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A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: A Reflection of the Tension Between Conformity and Rebellion in the Life and Times of Mary Wollstonecraft

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*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: A Reflection of the Tension Between
Conformity and Rebellion in the Life and Times of Mary Wollstonecraft*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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"We are little interested about what we do not understand."

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Dedication

"It is...not the acquirement of knowledge, that takes women out of their families..." Mary Wollstonecraft.

Thank you to my wonderful husband, Allan and our children, Anthony, Joseph, Jason, Darren and Michelle, for their love, support and patience.

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Ann Sofia

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I examine *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft and how it reflects the tension between conformity and rebellion that is an inherent component in the life of its author and therefore is a fundamental element of this treatise. In this paper I discuss how the personal struggles of Mary Wollstonecraft, as a woman living in a patriarchal society, influenced her perspective and moved her to address her concerns for her “fellow creatures.” This treatise pushed the boundaries of conventional thinking, but it was also written in traditional terms in an effort to appeal to her contemporary audience.

Another aspect of this study is the dichotomy between the public and private sphere that most women of Wollstonecraft’s time experienced. This dichotomy is related to the struggle between conformity and rebellion within Wollstonecraft herself, and as Wollstonecraft suggests, is an underlying cause for the wastefulness of women as an important resource within society. Throughout her writing and indeed her life, Wollstonecraft experienced a struggle between the traditional values she grew up with and those she developed in response to her circumstances. This struggle

cultivated a tension that became intrinsic to her being and is reflected in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Additionally, this study looks at how Wollstonecraft influenced other female figures of her time—specifically Anna Letitia Barbauld. Although Barbauld differed from Wollstonecraft in her ideas relating to women and their role in society as well as their rights to formal education, she was in fact inspired by the fervor with which Mary Wollstonecraft fought to bring her ideas to light.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the fact that Wollstonecraft concerned herself not only with her career as a writer, but also with the broader implications of such a career for the women of her time. She used the power of her words to open up discussion about women's place within society.

Preface To "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: A Reflection of the Tension Between Conformity and Rebellion in the Times of Mary Wollstonecraft*"

The passion with which Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was founded on her experiences of inequality as a young woman in a patriarchal society. As a young female Mary Wollstonecraft took on jobs that were traditionally held by women, particularly women of no means. Those jobs are an example of the conformity in which Mary Wollstonecraft was expected to live her life. It could be said that the passion with which she wrote this piece was fostered by her experiences with conformity. On the other hand, in her struggle to survive within the patriarchal society, Mary Wollstonecraft lived a life that very often existed outside the realm of conformity—one could say she lived a revolutionary life or at the very least flirted with rebellion, blurring the line between her public life and her private reality. She, like many others of her time, found that a life of conformity only led to a life of oppression and yet even in her rebellion, she was never quite free. "It is a melancholy truth; yet such is the blessed effect of civilization! The most respectable women are the most oppressed" (Wollstonecraft 287). She did not set out to change the world, but she did leave an indelible mark with her writing, most especially *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Since conformity and rebellion are central to my discussion of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (Vindication)*, I explore various statements within this piece that suggest a tension between conformity and

rebellion and that reflect both principles as examples of how they coexist within this work as well as within her life. Mary Wollstonecraft was outspoken in her argument for the rights of women and for national education; nevertheless, throughout her argument she was mindful of her position as a woman in a patriarchal society and she was skillful in her approach when asserting her opinions. Her views were considered rebellious for the time; they went against the laws and social practices of her community. However, she conformed in the assertion of her beliefs in order to ensure that her thoughts would have some chance of being heard. "Let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things; I have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue" (Wollstonecraft 135). She conceded that men were stronger, then moved into her message that women should "endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness..." (Wollstonecraft 111). Here we see evidence of conformity and rebellion coexisting within this work. This thesis is a study of how the tension between conformity and rebellion are an inherent part of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In this thesis I examine how Wollstonecraft's struggle with conformity and rebellion influenced her writing and how that struggle caused a tension that is reflected in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Understanding the role of conformity and rebellion within *Vindication* is essential to fully appreciating

this work, the time period in which it was written and most especially the author, Mary Wollstonecraft herself.

In my research, I found several scholarly articles and books dedicated to various aspects of Mary Wollstonecraft's life and to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Within many of these sources I found evidence to substantiate the existence of a tension between conformity and rebellion and its influence on Wollstonecraft and *Vindication*. For example, in her essay, "Mary Wollstonecraft and the literature of advice and instruction," Vivien Jones points out that Wollstonecraft's opinion on John Gregory's *Legacy to his Daughters* changed considerably between the time she (Wollstonecraft) wrote her anthology, *The Female Reader*, in 1789 as a struggling freelance writer and the time she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as a "newly politicized" writer in 1792. Further, Jones suggests that "as an autodidact, and then as an independent woman trying to make a living from her writing, Wollstonecraft relied throughout her life on those instructional genres through which moral principles and enlightenment knowledges were offered up to a popular audience" only to claim in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that she disapproved entirely of John Gregory's "celebrated Legacy" and that Gregory was a writer that "rendered women objects of pity" (V. Jones 119). It was those "moral principles and enlightenment knowledges" that informed and guided Mary Wollstonecraft's life. It is not difficult to see the conflict between conformity and rebellion.

In my introduction I discuss Wollstonecraft's motivation in penning *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—she wrote the book as a response to a proposal of a state-supported system of education that would, according to Mary Wollstonecraft, keep women ignorant and in “slavish dependence.” I discuss Wollstonecraft's concern about the role of women in society and society's own wastefulness of an important resource—that is women. At the same time, I begin to reveal some of Wollstonecraft's contradictions regarding her revolutionary ideas which she couched in traditional terms, thereby exposing the tension between conformity and rebellion. For example, I point out that Wollstonecraft states in *Vindication* that she would like to see women exercise greater involvement in their own lives and in society, but at the same time she states that “When I treat of peculiar duties of women...I do not mean to insinuate that they be taken out of their families...” (Wollstonecraft 180). Most importantly in this chapter, I define the terms conformity and rebellion. Specifically, I use “conformity” to refer to the steps Mary Wollstonecraft took “to remain aligned as a woman according to her society” and “rebellion” to refer to “those actions taken outside the traditional role of women as defined by her society.” This chapter lays the foundation for the ensuing chapters. It allows for greater understanding of later discussions of conformity and rebellion as reflected in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

My second chapter delves into the contrast between Mary Wollstonecraft's public and private spheres and the role of both spheres in her life as well as that of the women of her time. Its emphasis is on the

contradictions that occurred between these two spheres which only served to perpetuate the tension between conformity and rebellion that exists in *Vindication*. This chapter highlights the problem of being female, as Mary Wollstonecraft saw it, in a time when women were not wholly accepted into the public sphere and had little influence in the private sphere. Within this chapter I discuss Wollstonecraft's strong belief that women's inability to effectively participate in the public and private spheres was based on their lack of education. Also, according to Wollstonecraft, the inability of the "powers that be" to see women as an integral part of the public sphere through their role in the private sphere served as an obstacle to women in their effort to gain equal footing within society. The tension between conformity and rebellion is obvious as Wollstonecraft acknowledged the rules by which women must live while also offering her ideas for solutions to the problems women of her time faced.

In offering more details about Mary Wollstonecraft's situation, the second chapter necessarily overlaps somewhat with the first, but in the second chapter I add a distinctive discussion of the concepts of the private and public spheres as formulated by Jurgen Habermas, and I explain the importance of those concepts within the text of *Vindication*. I also present Anne Mellor's assertion that Habermas' account of the public sphere was inaccurate. The conflicting explanations add another layer of tension to the existing strain between conformity and rebellion that is found within *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Additionally, I introduce the idea put forth by Sylvana Tomaselli in her essay, "The Most Public Sphere of Them

All: The Family," that Mary Wollstonecraft believed the family to be a "unit of the social and moral reproduction of society" (239) and therefore was the heart of political reform. For Wollstonecraft, family was the intersection of the private and public sphere as it was the family that had the potential to dictate the morals and beliefs carried on by society. Finally, I identify how conformity and rebellion meet the public and private spheres within the text.

