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Mary Wollstonecraft: The Gender of Genres in Late Eighteenth-Century England

MARY POOVEY

Today, Mary Wollstonecraft is best remembered for her forays into that most “masculine” of all late-eighteenth-century genres, political disquisition. But her two vindications suggest that, while that genre allowed her to voice her considerable intellectual insights, it did not accommodate her equally adamant emotions—or, to use eighteenth-century terminology, her “sentiments.” Moreover, partly because her two political vindications were considered both “unladylike” and politically volatile, Wollstonecraft may have feared that her message would not reach those who most needed to hear it. In *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft set out to remedy both of these problems, to reformulate the insights of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in a genre she felt certain could articulate her own emotion and attract a female audience—the sentimental novel. But the attempt to fictionalize “the peculiar Wrongs of Woman” afflicted Wollstonecraft, for perhaps the first time in her life, with what seems very like writer’s block. Whereas she had composed *The Rights of Men* in less than a month and *The Rights of Woman* in six weeks, she spent a year working on *Maria*—only to leave the manuscript less than a third finished when she died. Godwin’s description of the composition of *Maria* reveals that the work induced insistent anxiety:

She began it in several forms, which she successively rejected, after they were considerably advanced. She wrote many parts of the work again and again, and, when she had finished what she intended for the first part, she felt herself more urgently stimulated to revise and improve what she had written, than to proceed, with constancy of application, in the parts that were to follow.¹

Almost any passage from the text of this much belabored first part reveals that the hesitation which afflicted *Maria*’s composition haunts its prose as well. Syntax is frequently disjunctive, narratives are broken off literally in mid-sentence, and, most troubling of all, the relationship between the narrative consciousness and that of the heroine Maria is inconsistent. All of the hesitations in composition and in achievement culminate, in fact, in a conspicuous failure to establish a consistent or purposeful attitude toward the subject under consideration. Even though *Maria* is an unfinished novel, then, both the time Wollstonecraft devoted to this work and the problems which prove to be characteristic suggest that she was having even more difficulty with this project than with the genre we might have expected to be daunting.

¹ William Godwin, *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. W. Clark Durant (London and New York: Constable, 1927), p. 111.

The problem is not simply that Wollstonecraft could not construct a successful narrative; both her first novel *Mary* and the story of Jemima, contained within *Maria*, argue for Wollstonecraft's competence as a storyteller. Rather, the problem seems to lie in the difficulty Wollstonecraft had in reconciling her intended "purpose" with the genre, which here shapes the "structure," of the work.² According to her sketchy preface, Wollstonecraft's purpose was political, to show "the peculiar Wrongs of Woman." And her structure, like those of what she considered "our best novels," was intended to delineate "finer sensations" rather than "stage-effect," "passions rather than manners."³ (Her implied model is Rousseau's *Julie*; the effects she denigrates belong, on the one hand, to improbable gothic romances like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and, on the other, to social comedies such as *Evelina*.) But, as she was to discover in the process of composing *Maria*, Wollstonecraft's political insights and the sentimental structure through which she hoped to develop "finer sensations" were dangerously at odds. For those "finer sensations"—and the sentimental genre in which they were characteristically enshrined—were deeply implicated in the very values of bourgeois society which Wollstonecraft wanted to criticize. It is Wollstonecraft's recognition of this incompatibility and—equally to the point—her resistance to this recognition that account for both the hesitations of composition and the contradictions that mark the text. In her final work, Wollstonecraft identified one aspect of what she held to be the tyranny of eighteenth-century bourgeois institutions, yet because her own values—indeed, her own self-definition—were inextricably tied up with the values of these institutions, she was unable to pursue her revolutionary insights to their logical conclusion. *Maria*, in other words, chronicles one determined woman's struggle to get outside of ideology—to "advance," to use her words, "before the improvement of the age"—and her failure to make that advance sets us brooding on the curious complicity of gender and genre in the late eighteenth-century sentimental novel.

