relationship to her other works to help mine its meaning and potential. I am grateful that I encountered the *Rights of Men* before the *Rights of Woman*, because the latter flows so naturally from the former. Indeed, the more famous *Rights of Woman* becomes more comprehensible through the lens of most of her earlier, little-known works. And although they came later, a full account of Wollstonecraft's political theory must also reckon with her history of the French Revolution, the *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, and her unfinished novel, *Maria*. Of course her thinking and experience evolved—who could remain unaffected by living in a city wracked with civil war and terrorism, as she did in Paris—but the time span from penning her most famous book until her end was brief, and there were no real revolutions in her thought.

Two aspects, at least, are rendered more visible in the earlier work by reading the later ones in which they are more clearly visible. One is the perversity of domination. Both the *Rights of Men* and, even more, the *Rights of Woman* explore the varieties of forms of domination. But in *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe* and in *Maria*, she expanded on her view of the impact of domination on distorting the minds and character of

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people, turning them into twisted, violent creatures regardless of which party in the domination relationship they are. (For elaboration, especially on the French Revolution, see Sapiro 1992, ch 7.) The force of her argument and the vivid representations of it help to highlight the earlier case in the *Vindications*.

The second aspect of the *Rights of Woman* that is rendered more visible by her later work is its nascent Romanticism. As literary critics and historians who study Wollstonecraft know well, her *Letters* was a signal text in the history of Romanticism, highly influential along with the likes of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and his wife, Wollstonecraft's daughter, Mary Godwin Shelley. But elements of this sensibility are clearly visible in the earlier works, springing, as they partly did, from her reading of Rousseau, especially *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, and of Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. A reading of the Romantic elements would make it much more difficult to see her work simply as calling for equal rights, and only as the forebear of the next-generation liberal feminist thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, Harriet Taylor, and the American suffragists. Rather, it would reveal the *Rights of Woman* to be a precursor of other strands of feminism, such as that of the Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller, who like Wollstonecraft called not just for an equalization between men and women but for a transformation of the capacities of human character, male and female.

Still Together After All These Years

I have traveled a long road with Mary Wollstonecraft since I first met her in the stacks forty years ago. She pushed me always to try to understand women's lives and words in their contexts. She was my companion when I resented the gap between what I hoped to accomplish as a feminist scholar—indeed what my whole shifting community of feminist scholars was hoping to accomplish—and the glacial pace of change in incorporating women's works into the canon of what was worth studying. If she could take being a "hyena in petticoats," I could take whatever came my way.

I was pleased that I was able to do something important for her—more important, certainly, than writing my book. I rescued her from a crime of mistaken identity. Like many writers on Mary Wollstonecraft, I stood in front of the portraits of her, most notably in the Tate Gallery and the

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National Portrait Gallery. I was shocked to find no postcards of the famous portrait in the National Portrait Gallery. And then, I found them, filed under G, for "Mary Godwin." I got the gallery to restore her proper name.

A wonderful community of Wollstonecraft scholars has tried to ensure that she is represented correctly and appropriately. There are new generations of scholars and readers who find Wollstonecraft in their own ways, and begin their own journeys with her. And there will be new generations after them. And perhaps, some time, the vision of strong-minded women that she forged will seem ordinary. But not yet.

NOTES

1. In reaching for knowledge across disciplines in those days, it helped that Leonore Davidoff was a neighbor, which is how I learned about this wonderful book.
2. Gendering words by association makes a difference. In the discussions about the cover design for *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*, the first—obvious—idea was to put a portrait of Wollstonecraft on the cover. But I objected to having her picture near the word "virtue," or even the phrase "political virtue," because I worried that people would imagine my use of "virtue" as a reference to Wollstonecraft herself, and worse, virtue in the common sense. Instead, my publisher found a wonderful line drawing of a writer's hand of ambiguous gender. Perfect.

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