Chapter three of this thesis takes a closer look at Wollstonecraft's life and its influence on *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. This part of my argument better explains the motivations behind the revolutionary ideas set forth by Mary Wollstonecraft. In taking a closer look at the work itself, I found resources that offered insight into the mindset of Mary Wollstonecraft as she wrote *Vindication*, as well as the mindset of the public at this time in history. I discuss how Wollstonecraft's childhood laid the foundation for the tension she would feel between conformity and rebellion and how that tension would influence *Vindication*. As Wollstonecraft says herself within the text: "A great proportion of the misery that wanders, in hideous forms, around the world, is allowed to rise from the negligence of parents..." (293). I also discuss her relationship with Joseph Johnson and the "literary elite" as well as the opportunities that came from her association with them. In his essay, "The *Vindications* and Their Political Tradition," Chris Jones points out that "What Mary Wollstonecraft gained from her radical friends was not just a set of doctrines but a way of life in which feeling and intellect gained social expression" (43). This chapter highlights the experiences of Mary Wollstonecraft's life that shaped her perspective, gave her voice and

contributed to her ongoing struggle with conformity and rebellion that is ultimately reflected in *Vindication*.

In the fourth chapter of my thesis, I consider the influence Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had on other authors of her time, specifically on Anna Letitia Barbauld. I draw a parallel between Anna Letitia Barbauld's place as a female within a patriarchal society, her career as a writer, and her struggle with conformity and rebellion, compared with Wollstonecraft's own experiences. These women's backgrounds were very different—Barbauld described her own upbringing as “peculiar”—however, throughout their lives both women would take on roles that conformed to society's expectations; then each would bloom within her rebellious (by society's standards) roles as writers and social commentators. During the course of their careers, both women would be admired and then severely criticized by their peers. Additionally, I discuss the “heated” exchange of words between Anna Letitia Barbauld and Mary Wollstonecraft that played out in several of Barbauld's poems as well as in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. These criticisms of each other's works underscored the differences in their approaches to social injustices and further demonstrated the tension between conformity and rebellion among women writers and how these principles were reflected in their works.

Finally, the conclusion brings together and synthesizes all the aspects of my argument that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* reflects a naturally occurring tension between conformity and rebellion because of an

inherent strain between those two concepts that existed within the author, Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft's goal was not to undermine the role of women in the home—although at times throughout *Vindication* it seems she is doing just that—but, rather, her goal was to encourage society to recognize women as a valuable resource. In my conclusion I also discuss the reception of *Vindication* and its legacy, as well as the reputation and legacy of Mary Wollstonecraft.

While conducting the research for this thesis, it became very apparent that there existed a tension between conformity and rebellion within *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and that this tension played an important role in the writing of the text. The tension is difficult to ignore and its understanding is essential to fully appreciating Mary Wollstonecraft and her *Vindication*.

Chapter One

Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft's book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was written as a response to the proposed state-supported system of public education that would, according to Mary Wollstonecraft, allow women "to remain in ignorance, and slavish dependence" (Wollstonecraft 309). This is a strong statement made by an empowered woman against a proposal, introduced by the French minister of education that would only seek to educate women to be "pleasing" partners to men.¹ It was in the context of the French Revolution that Mary Wollstonecraft proposed a solution to what she saw as a growing concern for the "conduct and manners" of her "fellow creatures." She sought to put an end to a "false system of education" and extend to women the same type of education that men were afforded. She would base her argument in favor of equal access to education on the idea that women were rational beings capable of reasoning and determining their own fate. Further, Wollstonecraft argued in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to "Let women share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man..." (343). Barbara Taylor points out in her book, *Mary Wollstonecraft and*

¹ Broadview's book, *The Vindications: The Rights of Men; The Rights of Woman*, edited by D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf, provides M. Talleyrand-Perigord's text in appendix, as well as other documents that help to contextualize Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas; for this reason, I have cited Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* from this edition instead of the standard edition *Political Writings*, written by Mary Wollstonecraft and edited by Janet Todd.

the Feminist Imagination, that Wollstonecraft's purpose was "not to elevate women above Female duty, but to better equip them for it" (45).

Throughout her treatise Mary Wollstonecraft balanced the very thin line between conformity and rebellion. She addressed her concerns in a traditional way by couching them in terms that would conform to the acceptable notions of society, while at the same time many of her ideas were revolutionary.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (Vindication)* she sought to change the many misconceptions about women that society had come to accept over the years. She turned a "critical gaze" on influential men in society who through their "books of instruction" established the popular notion of acceptable femininity, but who had also been a tremendous influence on her intellectual development (V. Jones 135). She criticized these men, saying their works had a "common end result" and that was "to render women pleasing at the expence of every solid virtue" (Wollstonecraft 130). Her concern was not with the economic exploitation of women, though she would later recognize it, but rather, she was concerned with middle-class women and the ladies of the "gentry" because she believed that these classes set the tone for society as a whole. As Eleanor Flexner said in her book, *Mary Wollstonecraft*: "She is intent on removing the stigma attaching to woman--any and all woman--as creatures of instinct and feeling, devoid of intellectual powers or the capacity for intellectual growth" (149). Wollstonecraft argued that women are human beings before they are sexual beings, that mind has no sex, and that society was wasting its assets if it

continued to keep women in the role of convenient domestic slaves and "alluring mistresses" by "denying them economic independence and encouraging them to be docile and attentive to their looks to the exclusion of all else" (Tomalin 105). In fact Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out that women were "systematically degraded" by men who gave them "trivial attentions" which she felt were "insultingly supporting their own superiority" (Wollstonecraft 172). In Wollstonecraft's view, women's roles in society could not be recognized as equally beneficial to the overall well being of civilization until women were valued more for their mind than for their "person."

Mary Wollstonecraft was dedicated to the primacy of reason, and it was her belief in reason that permitted her to conceive a world in which women might be seen in a new way; a way in which the "violence" of social norms would no longer be acceptable and women would no longer have to live according to the dictates of masculine power in society. In her essay, "Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and the Women Writers of Her Day," Anne Mellor writes that *Vindication* was grounded on the idea that "universal human rights" should be afforded to both men and women and that women are the same as men in every way that is important to being fundamentally human. Wollstonecraft's argument was based on her strong belief that both men and women possessed the same souls and the same "mental capacities" and therefore should be allowed the same human rights. According to Mellor, in addition to Wollstonecraft's demand for equal access to education, she also supported a revision of British law that would

entitle women to an equal share of responsibility in the “management and possession of all household resources” (142). In *Vindication* Wollstonecraft also introduced the idea that women should be represented in the government: “I may excite laughter...I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government” (Wollstonecraft 285). She believed that as a result of women’s greater involvement in their own lives and in society, men and women both would be changed for the better. Women would act with more “prudence and generosity” and men would treat women with respect—not as “house slaves” (142).

In her own life, Mary Wollstonecraft took on many conventional roles, both publicly and privately, in order to conform to the expectations of society. When the conventional roles proved to be less than fulfilling, she turned to positions that, at the time, were considered unusual—or rebellious—maybe even revolutionary for a woman. The ensuing chapters examine Wollstonecraft’s evolution from fulfilling the traditional roles of being female to pushing the boundaries of acceptable female standards during the eighteenth century. As Lyndall Gordon wrote in her biography of Mary Wollstonecraft entitled *Vindication*, “Each phase of her life is a new experiment...” (3-4). Gordon went on to point out that over the course of her life, Mary Wollstonecraft took on a variety of different roles in order to survive—from the “uneducated school teacher; the scribbling hack; the fallen woman...; the practical traveler; the pregnant wife...”(5). She could not ignore her own suffering at the hands of a patriarchal society and she could

not continue to be silent "...not so much because of what she had read or the thinkers she had listened to and argued with, but from her own personal experience and her reflections on those experiences" (Flexner 149). In this treatise she writes with the passion that is the manifestation of her life experiences and the strong opinions she formed as a result of how she came to understand the world. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is the culmination of her life experiences, as well as the intersection of her public and private spheres that gave rise to the tension between conformity and rebellion.