Wollstonecraft's dilemma is epitomized by the uncertain perspective of the novel's omniscient narrator. In chapter four, for example, which traces Maria's emotional surrender to a fellow inmate, the narrator moves from judgmental observer to unreflecting sympathizer. Maria has been imprisoned in a madhouse so that her avaricious husband can gain control of the independent fortunes of both Maria and their infant daughter. At the beginning of the chapter, the narrative voice comments authoritatively on Maria's situation. "Pity," this voice observes,

and the forlorn seriousness of adversity, have both been considered as dispositions favourable to love, while satirical writers have attributed the propensity to the relaxing effects of idleness; what chance then had Maria of escaping,

² Godwin states that Wollstonecraft believed the "purpose and structure of the . . . work . . . capable of producing an important effect" (Preface to *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* [New York: Norton, 1975], p. 5). Mitzi Myers also explores the difficulty Wollstonecraft had in reconciling purpose and structure in "Unfinished Business: Wollstonecraft's *Maria*," *The Wordsworth Circle*, 11, no. 2 (Spring 1980), pp. 107-114.

³ *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (New York: Norton, 1975), pp. 7, 8. All future references, cited in the text, are to this edition.

when pity, sorrow, and solitude all conspired to soften her mind, and nourish romantic wishes, and, from a natural progress, romantic expectations? (48)

The most pressing question here is the narrator's attitude toward Maria's "romantic expectations." The rhetoric of imprisonment suggests that, at the very least, Wollstonecraft understands such wishes to originate in deprivation and confinement. An adjacent passage, moreover, underscores the insight that "romantic expectations" are actually projections of unanswered desire. "Having had to struggle incessantly with the vices of mankind," the narrator continues,

Maria's imagination found repose in portraying the possible virtues the world might contain. Pygmalion formed an ivory maid, and longed for an informing soul. She, on the contrary, combined all the qualities of a hero's mind, and fate presented a statue in which she might enshrine them. (49)

The "statue" is Maria's fellow prisoner, Henry Darnford, who soon emerges from featureless obscurity to become a vital force in Maria's drama. But the narrator remains curiously ambivalent about the precise nature of his role. Her description of Maria's emotional surrender, for example, culminates in a question which seems to announce the narrator's shrewd awareness that "romantic expectations" often do not correspond to real possibilities. And yet the ambiguous origin of the sentiments expressed in the first part of this passage suggests that the narrator still harbors the hope that such romantic expectations might be fulfilled. As the two lovers embrace, "Desire was lost in more ineffable emotions, and to protect her from insult and sorrow—to make her happy, seemed not only the first wish of his heart, but the most noble duty of his life. Such angelic confidence demanded the fidelity of honour; but could he, feeling her in every pulsation, could he ever change, could he be a villain?" (50) Is this question the narrator's ironic reminder of the possible delusion of "romantic expectations"? Or is it the narrator's desperate attempt to resist the "ineffable emotions" that already seduce Maria? By the end of this brief chapter the distance between the narrator and Maria almost wholly disappears; even allowing for ironic overtones—as some modern editors do—the honorific language of this passage suggests that the narrator shares Maria's "romantic wishes" and perhaps her "romantic expectations" as well. "So much of heaven did they enjoy, that paradise bloomed around them; or they, by a powerful spell, had been transported into Armida's garden. Love, the grand enchanter, lapt them in Elysium, and every sense was harmonized to joy and social extacy" (51).

I've spent so long on this chapter because the progression of the narrator here—from detached, critical observer to emotional participant—recapitulates the movement which constitutes the organization and, theoretically, the target of criticism of the novel. The movement is the "fall" into female sexuality, or, more precisely, the fall into that susceptibility to romantic expectations which eighteenth-century bourgeois society annexed to female sexuality. The problem here is that the narrator—and, by implication, Wollstonecraft herself—has just fallen victim to the very delusion which it is the object of this novel to criticize.