At a time in history when the idea of female independence was seen as a threat to the stability of society, Mary Wollstonecraft envisioned a world in which women could be counted among the concerned and responsible citizenry—a revolutionary idea and rebellious in that it challenged the conventional wisdom of the time. Through her writing, Wollstonecraft stirred up controversy and perpetuated a tension between conformity and rebellion—in other words, she exposed the injustices as she saw them and advocated "improvements" that she thought would benefit both men and women. In her conformity, she presented her radical or rebellious ideas regarding women's "educational and moral equality" in the "acceptable terms of her day." In addition, much of Wollstonecraft's treatise was based on women's roles as wife and mother, which seems a contradiction to her strong opinions regarding female independence. Wollstonecraft herself points out in chapter four of *Vindication*: "When I treat of the peculiar duties of women...I do not mean to insinuate that they be taken out of their

families..."(180). This statement illustrates the tension between conformity and rebellion in *Vindication*. Further, in her article *The Radical ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft*, Susan Ferguson argues that Wollstonecraft's criticism of "domestic arrangements" reflected only the effects that marriage and "the household have on women's character formation" and the reforms that Wollstonecraft proposed were only meant to improve "the quality of the individuals within what is considered to be an essential and natural unit" (446). On the other hand, in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, Claudia Johnson describes Mary Wollstonecraft as a "revolutionary figure in a revolutionary time" who "took up and lived out... virtually all of the other related questions pertaining to the principles of political authority, tyranny, liberty, class, sex, marriage, childrearing,...to mention only a few" (1). The tension between conformity and rebellion is palpable—even among Wollstonecraft's critics. Walking the thin line between conformity and rebellion left Wollstonecraft vulnerable to the people in authority—that is men—who had the power to thrust her into a life of "wastelessness" as, in her opinion, many women of the eighteenth century lived. She clung to the ideal of female independence in order to exercise her own reason and judgment. This is reflected in her letter to M. Talleyrand-Perigord when she says: "...independence I will ever secure by contracting my wants, though I were to live on a barren heath" (Wollstonecraft 101). She conformed only in the way she presented her proposals in an effort to appeal to the "reason" of her audience, which she hoped would be "the whole human race." Conformity and rebellion coexist in *Vindication*; by "pleading"

for her sex, the changes she felt necessary to move civilization forward, Wollstonecraft rejected many of the established conventions. This was an act of rebellion. In Wollstonecraft's life and in her work, rebellion was defined as any action considered outside the traditional role of women as defined by her society. At the same time, she appealed to the conventional sentiments of her era—those sentiments were “the glorious principles that give a substance to morality” (Wollstonecraft 101). Her acknowledgement of those sentiments and her appeal to them was an act of conformity. In her life and work, Wollstonecraft's conformity was defined by the steps she took to remain aligned as a woman according to her society.

In her effort to convince society of the importance of education for women, Mary Wollstonecraft became a strong voice among many other female writers—all of whom were also struggling to be heard. In particular, Anna Letitia Barbauld played a unique role in *Vindication*. Both women were part of Joseph Johnson's literary circle and both enjoyed success as writers. Each lent their voice to issues they considered to be of great importance at the time, which for Barbauld included slavery, and corruption of the British government. Barbauld was a literary critic, as was Wollstonecraft, and was well known for her political essays and poems, as well as for her children's literature. If Wollstonecraft's writing reflected a tension between conformity and rebellion, so too did Barbauld's writing. In the intellectual literary circle of London, each played very different roles and the tension between them became obvious when they engaged in a public debate over the “proper role of women” in society. In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft criticized Barbauld for

adopting the "same sentiments" as the men who through their "language" contributed to the subjugation of women. Barbauld responded to Wollstonecraft's criticism by writing a poem entitled *The Rights of Woman* in which she was critical of Wollstonecraft's "overly aggressive" approach to her call for equality between the sexes. Although both women agreed on the importance of reforming the "false system of education," their styles were very different. Through Barbauld's prose and poetry and Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* they "attacked the deficiencies of fashionable training and values" while at the same time they sought to "endow woman's role with more competence, dignity and consequence" (Meyers 201).

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman was published at a time when society was moving toward becoming more "humane, thoughtful, and culturally" enlightened and it was well received by critics. *Vindication* was described as "an elaborate treatise of female education" and a work of philosophy. William Enfield wrote in the *Monthly Review* that *Vindication* was evidence that "women are no less capable of instructing than of pleasing" (Taylor 27). According to Barbara Taylor, the radical press was "most enthusiastic" and embraced the book, while more conservative journals managed to "ignore or understate her [Wollstonecraft's] challenge to men's authority" (27). However as England and France moved closer to war, criticism of Wollstonecraft's "philosophical treatise on education" became harsh. As Barbara Taylor points out "philosophy had become a synonym for revolutionary zealotry" (28). Mary Wollstonecraft was referred to by critics, such as Horace Walpole and Richard Polwhele, as a "hyena in petticoats" and

an “unsexed female” (Johnson 1). Additionally, William Godwin, Wollstonecraft’s husband, published a memoir of her life that was meant to reflect his deep affection for her, but ultimately further destroyed her reputation for many years. Godwin’s *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (Memoirs)* exposed Mary Wollstonecraft as the imperfect, vulnerable human she was. Much of her controversial life that had been kept private was at once public. To the critics who had been hard on her before Godwin’s *Memoirs* were published she was an example of how “adhering to the ‘new order’” could bring “pernicious consequences” to society (Janes 298). Others who had been supportive of Wollstonecraft’s ideas moved away from her writings so as not to be associated with her ideology. Although, as Anne Mellor pointed out, many women writers did not want to be “tarred with the blackened brush of Wollstonecraft’s reputation,” they continued to advocate many of her ideas long after her death and the publishing of Godwin’s *Memoirs* (145). However, it would be almost a century after Wollstonecraft’s death that her work was recognized for its literary and historical value.

In examining conformity and rebellion as reflected in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, it is difficult to separate Wollstonecraft’s personal life from her public voice. Her experiences as a female moving through a patriarchal society informed her writing. As Cora Kaplan points out in her essay, *Mary Wollstonecraft’s Reception and Legacies*, she represents the “paradox”—“the passionate life in apposition to the radical and rationalist agenda” (254). Ultimately, Mary Wollstonecraft’s struggle was not with

innovation, but rather her struggle was with survival; and writing was how she was best able to survive. The next chapter examines the dualistic nature of conformity and rebellion in Mary Wollstonecraft's private life and public text and how each informed the other, as well as her strong belief that women's participation in both spheres would be beneficial to all society.

Chapter Two

Private vs. Public

By the time Mary Wollstonecraft arrived in London to work for Joseph Johnson, she had already been exposed to several “educational literatures, conduct books, novels, and poetry”—some of which had been written by women, which indicated to Wollstonecraft that women were at least beginning to have their voices heard in some type of public sphere—however small it was. Though those publications were written by women and enjoyed by a small audience, Mary Waters writes in her essay “‘The First of a Genus’ Mary Wollstonecraft as a Literary Critic and Mentor to Mary Hays,” that often times they were published with apologies “...on the grounds of financial need for the transgressive immodesty of going public...” (415). The tension between public and private is reflected in the frequency of these apologies and the fact that these apologies were so common they were almost considered a “convention” in women’s writing at the time (Waters 415). Wollstonecraft came to London with just enough naïveté, mixed with a real need to support herself, as well as a desire to become “the first of a genus” (Waters 415). She would not apologize for earning her wage through writing in a public forum. The only apology Mary Wollstonecraft made was to her “own sex” for treating them like “rational creatures, instead of flattering their

fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone..." (Wollstonecraft 111).

Much of Mary Wollstonecraft's struggle with conformity and rebellion came from the expectations and realizations of the public versus the private sphere. Her public persona was defined by her public voice, which often times conflicted with her private reality. What constituted the public and the private sphere? In his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Jurgen Habermas defines the public sphere as being "conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public" (Habermas 27). According to Habermas, the "private" sphere was "a distinguishable entity in contrast to the public as each family's individual economy had become the center of its existence" (Habermas 19). In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft illustrates the way the private sphere becomes even smaller for women because they are denied "all political privileges, and not allowed ...a civil existence," so that a woman's attention is "naturally drawn from the interest of the whole community to that of the minute parts... The mighty business of female life is to please, and [females are] restrained from entering into more important concerns by political and civil oppression" (Wollstonecraft 330). In other words, women could not, theoretically, affect the same kind of influence on the "public" sphere as men, meaning that women do not speak with the same authority as men, as their "sphere" remains private, and even within the private sphere, their influence and authority are limited. This notion was personally unacceptable to Mary

Wollstonecraft who fought to find her way to finally be heard and who eventually made her living in the public sphere as a literary reviewer and social commentator. Mitzi Meyers in her essay, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Literary Reviews," points out that Wollstonecraft's experience as a reviewer not only educated her (Wollstonecraft) privately, but also her "reading audience." Wollstonecraft's experience as a literary critic moved her from a "tentative confessional author to the authoritative public figure who altered the social, political, and literary sphere during the... 1790's" (82). Thus, against all odds, Mary Wollstonecraft became a public figure.

In the public sphere, Habermas explains that the public comes together to "debate over general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor" (Habermas 27). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft addresses one of the many issues of public versus private when she says: "The grand source of female folly and vice has ever appeared to me to arise from narrowness of mind; and the very constitution of civil governments has put almost insurmountable obstacles in the way to prevent the cultivation of the female understanding" (Wollstonecraft 54). Here she makes reference to the way in which society has in place "obstacles" for women to gain an equal footing on the intellectual and the practical concerns of the time, shutting them out of the public sphere. In *Vindication*, Mary Wollstonecraft expresses very strongly her belief that women are "naturally weakened or degraded by a concurrence of circumstance" (Wollstonecraft 72). It was those "circumstances" that perpetuated the "firmly rooted"

prejudices against women in any sphere and moved Mary Wollstonecraft to bring into the forefront the struggle of every woman: "It is time to effect a revolution in female manners, time to restore to them their lost dignity, and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world" (Wollstonecraft 158). This can be seen as a suggestion of the intersection of the public and the private sphere as well as the ongoing struggle between conformity and rebellion.

According to Habermas, coffee houses became popular places to meet; it was in the coffee houses that "intellectuals met with the aristocracy" (Habermas 33) and literature had to "legitimate itself." Habermas said the conversations between the "intellectuals" first centered on literature and then moved into economic and political debates, reflecting the "landed and moneyed interests" of the aristocratic society and the bourgeoisie intellectuals. In his estimation, "the coffee house not merely made access to the relevant circles less formal and easier; it embraced the wider strata of the middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers" (Habermas 33). Furthermore, Habermas stated that only men were admitted to the "coffee-house society" and that women, "abandoned every evening, waged a vigorous but vain struggle against the new institution" (Habermas 33). This point is argued against by Anne Mellor in *Mothers of a Nation* when she says that Habermas's account of the "public sphere" is historically incorrect (Mellor 2). She says that women "participated fully in the public sphere as Habermas defined it" (Mellor 2). However, Mellor does allow that women's participation in the public sphere was contested: "Numerous conduct books

and other forms of public discourse" from sermons to literary texts to public debates "urged women to remain silent, to stay at home, to devote themselves exclusively to the activities of raising children and pleasing their husbands" (Mellor 6). This sentiment confirms women's struggle between the public and private sphere, and between conformity and rebellion. Mellor goes on to say that "these discursive productions existed in open dialogue with women's published arguments which vigorously contested, qualified, or even on occasion endorsed them" (Mellor 6). The issue of whether women were allowed in coffee houses contributes to the idea of a struggle between conformity and rebellion. In either case, Mary Wollstonecraft had to feel the challenge of being an intellectual woman living in a time when women were not accepted into the public sphere as men were and had little influence in the private sphere. For Wollstonecraft, her "coffee house" was the dinner table at Joseph Johnson's "hospitable mansion" where the London "intelligentsia" often met to discuss the issues of the day. It was during these meetings that Wollstonecraft's public voice was nurtured (Taylor 40).

As a woman, Mary Wollstonecraft pushed the acceptable boundaries of social expectations--that is, and she quotes Rousseau from *Emile*, that a woman "should never feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man" (Wollstonecraft 134). According to Wollstonecraft, this was the familiar sentiment of the time and was only compounded by the lack of formal education made available to women, leaving women no avenue for escape.

However, she maintained a professional life outside the restrictions (boundaries) put in place by society—despite her lack of formal education. It was in her private life that she most often struggled with the tensions between conformity and rebellion.

Perhaps the root source of the struggle between conformity and rebellion lies in the tension between the public and private sphere, with the underlying cause of that tension being the lack of education or training women received: “Women are told from infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives” (Wollstonecraft 19). The notion that a woman’s sole purpose was to please a man was considered to be nonsense by Mary Wollstonecraft. She wanted to see women become more independent and to make themselves “more respectable.” Wollstonecraft believed that to make women more useful members of society, their “understandings” should be “cultivated on a large scale” so that women could “acquire a rational affection for their country, founded on knowledge, because it is obvious that we are little interested about what we do not understand; private duties are never properly fulfilled unless the understanding enlarges the heart; and that public virtue is only an aggregate of private” (Wollstonecraft 191-92). In order for women to participate fully in even the private sphere, they must have an understanding of how their behavior contributes to the overall well-being of

society. Mary Wollstonecraft firmly believed that it was as important for women as it was for men to understand the impact that all citizens have on both the public and private spheres.

An example of Mary Wollstonecraft's conformity in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, can be seen in her understanding of the private sphere as the conduit for social change. Wollstonecraft accepted the traditional role of women and the family as a starting point from which to mold her argument. Sylvana Tomaselli writes in her essay, "The Most Public Sphere of All: The Family," that in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft held the family ideally to be the "heart of political reform" (241). Further, Tomaselli argues that Wollstonecraft saw the inability to recognize the influence of family on issues of the public sphere as limiting "our capacity to understand the realm of mores, morals, and education with which women have been particularly identified for centuries" (239). Wollstonecraft believed the family to be "the unit of the social and moral reproduction of society. This unit consisted of a husband and a wife, a father and a mother, a citizen married to a citizen, a Christian married to a Christian, a companion married to another" (Tomaselli 241). For Wollstonecraft, family is the intersection of the private sphere and the public sphere in their obligation not only to each other, but also to society. "To render mankind more virtuous, and happier of course, both sexes must act from the same principle...To render also the social compact truly equitable, and in order to spread those enlightening principles, which alone can meliorate the fate of man, women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge..." (Wollstonecraft 317).

Once again, the tension between conformity and rebellion is palpable as Mary Wollstonecraft acknowledges the rules by which women must live while offering what she feels is a reasonable alternative to the conditions of the time.