This seduction of the narrator constitutes the third occurrence of this pattern, and, from the three taken together, we begin to glimpse both Wollstonecraft's insight and her dilemma. As if to emphasize the importance of this pattern, the novel opens *in medias res*, precisely at the moment at which Maria is about to fall into romantic love for the second time. Just as Maria was initially confined in a loveless, repressed youth, so she is now confined in a madhouse. Just as she was then "liberated" into a loveless marriage, so she is soon to be "released" into the ambiguous, but decidedly dangerous, embrace of Darnford. And—most telling from the perspective of the narrative—the pander in each case is sentimentality—or, more precisely, a sentimental story. Maria's imagination was originally "animated" or aroused by her uncle's sentimental history; now Rousseau's *Julie* fuels her fantasies about Henry Darnford and encourages her to receive him "as her husband" (138). Clearly Wollstonecraft senses danger in this pattern, which is endemic to the sentimental genre. And yet at every point at which the narrator could underscore this danger, she hesitates, and the point is lost. Instead of shaping her "structure" to her "purpose," Wollstonecraft repeatedly struggles—not very convincingly—to resolve the paradox she has introduced. "We see what we wish, and make a world of our own," she acknowledges of Maria's wishful projection, "and, though reality may sometimes open a door to misery, yet the moments of happiness procured by the imagination, may, without a paradox, be reckoned among the solid comforts of life" (139).

In order to understand fully the implications of these narrative hesitations we need to examine Wollstonecraft's fundamental insights about the relationship of sentimentalism to both female sexuality and the bourgeois institution of marriage. For *Maria's* central subject is really the way in which female sexuality is defined or interpreted—and, by extension, controlled—by bourgeois society. The primary institution of this control is marriage, which is, as Tony Tanner has recently reminded us, the fundamental "mythology of bourgeois society." With its institutionalization of kinship distinctions and alliances, its harnessing of individual sexual desire to the economic unit of the nuclear family, marriage is the basis of "all the models, conscious and unconscious, by which society structures all its operations and transactions."⁴ Because of the particular legal and economic practices of late eighteenth-century England, the power of this mythology was particularly strong in Mary Wollstonecraft's society. According to eighteenth-century bourgeois conventions, female sexuality could only be legitimately expressed—indeed, only existed as a positive cultural sign—within the institution of marriage. This was true partly because confining female sexual expression to marriage served to control that appetite which some men feared would "devour them alive" sexually.⁵ But even more importantly, it also insured that the transfer of property from one generation to the next would be legitimate. In the late

⁴ Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 15.

⁵ From Joseph Swetnam, *Araignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and vnconstant women*. Quoted by David J. Latt, "Praising Virtuous Ladies: The Literary Image and Historical Reality of Women in Seventeenth-Century England," in Marlene Springer, ed., *What Manner of Women: Essays on English and American Life and Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 43.

eighteenth century, as what Dr. Johnson called England's "fixed, invariable external rules of distinction and rank" increasingly gave way before incursions of new wealth, the prestige and political power of an individual (and his family) was frequently established through the twin practices of marrying for money and strict settlement, a legal arrangement which kept the family estate intact for the eldest son of each generation.⁶ Given the rigid provisions of strict settlement and the importance of property, the chastity of a woman was especially critical, for if her fidelity was in question, so too was the integrity of the family. Jean-Jacques Rousseau underscored the severity of this transgression when he called it "treason": when the faithless wife

*gives her husband children who are not his own, she is false both to him and them, her crime is not infidelity but treason. . . . Can any position be more wretched than that of the unhappy father who . . . is haunted by the suspicion that this is the child of another, . . . a thief who is robbing his own children of their inheritance. Under such circumstances the family is little more than a group of secret enemies, armed against each other by a guilty woman. . . .*⁷

Even when family estates did not hang in the balance—that is, even when one's suitor was not the eldest but a younger son—the morality upon which strict settlement depended prevailed. Women were characteristically treated as counters in an economic exchange; they were valued as much for what they represented as for who they were. "Men have a property in their wives and daughters," Gilbert Burnet flatly stated.⁸ Once married, the property of their fathers which young girls represented became the property of their husbands. And, under the Roman law which still governed late eighteenth-century English women, so did they. As Maria recognizes, a married woman is "as much a man's property as his horse, or his ass" (107). In England in the eighteenth century, a married woman had no independent legal rights: she could not sue her husband for divorce, she could not visit her children if her husband took them from her, and, most importantly, she could not act upon her own desires if they conflicted with those of her husband. Within marriage, as Maria phrases it, the feeling woman is "required to moralize, sentimentalize herself to stone" (102).