In this work Wollstonecraft also suggests that in a relationship between a husband and wife, "The man who can be contented to live with a pretty, useful companion, without a mind, has lost in voluptuous gratifications a taste for more refined enjoyments; he has never felt the calm satisfaction, that refreshes the parched heart, like the silent dew of heaven, of being beloved by one who could understand him" (Wollstonecraft 213). Wollstonecraft rightfully points that men suffer along with women in perpetuating the notion that society benefits from the ignorance of any member of its citizenry. She is right when she asks if the government is being most effective when it dismisses half of its members: would it not be a more effective governing if women could "render their private virtue a public benefit." Further, she says that "A truly benevolent legislator always endeavors to make it the interest of each individual to be virtuous; and thus private virtue becoming the cement of public happiness, an orderly whole is consolidated by the tendency of all the parts towards a common centre" (Wollstonecraft 282). Recognition of women as an integral part of the public sphere through their role in the private sphere as well as its influence on the public sphere reflects an ideal that Wollstonecraft aspired to and ultimately contributed to, even as she struggled with the tension between the reality

and the romantic ideal of her private sphere, while also celebrating her success in the public sphere.

Wollstonecraft attributed the misconceptions of women's ability to the "false system of education" and the books of instruction written by "men of genius" which perpetuated the treatment of women as "subordinate beings." She often quoted *Emile* by Rousseau to illustrate the assertion that women are "naturally" weaker and more passive than men. In terms of sex, men and women are "in every respect related and in every respect different" (Rousseau 357). Rousseau said that the man and the woman contribute equally to the common aim but do so in different ways, and these ways are not merely factual but moral in nature: "One ought to be active and strong, the other passive and weak. One must necessarily will and be able; it suffices that the other put up little resistance" (Rousseau 358). Given this view, Rousseau concluded that women were made especially to please men, and he said that this is the law of nature. Mary Wollstonecraft could not have disagreed more. She believed that the distinctions made between men and women were "unnatural distinctions established in civilization." Further, she said that "men are allowed by Moralists to cultivate, as Nature directs, different qualities, and assume the different characters, that the same passions, modified almost to infinity, give to each individual. A virtuous man may have a choleric or a sanguine constitution, be gay or grave, unreproved; be firm till he is almost overbearing, or, weakly submissive, have no will or opinion of his own; but all women are to be leveled, by meekness and docility, into one character of yielding softness and gentle compliance"

(Wollstonecraft 219). In other words, all women must be of the same temperament, and men's and women's virtues are different. This suggestion falsely lends credibility to the idea that women should not be allowed to participate in the public sphere—a problem that has been an issue in contemporary society; it is only now that the roles of women in the public sphere are becoming more acceptable. Wollstonecraft believed that "...if women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not by degree, or virtue is a relative idea; consequently, their conduct should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim" (Wollstonecraft 134). Contrary to Rousseau's view that the "laws of nature" dictate women as passive and weak and therefore subservient to men, Wollstonecraft asserts the importance of women to society as a whole and stresses the significance of their contribution to both the public and private sphere. She believed women had the capacity to be as "strong and active" within society as men and in a suggestion that ran counter to popular thinking at the time, she urged women to take responsibility for themselves: "...her first wish should be to make herself respectable, and not to rely for all her happiness on a being subject to like infirmities with herself" (Wollstonecraft 137). This statement was an acknowledgment that both men and women are subject to strengths and weaknesses alike and both are invaluable members of society as a whole—a rebellious concept for the time; yet it is proposed by appealing to a popular sentiment of the time—the betterment of society as a whole. Once again we see a blurring of the lines between living within the boundaries of social expectations and the pushing

of those boundaries beyond what is generally accepted by society. It is at this intersection that the public meets the private sphere and women's place within those spheres becomes unclear.

In her quest to take responsibility for herself and make herself respectable, Mary Wollstonecraft faced many challenges in all aspects of her life which contributed to her strengths and weaknesses of character and cultivated the tension that was intrinsic to her being and is so apparent in her work.

Chapter Three

A Closer Look at Wollstonecraft's Life and its Influence on *Vindication*: A Montage of Conformity and Rebellion

To understand the passion with which Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *Vindication*, one has to understand the experiences of inequality she encountered throughout her life as a woman in a patriarchal society. These experiences combined with the social mores of her time worked together to form within her person the conflict between conformity and rebellion that is reflected in her work, *A Vindications of the Rights of Woman*. When armed with the knowledge of Mary Wollstonecraft's history and her life choices, the struggle between the reality of her time and the idealism she proposed—conformity and rebellion—becomes obvious.

Mary Wollstonecraft's childhood laid the foundation for the tension she would later feel between the pressure she felt to act in accordance to society's expectations and her refusal to accept those conventions. It is well documented that Mary Wollstonecraft's own mother paid little attention to her and her younger siblings, lavishing most of her love and affection on to Mary's older brother, Ned. This would "embitter and fuel Mary's life" (Todd 4). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she wrote "A great proportion of the misery that wanders, in hideous forms,

around the world, is allowed to rise from the negligence of parents..." (Wollstonecraft 293). The treatment by her mother coupled with the relationship she witnessed between her parents helped to form her opinions of the roles of man and woman in society. Janet Todd points out that "the pains of marriage were engraved on Mary's mind in this demeaning tie of father-tyrant and mother slave, and the authority this mother naturally had over her was tainted by the vision of improper submission" (Todd 5). This would greatly influence Wollstonecraft, and as an adult she felt strongly that "A man, or a woman, of any feeling, must always wish to convince a beloved object that it is the caresses of the individual, not the sex, that are received and returned with pleasure; and, that the heart, rather than the senses, is moved. Without this natural delicacy, love becomes a selfish personal gratification that soon degrades the character" (Wollstonecraft 224). Wollstonecraft spent a great deal of time in *Vindication* addressing the issue of man's authority over woman and woman's role within the male/female relationship. Her experience at home placed marriage and tyranny together as well as love and power. Wollstonecraft acknowledged in *Vindication* that "...men, for whom we are told women were made, have too much occupied the thoughts of women; and this association has so entangled love with all their motives of action...when a sense of duty, or fear, or shame, obliges them to restrain this pampered desire of pleasing beyond certain lengths, too far for delicacy...they become abject woers, and fond slaves" (Wollstonecraft 249). In fact, it was Wollstonecraft's relationship or lack of relationship with the important men in her young life—her father and older brother—that

fostered her desire for “independence” while at the same time cultivating feelings of insecurity and neediness. These are all sensibilities related to her struggle between conformity and rebellion. Wollstonecraft would later form a lasting personal as well as professional relationship with publisher Joseph Johnson whom she would describe as both the “father and brother” she never had (Taylor 42). Her personal and professional relationship with Johnson would last the rest of her life and prove to be a source of strength for her.

Wollstonecraft’s relationship with Joseph Johnson was significant in that Johnson hired her to work on his new “Analytical Review,” and, as Mary Waters wrote, “Wollstonecraft’s work for Johnson was central to her own intellectual growth; everything that she read and wrote contributed to her fund of knowledge and her cognitive training, laying the groundwork for the books for which she is best remembered” (416). She worked hard for Johnson, producing seven publications in three years (Franklin 64). However, Johnson, fulfilling the role of both employer and father, would often advance her money to help her pay back the debts she owed creditors—expecting the kind of work she delivered. Caroline Franklin wrote that Wollstonecraft was a “pioneer for her generation,” even before *Vindication* was published, not so much because she wrote professionally, but because she had no other source of income (65). And as Franklin points out this was a difficult accomplishment even for men at the time. Barbara Taylor suggests in her book, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, that Wollstonecraft eventually lost her “dependent” status with Johnson and that

his "patronage" became more like "collegiality" (41). Taylor described their relationship as a "very personal partnership" as well as a "highly commercial one with real financial advantage to both sides" (42). It has been suggested that their relationship fulfilled a "mutual need to play at fathers and daughters" (Taylor 41). He offered a stability she never knew in her young life.