This last observation reminds us of one role played in this system of morality by the late eighteenth-century ideology of sentimentalism, and by sentimental novels in particular. For because the kind of economically advantageous marriages

⁶ The standard discussion of this subject is H. J. Habakkuk, "Marriage Settlements in the Eighteenth Century," in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 32 (4th series) (London: Royal Historical Society, 1950).

⁷ *Emile*, tr. Barbara Foxley (New York: Dutton, Everyman, 1974), pp. 324–25. To Samuel Johnson, the transgression was equally serious. "Consider," Johnson advised Boswell, "of what importance to society the chastity of women is. Upon that all the property in the world depends. We hang a thief for stealing a sheep; but the unchastity of a woman transfers sheep, and farm and all, from the right owner." James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. Allan Wendt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Riverside, 1965), p. 250.

⁸ *The Earl of Rochester* (1680). Cited in Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. 120.

which frequently took place in this period often entailed the objectification of women, their reduction to symbols of property rather than their recognition as individuals, it had to be enforced not only by laws, but by a set of values that could make inequality seem "right" or even "natural." Wollstonecraft recognized that one of this system's most effective guardians was the internalized set of values which encouraged women to sublimate their potentially anarchic desire, a system of values that was identified in the late eighteenth century with sentimentalism. Paradoxically, sentimentalism served both to arouse female sexuality and to control it.⁹ In the first of these two functions, exemplified in this novel by Maria's adolescence, sentimental stories arouse a young woman's imagination (and, by extension, her potentially promiscuous erotic desire)¹⁰ by engaging her vicariously in thinly disguised sexual exploits. But because the young girl is protected (or confined) by both ignorance and inexperience, the expectations generated by reading romantic stories lead her to project her desire uncritically onto an individual man, a "hero," with whom she then seeks to realize her imaginative and sexual desires through marriage.

The irony (and tragedy) of this situation is that, as often as not, the desire so aroused was in excess of the gratification offered women through marriage. Precisely because one effect of marriage was to limit desire and, more perniciously, to strip women of their status as autonomous subjects, sentimentalism theoretically generated a clash between female desire and male will. For, once imprisoned within marriage, a woman existed in the same state of confinement that characterized her adolescence. The desire threatened to begin again, to lead a woman to seek fulfillment outside the marriage bed. But the second effect of sentimental novels curtailed this threat. Despite the ominous spectres of adultery and seduction in eighteenth-century sentimental novels, the function of such flirtations with transgression was actually to sublimate female desire, to provide vicarious gratification which compensated for the diminished fulfillment of marriage. One function of sentimental novels, then, was actually to reinforce the institution which the desire they aroused could theoretically have subverted.

This was not, of course, the only or even the most explicit function of sentimental novels. As the etymological kinship suggests, "sentimental" was closely associated with both "sentiments" and "sensibility," and thus implied both an initial physiological sensation and the quality of response that sensation produced.¹¹ During most of the eighteenth century, "sentimental" did not carry the

⁹ Rousseau discusses this paradox in his *Letter to d'Alembert*.

¹⁰ The connection between the aroused imagination and aroused female sexuality is made explicit in the admonitions of eighteenth-century moralists against novel-reading. Thomas Gisborne, for example, describes the lust for novels as arising from and stimulating "appetite": "The appetite becomes too keen to be denied. . . . The contents of the circulating library, are devoured with indiscriminate and insatiable avidity. Hence the mind is secretly corrupted." *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797; London: T. Cadell Jr. and W. Davies, 1799, 4th ed.), pp. 228-29. Laetitia Hawkins makes the connection even more precise: sentimental novels, she claims, arouse the "irascible passions . . . miscalled love" and so threaten both self-control and moral order. *Letters on the Female Mind*, 2 vols. (London: Hookham and Carpenter, 1793), I, 42.