The fact that Wollstonecraft and her family were uprooted several times during her childhood also contributed to the unstable and unhappy environment she experienced at home. At a time when the quality of women's education was substandard compared to that of men, Wollstonecraft's education could be best described as hit or miss. However, her experience was not unique. She made reference to the quality of education women received in *Vindication*, saying that it "cramped" women's understanding and that women received "only a disorderly kind of education" (Wollstonecraft 130). Her own education consisted of attending a Yorkshire day school when she was young where she learned to sew, add simple numbers and read just enough to "please a spouse" (Jacobs 20). In his essay, "Mary Wollstonecraft on Education," Alan Richardson contends that Wollstonecraft saw the "history of female education as a virtual conspiracy of male educators and writers seeking to render women more weak and less rational than they would otherwise have become" (25), therefore confining them (women) to the domestic sphere. Further, Richardson goes on to point out that "dominant social manners and institutions" play an important role in the "education" of anyone, in particular, children. This was certainly true of

Mary Wollstonecraft's exposure to her friend Jane Arden. After meeting Arden, Wollstonecraft would often spend time reading with her and attending her father's lectures; Arden's father was a "self-styled" philosopher and scientist. Wollstonecraft loved the intellectual atmosphere of the Arden home. Later, she would be tutored by a neighbor who introduced her to "well-thought of works" and authors such as Shakespeare, Milton and Locke. She would also meet her special friend Fanny Blood who helped Wollstonecraft with grammar and also helped her to organize her ideas in her writing (Jacobs 26). These early exposures to intellectual ideas demonstrated to Mary Wollstonecraft that early education has a long lasting effect on a person's character. "...there is a habitual association of ideas, that grows 'with our growth,' which has a great effect on the moral character of mankind; and by which a turn is given to the mind that commonly remains throughout life" (Wollstonecraft 245). In keeping with this idea, Mary Wollstonecraft reveled in the intellectual and never stopped learning—she had a thirst for knowledge which helped her earn a living and to live as an independent woman in a patriarchal society.

As an adult Mary Wollstonecraft opened a school for girls in the Newington Green area; there she was exposed to several religious Dissenters and also met people who were passionate about social improvement. One such person was Dr. Richard Price, who was considered a "celebrity" among Dissenters as he was a Unitarian clergymen and philosopher (Jacobs 38). It was also at Newington Green that Wollstonecraft would write her first book of instruction, which was published by Joseph Johnson. This was the beginning

of Mary Wollstonecraft's "writing career." Her writing was, at first, meant to supplement her income. However, after failing in her endeavors as teacher and tutor, she went to London to pursue her next "course of action" and become a professional writer. This set Wollstonecraft on a course that would pit conformity against rebellion.

In addition to the influence on *Vindication* of Wollstonecraft's early life, she was also influenced by the French Revolution, which was viewed as a struggle for individual liberty against a tyrannical monarchy and prompted many discussions, political in nature, among the literary elite in London that addressed a broad range of controversial topics. Mary Wollstonecraft had been introduced to and was now working for Joseph Johnson; because Mr. Johnson was considered an important figure in the London "intelligentsia and with his 'hospitable mansion'...serving as his principle venue for the literary avant garde" (Taylor 40), she spent many evenings discussing politics and philosophy with the likes of Henry Fuseli, William Cowper, James Fordyce and Thomas Paine, to name just a few (Gordon 130). In his essay, "Mary Wollstonecraft's French Revolution," Tom Furniss writes that the French Revolution was seen by Wollstonecraft and her London friends as a precursor for the potential of a new era in social and political relations. They greeted the revolution with enthusiasm; they supported and argued for Britain to follow the example and "thereby complete the political process that had begun in England's so-called 'Glorious Revolution'" (59). In response to Dr. Richard Price's sermon, "A Discourse on the Love of Country," Edmund Burke, a Whig politician and political theorist, harshly criticized Dr. Price and

the French Revolution in his treatise entitled, "Reflections on the Revolution in France" (60). Burke's treatise provoked a number of responses, but Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Man, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France* was one of the first published responses (Furniss 60). It was published anonymously a month after Burke's *Reflections* came out and was so well received that Johnson published a second edition soon after —this time bearing her name. However with the second edition, it was Wollstonecraft herself that received harsh criticism from literary reviewers, advising her not to "meddle in men's affairs" (Conger 97). "Gentlemen's Magazine" wrote how they found it "ridiculous" that a woman would have anything of value to say about the rights of man and the "Critical Review" offered "carping criticism—with a chivalrous apology for so addressing a woman" (Conger 97). Not surprisingly though, "The Analytical Review" wrote glowing reviews in support of Wollstonecraft's treatise. Wollstonecraft's contact with Johnson's circle of friends and associates, along with her exposure to the many diverse publications distributed by Johnson "not only completed Wollstonecraft's education but gave her the intellectual cutting edge to carve out her own originality" (Franklin 60). Under the protection and with the encouragement of Joseph Johnson, she found her voice.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she set about arguing against the assumption that women were not rational creatures and were simply slaves to their passions. Mary Wollstonecraft argued that ignorance only perpetuated the notion of women as irrational beings. She said that

"men...act in a very unphilosophical manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood" (Wollstonecraft 127). She described the process by which parents brought their daughters up to be docile and domesticated as contemptable and she extended to women Rousseau's opinion regarding the education of men: "...the most perfect education...is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart..." (Wollstonecraft 129). She maintained that if girls were encouraged from an early age to develop their minds, it would be seen that they were rational creatures; further, it would show that there was no reason whatsoever for them not to be given the same opportunities as boys with regard to education and training. In proposing the same type of education for girls as that proposed for boys, Mary Wollstonecraft also went a step further and proposed that they be educated together, which was even more radical than anything proposed before. The idea of co-educational schooling was simply regarded as nonsense by many educational thinkers of the time. It was fashionable to contend that if women were educated and not docile creatures, they would lose any power they had over their husbands. Mary Wollstonecraft was adamant in her conviction that women should be viewed as "...more respectable members of society, and discharge the important duties of life by the light of their reason" (Wollstonecraft 179) and she maintained that the idea that educated women would lose "power" over the men of society was preposterous. "This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" (Wollstonecraft

179). She felt strongly that women be given the right to exercise their ability to reason and contribute to society in an important way.

Mary Wollstonecraft grew more confident of her "place in the world" and that confidence, together with the "philosophical idealism of the early phase of the French Revolution" (Furniss 62) emboldened her to write about the injustices of being female in the eighteenth century. "What Wollstonecraft gained from her radical friends was not just a set of doctrines but a way of life in which feeling and intellect gained social expression" (C. Jones 43). By the time she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she had experienced and witnessed the injustices of being female in a patriarchal society; she had traveled and seen things that few women of her time would ever see; she had also been involved in torrid love affairs and been rejected by lovers; she had supported herself and some members of her family; she also had some success as a writer and had gained the respect of her colleagues, men and women alike. She had lived a revolutionary life, as her life was unlike most women of her time. Mary Wollstonecraft learned to balance conformity and rebellion within her public and private sphere. She felt she was wholly qualified to write about the female condition and offer answers to the prevailing problems, as she saw them. She was strong in spirit. "Thanks to that Being who impressed them [those imaginings of a better way of life for her "fellow creatures"] on my soul, and gave me sufficient strength of mind to dare to exert my own reason, till, becoming dependent only on him for the support of my virtue, I view, with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex" (Wollstonecraft 147). She wrote

with a rebellious tone, but conformed to the traditional notion of giving thanks to that "Being" for her strength and ability. She did not buy into men's "language of sensibility" because she recognized how it "flatter[s] woman into a posture of weakness, then declares her weak by nature (or according to God's will) and accordingly denies her access to 'manly' pursuits for a strong mind"(Conger 114). With *Vindication* Mary Wollstonecraft had cemented her place in the public sphere; "...opinion became emancipated from the bonds of economic dependence" (Habermas 33). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had been well received for the most part and Wollstonecraft's public persona became an example to many other strong-willed women (with voices of their own.)

Chapter Four

Mary Wollstonecraft's Influence on Anna Letitia Barbauld and Her Struggle with Conformity and Rebellion

Mary Wollstonecraft's influence on other women writers of her time was considerable, even when they differed with her on substance. One such person was Anna Letitia Barbauld, who also struggled with conformity and rebellion, in her case a rebellion set in motion during her years spent at the Warrington Academy. During her time at Warrington, Barbauld was privileged to be educated in an environment that was typically only offered to young men. The first evidence of her struggle with conformity and rebellion came when she was asked by Elizabeth Montagu to help start a "kind of Academy" for young women. Barbauld declined to help, saying that "the best way for a woman to acquire knowledge is from conversation with a father or brother," adding that "My own situation has been peculiar, and would be no rule for others" (Janowitz 66). Herein lies a conflict of interest for Barbauld. She enjoyed the benefits of her "peculiar situation," while at the same time, she refused to help others of her gender gain access to the benefits of an institutionalized education. In fact, Barbauld would come to be known by critics as "...a figure of repression pure and simple, an enemy of women's desire" (McCarthy 125). However, as Sara Delamont argues in her essay, "The Contradictions in Ladies' Education," the idea of establishing a

school for girls was financially risky considering the existing mind-set was that a woman's primary purpose was to please a man and since a girl's school "could not guarantee a husband, it was little wonder [that] fathers balked at paying for their daughter's education" (137-38). Mary Wollstonecraft experienced this first hand when she was forced to close her school for girls in Newington Greene.

Barbauld would be noted for her children's books and for her criticism and social commentary. She would, like Wollstonecraft, argue for the expansion of education for all in English society, though she and Wollstonecraft differed on a number of points and argued in the journals of the day at great length. Contributing to their differences of opinion was that in Barbauld's poem, "On Female Studies," she argued that "a woman is excused from all professional knowledge" (*Selected Poetry* 475) therefore, women should not have to acquire professional knowledge since they do not have professional careers. However, in her defense, she does not state that women are incapable of learning these subjects, she is pointing out that women are excluded from these professions; she goes on to state that this kind of knowledge in women would be "a desirable accomplishment" (*Selected Poetry* 476). Mary Wollstonecraft, on the other hand states that women are capable of and should be allowed to "...study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses...They might, also, study politics...Business of various kinds, ... which might save many from common and legal prostitution. Women would not then marry for support..." (Wollstonecraft 286). Barbauld's poem could be seen more as a reflection of

her concern for other female's frustrations and disappointments in pursuing a more "useful" education. In fact in another of Barbauld's poems entitled, "To Dr. Aiken on his Complaining that she neglected him, October 20th 1768," she writes about how she and her brother were given the same type of education, but now, "fair fate" has allowed him to pursue "noble labours of a manly mind" while she was left to pursue a course of "more humble works," of "lower cares," and "less shining toils" (lines 51-53)². As McCarthy points out, this poem expresses "what birthright Barbauld felt herself to have been cheated of" (McCarthy 120). It is no surprise that Anna Letitia Barbauld experienced the same kind of social prejudice that Mary Wollstonecraft had experienced in her life, and it is no surprise that Barbauld would feel compelled to write about those injustices—however different her approach was from Mary Wollstonecraft. That difference was "deeply rooted in and bounded by...religious convictions," a reflection of the influence Anna Letitia Barbauld's childhood had on her approach to social improvement (Janowitz 76).

In her article "Amiable and Radical Sociability: Anna Barbauld's Free and Familiar Conversation," Anne Janowitz asserts that Anna Letitia Barbauld's move from Warrington to London marked the beginning of her "shift from sensibility to Romanticism, from "'amicability' to 'ardour'" (Janowitz 63). Further, Janowitz points out that in London, Barbauld was no longer the "pleasing daughter of the house, nor the wife and partner of the

² When citing the poem, "To Dr. Aiken on his Complaining that she neglected him, October 20th, 1768" I refer to the book, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, edited by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft, 2002. Please see "References" for complete bibliography.

schoolmaster, but an intellectual involved with the contemporary issues of slavery, religious toleration and the consequences of the French Revolution” (Janowitz 64). It was in London that Barbauld was introduced to Joseph Johnson’s circle of intellectuals, including Mary Wollstonecraft, and it was here that she found her voice as a social commentator. One of Barbauld’s great concerns was for equal rights, and she argued this idea forcefully in 1790 when she denounced the government's refusal to repeal the Corporation and Test Acts, which prohibited non-members of the Church of England from holding political office or attending the established universities. This was in Barbauld’s political pamphlet *Appeal to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts*. At the time, she was one of a select group of female literary critics and she argued for the primacy of contemporary women's writing in the genre of prose fiction, while also promoting the rational religious education of children in her widely circulated *Hymns in Prose for Children*. She also wrote numerous poems and articles attacking the British slave trade, slavery in the British colonies, and the growing corruption of the British government and of British commerce as it increased its empire to India and the Pacific Islands. Specifically in terms of the rights of women, Barbauld became involved in an extended debate with Wollstonecraft on the proper role of women in society. Wollstonecraft had attacked Barbauld directly in a footnote in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft had first endorsed Barbauld’s affirmation of virtue over physical pleasure in her poem “To Mrs. P—, with some drawings of birds and insects, ” Wollstonecraft then quoted the entire text of Barbauld's poem

"To A Lady, with Some Painted Flowers" (1773) and dismissed it as "ignoble." Wollstonecraft objected to the way Barbauld identified femininity with delicate flowers "born for pleasure and delight alone" and her conclusion that for women, "*Your best, your sweetest empire is—to please.*" Wollstonecraft then commented, "So the men tell us; but virtue, says reason, must be acquired by *rough* toils, and useful struggles with worldly *cares*" (Wollstonecraft 165 n5). Referring to Barbauld, Wollstonecraft said that the "language of men" had even been adopted by women of "superior sense." This was particularly difficult for Wollstonecraft to understand, especially since Barbauld was part of the "few women in the progressive circles" of London at that time.

This was not the end of the exchange; Barbauld responded with a poem she chose not to publish, "The Rights of Woman." In this poem, Barbauld first urged "injured Woman," quoting Wollstonecraft, to "assert thy right!" (line 1)³. However, Barbauld also endorsed Hannah More's belief in innate sexual difference, so for her, woman's "rights" were a "native empire o'er the breast" (line 4), meaning a greater sensibility, virtuousness or "angel pureness" (line 6). Barbauld also mocked the conventional rhetoric of the battle of the sexes. Instead she urged women to resist the notion that they might best be able to "subdue" men by using their "soft melting tones." Barbauld would have women yield to "Nature's school" because she saw in a loving relationship between man and woman that "separate rights are lost in

³ When citing the poem "Rights of Woman," I refer to the book The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld edited by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft, 1994. Please see "References" for complete bibliography.

mutual love" (line 32). This sentiment is very different from Wollstonecraft's idea of how loving relationships should be: "Were women more rationally educated, could they take a comprehensive view of things, they would be contented to love...and after marriage calmly let passion subside into friendship..." (Wollstonecraft 249). Barbauld saw Wollstonecraft's call for equality as overly aggressive and instead suggested a "more gradual process of moral development, mutual sexual appreciation, tolerance, and love, a process in which middle-class women recognize and take seriously their ethical responsibilities and emotional capacities to exercise an ethic of care and to prevent conflict and violence at home and abroad (an argument she made at greater length in 1793 in her political pamphlet, *Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation*)" (Mellor 154). It should be noted that this poem, "The Rights of Woman," was written in anger and frustration in reaction to Wollstonecraft's published criticisms of her poems. However, it should also be noted that Wollstonecraft later praised one of Barbauld's works from *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose*, calling it an "excellent essay" on the virtue of determining a single course of education for young men. In addition, McCarthy notes that though Wollstonecraft was very critical of Barbauld's poetry, other female writers of the time, such as Hannah Cowley and Mary Robinson, found many of Barbauld's poems to be "thrillingly woman affirming" (McCarthy 114). This discussion showed the conflicts among women writers at the time: "Wollstonecraft would have women fulfill the social and political roles currently played by men; Barbauld would have women enter the literary realm as didactic writers, educators, and critical

judges..." (Mellor 154). Wollstonecraft would have women as equals in society; Barbauld would have women in supporting roles in society.