¹¹ In his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), Raymond Williams explains that the word *sentimental* was, throughout the eighteenth century, informed by its root affiliation with *sensible* and that it was closely associated with both *sensibility* and *sentiments*.

pejorative connotations we now often assign it; instead, it suggested feelings which were not only strong but rational. The values associated with sentimentalism were therefore moral as well as aesthetic, and, especially in the second half of the century, sentimental theories were advanced to support many humane programs—from justifications for the American revolution and the freeing of enslaved Negroes to arguments for the humanitarian treatment of the poor.

Yet despite Mary Wollstonecraft's adamant support of these political causes, she repeatedly voiced grave reservations about the "sensibility" that was cultivated by sentimental novels. For, as we will see, the very "sensibility" which might temper men's acquisitive impulses could easily simply overwhelm women, who were neither encouraged to discipline feelings by reason nor provided with constructive outlets for their aroused emotions. By such reading, Wollstonecraft complained in *The Rights of Woman*, women's "senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling. . . . All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion; and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions are wavering. . . ." ¹² The fact that such weakness is considered one of women's most "feminine," hence attractive, qualities, Wollstonecraft argued in *The Rights of Woman*, indicates the extent to which men are anxious to perpetuate their power at the expense of women's self-realization.

This recognition of the sentimental ways and means of marital tyranny is the heart of Wollstonecraft's insight in *Maria*. Yet despite the clarity of many of Maria's statements about marriage, the heroine remains ominously attracted to the very sentimentalism that has twice ensnared her. "True sensibility," she calls it, "the sensibility which is the auxiliary of virtue, and the soul of genius, is in society so occupied with the feelings of others, as scarcely to regard its own sensations" (126). Even after the scheming brutality of Venables theoretically opens her eyes to the naïveté of such sentiments, Maria continues to extoll the purported selflessness of this "active sensibility" and to encourage her infant daughter to perpetuate the mother's mistakes: "Whilst your own heart is sincere," she writes in the memoirs she intends for her daughter, "always expect to meet one glowing with the same sentiments" (77).

This returns us, of course, to the central problem; for what is confusing here is how Wollstonecraft intends for us to take the character of Maria. Do Maria's repeated lapses into the very sentimental jargon Wollstonecraft denounces constitute an ironic presentation? And, if so, does the irony extend to Maria's

"The significant development in 'sense' was the extension from a process to a particular kind of product: 'sense' as good sense, good judgment, from which the predominant modern meaning of *sensible* was to be derived. . . . *Sensibility* in its C18 uses ranged from a use much like that of modern 'awareness' (not only 'consciousness' but 'conscience') to a strong form of what the word appears literally to mean, the ability to feel. . . . The association of *sentimental* with *sensibility* was then close: a conscious openness to feelings, and also a conscious consumption of feelings." See *Keywords*, pp. 235–38.

¹² *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; New York: Norton, 1975), pp. 60–61. The ambivalence toward sentimentalism is also discussed by R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

insights about marriage? Or is Wollstonecraft herself prey to the same delusive "romantic expectations" that she shows crippling Maria? And, if so, what does this tell us about the tyrannical complicity between marriage and sentimentalism that Wollstonecraft is trying to expose?

The most telling argument for reading the characterization of Maria ironically is Wollstonecraft's juxtaposition of Maria's first-person narrative with another first-person narrative, that of Jemima, Maria's warder in the madhouse. Jemima's story is decidedly *un-sentimental*. Her history begins not with romantic expectations but with sexual violation ("My father . . . seduced my mother"), and it details the events of a continuing victimization: Jemima is raped by her master when she is sixteen, and the ensuing pregnancy drives her into the streets. After a self-inflicted abortion, poverty forces Jemima into prostitution. But as a self-sufficient prostitute, Jemima experiences an unorthodox, if momentary, freedom, a freedom which, no matter how qualified, Wollstonecraft says Jemima "values": "my independence," Jemima calls it. Such subversive independence cannot be tolerated, however; night watchmen, jealous of her autonomy, soon drive Jemima to seek refuge in institutionalized prostitution—first in a whorehouse, then in a relationship with a "worn-out votary of voluptuousness." This sexual exploitation marks Jemima's entry into bourgeois society: the old man teaches her to read and confines her in a monogamous relationship. Upon her lover's death, Jemima learns the other face of bourgeois security: along with her freedom she has squandered her rights. Left penniless, Jemima is reduced, in rapid order, to a washerwoman, a thief, and a pauper, before she finds employment in the madhouse to which Maria is confined.

From her history of persecution, however, Jemima has developed both intellectual resolution and emotional resilience. "The treatment that rendered me miserable," she comments, "seemed to sharpen my wits" (53), and with these "sharpened wits" she learns how to survive in bourgeois society; Jemima endures by "despis[ing] and prey[ing] on the society by which she had been oppressed" (31). Despite the fact that she is a victim, Jemima is also a survivor—and potentially a new kind of heroine as well.

For if Jemima's experiences have taught her to despise men, they have not wholly frozen her to a more radical expression of feminine feeling: Jemima retains the capacity to love—not men, significantly, but women. Jemima's only childhood wish was for a "mother's affection," her only feelings of guilt stem from her having made another woman suffer, and she is quick to respond to Maria's anguish. Moreover, Jemima's "feminine emotions" are more resilient than Maria's nurtured, middle-class sensibility. When the two women finally escape the madhouse, Jemima goes first; and when they are confronted by a last, menacing male, the terrified Maria throws "her arms round Jemima, and crie[s], 'Save me!'" (141). In the most developed of the projected conclusions to the novel, Wollstonecraft has Jemima save Maria once more, this time from an attempted suicide, by restoring to Maria her lost daughter and then ushering her into the female world just glimpsed at the end of the passage.

This genuinely radical, indeed, feminist story has the potential to call into

question both the organizational principles of bourgeois society and the sentimentalism that perpetuates romantic idealism. For the anarchy implicit in Jemima's brief exploitation of female sexuality combines with the stark realism of the narrative to explode the assumptions which tie female sexuality to romance and thereby to the institutions men traditionally control. But Wollstonecraft does *not* develop the revolutionary implications of Jemima's narrative. Instead, her story is quickly, ostentatiously, suppressed. Jemima's history occupies only one of the seventeen completed chapters of *Maria*, and it is suspended prematurely by an unspecified "indistinct noise" whose only function is to curtail this narrative. The effect of this narrative on her auditors (two captives in a madhouse) is only to give rise to "the most painful reflections on the present state of society" (not to effective actions), and, after their escape, Jemima insists only on being Maria's "house-keeper" (not her equal). The abrupt manner in which Jemima's story ends and the thoroughness with which her tough attitude is reabsorbed into Maria's sentimentalism suggest that Wollstonecraft is not willing to consider seriously such a radical alternative to women's enslavement. For such a solution would entail renouncing not only the bourgeois institution of marriage, but also the romantic expectations that motivate Maria and, we must conclude, the narrator as well.

For, despite the strong suggestions that Maria's incorrigible romanticism is being presented ironically, despite Wollstonecraft's emphasis on the pernicious effects of sentimentalism, the narrator herself repeatedly lapses back into sentimental jargon and romantic idealism. At such moments, the theoretical wisdom of the narrator simply collapses into the longing of the character. These repeated collapses are characteristically marked by Wollstonecraft's insistence on semantic distinctions where substantial differences do not exist. "The real affections of life," Wollstonecraft comments in a typical passage, "when they are allowed to burst forth, are buds pregnant with joy and all the sweet emotions of the soul. . . . The substantial happiness, which enlarges and civilizes the mind, may be compared to the pleasure experienced in roving through nature at large, inhaling the sweet gale natural to the clime" (143–44). Wollstonecraft wants happiness to be "substantial," "real," physically possible. But the explicitly metaphorical language she uses to depict that happiness ("buds pregnant with joy") calls attention only to the fictiveness, the literariness, the patent immateriality of this ideal. Despite her anxious assertions that such happiness is "substantial" and that the "real affections of life" and "true sensibility" somehow differ from the romantic delusions that twice ensnare Maria, Wollstonecraft actually reveals only that her own ideals are insubstantial—figments, in fact, of the very romantic idealism they are meant to transcend.