The end of both Wollstonecraft's and Barbauld's career would bring severe criticism that would have many of their peers move away from association with them so as not to stifle their own careers. For Mary Wollstonecraft, the severe criticism would come after her death and as a result of William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. As mentioned earlier, the revelations of Wollstonecraft's private life would destroy her reputation and undermine the value of all that Wollstonecraft sought to change through her treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. For Anna Letitia Barbauld, harsh criticism would come as a result of her public voice with the publishing of her poem *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, a Poem*, described by Anne Mellor as a "feminist rewriting of a neoclassical progress poem." Although this poem reflected the "progressive Dissenting ideology" that could be seen in Barbauld's other works, according to William Keach, this poem "marks a decisive break with the meliorist historical perspective" (577). Barbauld's previous works were described by Keach as being "consistently balanced, sensible, moderately reformist" (577). It was in fact her conventionality on women's issues that drew criticism from Mary Wollstonecraft. However, the criticism for this poem was biting and personal. John Wilson Croker wrote in the *Quarterly Review*, that he could not "comprehend the meaning of all the verses which this fatidical spinster has drawn from her poetical distaff" (Keach 569). The criticism was not limited to her well known critics, but friends too were very critical of this

poem. Crabb Robinson wrote in his diaries that he wished "she had not written it" because "the tone and spirit are certainly very bad" (Keach 570). Even Maria Edgeworth, who had "defended the poem privately, in a letter to Barbauld..." did not want to "enter the public fray" to defend it. Even the *Monthly Repository*, in its defense of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, ended its review with a kind of prayer "Heaven grant that the melancholy strain may not prove the voice of prophecy!" (Keach 571). With this kind of endorsement, Anna Letitia Barbauld would not write publicly again. This would mark the end of her career.⁴ Barbauld would be remembered only as a pedantic children's writer during the nineteenth century, and largely forgotten during the twentieth century; however, a renewed interest in feminist literary criticism in the late twentieth century restored her place in literary history.

⁴ New research by Devoney Looser published when this thesis was nearly completed has found evidence that Barbauld continued to publish some short pieces after Crocker's review and so unsettles the consensus, emphasized by Keach on this point (137-40).

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* embodies her views of women's education in the late eighteenth century, reflecting her own experiences and her perceptions about the roles of women, highlighting the need for more opportunities for women in the public sphere, as well as the need for recognition of the importance that women play in the private sphere and ultimately, the influence women have on the public sphere through the private sphere. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is more often than not regarded as a purely philosophical treatise. However, like Rousseau's *Emile*, it can also be seen as a political treatise. It is above all a celebration of the rationality of women. It constitutes an attack on the view of female education put forth by Rousseau and countless others who regarded women as weak and incapable of reasoning effectively. Mary Wollstonecraft rejected the education in dependency that Rousseau advocated for them in *Emile*. She argued that a woman must be intelligent in her own right. Mary Wollstonecraft maintained that this did not contradict the role of the woman as a mother or caretaker nor did it undermine the role of woman in the home. She asserted that "meek wives are, in general, foolish mothers" (Wollstonecraft 291). Further, she insisted that "...to be a good mother—a woman must have sense, and...independence of mind"

(Wollstonecraft 291). Against many odds, she certainly exercised independence in her writing and in her personal life.

The myth about the work is that it was poorly received because it challenged the standards of eighteenth century society, but in fact the book was well received—so much so that “booksellers hurried to supply impatient customers...” (Taylor 25). For the most part, the aspects of the book that were most radical were simply ignored or understated by critics of the time, while the focus was placed primarily on Wollstonecraft’s “philosophical reflections of female manners and moral improvement.” Unsurprisingly, *Vindication* was received as more of a philosophical text than a political treatise. The more hostile attitudes toward the book developed later after some of the more troubling elements of her life had been revealed.

Since that time, the reputation of the book has increased greatly, and clearly the sentiments expressed in this book have become more accepted by the masses and have been embraced worldwide. Wollstonecraft’s ideas indeed no longer seem so radical. Her ideas have influenced many women writers over the years, helping shape literature, political discourse, educational theory, and feminist thought. Perhaps, though, most interesting about *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is that its author, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a pioneer of sorts in the eighteenth century. She was not the first female to earn a living by pen—however modest and precarious a way of life it was for females—and many of her ideas were not new to society; what was new was her idea of extending the rights of man to woman

and her defense of that concept. Mary Wollstonecraft embarked on her career armed with only the experiences of being female in a patriarchal society and a strength of character –some would describe as drive—that would enable her to put aside fear and embrace the uncertain path throughout her life. Barbara Taylor suggests that Wollstonecraft’s strength came from her “impulse toward self-creation.” Taylor says that Wollstonecraft, without models, had to invent herself “while at the same time struggling with obstacles encountered by all self-made women” (Taylor 31). This “struggle” often led her to grapple with conformity and rebellion. It is interesting to note that for all her radical ideas of equality, Mary Wollstonecraft still expounded the virtues of education and recognition of women as rational beings within the traditional boundaries of society. “Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man...” (Wollstonecraft 343). She did so in order to ensure that her voice would be heard and her ideas would be “maturely weighed” in an effort to advance “the rights of woman and national education.”

Throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she exposed the injustices and misconceptions of being female. She defended women, but also addressed women directly, urging her fellow “creatures” to take on some of the responsibility for improving themselves. The tension between conformity and rebellion would be seen in her desire to “to fulfill both parts of her nature, to work and live like a man, but like a woman as well...her attack on femininity did not mean she wanted to become a man” (Walters 270). Wollstonecraft’s desire to “work and live like a man” was only indicative of

her desire for all women to have the same access to education, to be given the same opportunities, to be recognized as rational beings and to be allowed to make real contributions to society. The success of *Vindication* led to Wollstonecraft's being described as "unfeminine." She wanted the freedom men were afforded, the freedom to pursue "noble structures." "A man when he enters any profession has his eye steadily fixed on some future advantage (and the mind gains great strength by having all its efforts directed to one point)..." (Wollstonecraft 176). It was her constant struggle between conformity and rebellion—public versus private—that provides the most evidence of her struggle with conformity and rebellion; her insistence of reason throughout *Vindication* spoke louder than her private struggle with passion. It was not until her death that the public would know her whole story and she would lose credibility. It could be said that she lived a life that contradicted her ideology that was so passionately described in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. On the other hand, she lived so much of her life according to her best hopes for her "fellow creatures." She lived and came to be respected during her life as a rational female who would contribute a philosophy that would be beneficial to at least half of the population. As Cora Kaplan asserts in her essay, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Reception and Legacies," there is "a strong sense of unfinished business [that] hovers about Wollstonecraft's legacy..." (246).

Barbara Taylor asks "Why would a woman who, at one stage in her life at least, found the generality of her sex stupid, frivolous, and morally vicious, make female emancipation her political priority?" The answer will never

really be known; however, the question underscores the existence of a struggle between conformity and rebellion in the life of Mary Wollstonecraft and its reflection in her treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

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