Repeatedly, then, the narrator falls victim to the same sentimental idealism that cripples Maria. Wollstonecraft continues to cherish the belief that, by fidelity to personal feelings kept pure of the taint of self-interest and the "grossness of sensuality," an individual can express a sensibility "true" in the metaphysical—and physical—sense of that word. And yet even Wollstonecraft knows that something is wrong. In the crucible of her novel, things just don't work out that way:

Darnford's love is "volatile," Maria's happiness is less substantial than the bars of her madhouse cell. And the fiction that Wollstonecraft believed "capable of producing an important effect" repeatedly threatens to fall out of grace and into just another sentimental novel.

Wollstonecraft is aware that there is a critical gap between the realism of her isolated political observations and the idealism of her sentimental paradigms. And, as if searching for an antidote for her own susceptibility, Wollstonecraft repeatedly aborts the sentimental structure of *Maria* in order to reassert her political purpose. At virtually every point at which the characters' stories begin to elicit the reader's identification, Wollstonecraft ruptures the narrative either by the interjection of non-dramatic political commentary, by simply severing the dramatic action, or by ejecting characters out of the novel altogether. The hiatuses in the novel are frequent and obtrusive—even in those chapters Godwin describes as finished. Yet these ruptures are not expressions of a telling ambivalence on Wollstonecraft's part toward sentimental *feeling*. Rather, they constitute one expression of a crisis in self-confidence not uncharacteristic of eighteenth-century women writers. Instead of questioning the validity of sentimental feeling, Wollstonecraft limits her suspicion to one particular aspect of feeling—the creative, self-expressive imagination.

According to sentimental theory, the imagination is a faculty whose characteristic activity is projection, both salutary and harmful. The imaginative projection of feeling, according to Adam Smith and David Hume, is the root of sympathy; yet the imaginative projection of desire, Dr. Johnson warned, is the heart of human vanity.¹³ Because this latter propensity is so tied up with the former, the imagination is for Wollstonecraft a highly ambiguous faculty, the "characteristic of genius," on the one hand, the self-filled boudoir of desire, on the other. And, for her, *women's* imaginations are particularly suspect because women, lacking both personal experience and practical opportunities, are especially tempted to project their desires into fiction *instead* of into the real world. How many, Wollstonecraft wonders in *Maria*, of women's imaginings are vain—vain, not only in the sense of self-centered, but in the root sense of that word, *vanus*, empty, ineffectual?

Thus Wollstonecraft's ambivalence about feeling focuses most consistently on the very enterprise in which she, as an imaginative artist, is engaged. And this ambivalence about the creative imagination becomes both a theme of *Maria* and a repeated agitator of the narrative structure. Wollstonecraft is wary of the products of the creative imagination because she fears they will have the effect on readers that Rousseau's *Julie* has on Maria: engaging their readers' imaginations, fictions *disengage* those readers from life; eliciting imaginative identification, they feed wishful fantasies instead of initiating political action. Wollstonecraft breaks off the various narratives of *Maria* at their most affecting

¹³ As David Hume describes sympathy, it depends upon imaginative projection: "We have no such extensive concern for society but from sympathy; and consequently, 'tis that principle, which takes us so far out of ourselves, as to give us the same pleasure or uneasiness in the character of others, as if they had a tendency to our own advantage or loss." *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest Mossner (1739 and 1740; Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1969), p. 630. See also Johnson's "Vanity of Human Wishes."

moments at least partly because she senses that the narrative contract is drawing the reader into stories that are patently not true, and whose very aesthetic closure would artificially resolve whatever politically effective emotions the stories might arouse.

By the same token, Wollstonecraft is ambivalent about the process of imaginative creation. For women especially, this opportunity for self-expression is particularly tempting—but also particularly dangerous. For without political or economic opportunities to put their ideas into effect, women's imaginings threaten to become merely escapes from, not engagements with, reality. In the madhouse, both Maria and Darnford become artists, but while Darnford's compositions are primarily political, Maria becomes a sentimental writer. Her first compositions are "rhapsodies descriptive of the state of her mind" (30–31), and, as she begins to compose her own history, she finds herself embarked on an escapist, sentimental journey: "She lived again in the revived emotions of youth, and forgot her present in the retrospect of sorrows" (31).

Wollstonecraft shows, however, that such imaginative escape is really no escape at all. Maria's art is, in fact, an expression—perhaps even a cause—of her political impotence. The composition and effect of Maria's manuscript is virtually a paradigm of female sentimental authorship, with the writer confined in a prison of "disproportioned" passion, the intended beneficiary (her absent daughter) cut off from the purported moral, and the major reader (Darnford) aroused by the story only to that "transporting" passion with which he soon seduces Maria. Despite Maria's determination to plot a real escape, her schemes produce only this romantic—and escapist—narrative. Her liberation comes only at the instigation of Darnford's male guards, and, outside the madhouse, Maria remains completely ineffectual. Just as she had earlier been outsmarted by the crafty George Venables (who is the novel's consummate artist, with the power to deploy as well as imagine plots), so Maria is now outdone by the obdurate masculine logic of the courts. In the last chapter of the novel, Maria is tried for adultery, but her written defense is as easily disposed of as any mere piece of paper. Feminine logic—the argument based on feeling—has no authority among the men who author laws with the patriarchal fiat of their all-powerful Word.

In this final chapter of the novel, Wollstonecraft—through Maria's written defense—attempts one last time to fuse "purpose and structure," to find a form which will betray neither her political insights nor her feeling heart. Whereas the preceding sixteen chapters, whether narrated in first or third person, tended to be dramatic narratives, and to highlight subjective responses, in this chapter Wollstonecraft tries to "restrain [her] fancy," to avoid such unreliable, because escapist, flights of the creative imagination. Here Wollstonecraft summarizes objective events rather than feelings in order to diminish the personal aspect of Maria's history, to specify those events which are the universal "Wrongs of Woman."

But Maria's final plea does not solve the problem of women's ineffectualness. For the heart of the problem is not, as Wollstonecraft supposed, finding the proper form of expression for the feeling heart. Rather, the real problem lies in

the bourgeois concept of the autonomous feeling heart itself. Basically, all Maria's argument does is to privilege this feeling heart: she justifies her flight from Venables by an appeal to her own subjective judgment and urges the jury to consult their own feelings in deciding her case. Moreover, Maria's defense, for all its insight, simply strives to institutionalize feminine feeling as a new rationale for the old covenant of marriage. Even as she pleads for freedom from Venables, Maria calls Darnford her "husband" and declares that what she really wants is only a new marriage in which to better fulfill "the duties of a wife and mother" (148). We are not really surprised that Maria's attempt to generalize and institutionalize feeling has no effect on the court, for in her argument Wollstonecraft fails once more to take her own insights to their logical conclusions. Just as she turned from exploring the radical implications of Jemima's narrative, so Wollstonecraft now stops short of exposing the tyranny of the marriage contract itself. Instead, the defiant Mary Wollstonecraft clings to that bedrock of bourgeois society—the belief in individual feeling—and in so doing her fledgling voice hesitates, and finally falters into silence.

Wollstonecraft does not develop the hybrid form which might have fused "purpose and structure" largely because she refuses to relinquish the values tied up with sentimental structure itself. But Wollstonecraft's dilemma was not unique. Indeed, it is only one example of a philosophical as well as a social problem that beleaguered men as well as women in the late eighteenth century. For the fundamental desire which makes her retain those values and which informs not only this work but all of Wollstonecraft's literary productions (and her turbulent life as well) is a longing to identify—or assert—a reliable relationship between phenomenal reality and that intimation of transcendent meaning which the imagination so doggedly, so teasingly, projects. Wollstonecraft's refusal to abandon the ideal of "true sensibility," in other words, even when recognizing that the romantic expectations endemic to such sensibility were agents of bourgeois tyranny, reflects her yearning for some connection between spiritual values and real, everyday experience. What might seem to us to be the artificial vocabulary of sentimentalism expresses—and attempts to satisfy—this longing. Wollstonecraft's sentimentalism, then, is another expression of what Hegel called the "nostalgia for transcendence"; it constitutes one more desperate attempt to construct a myth of the autonomous self and of Presence—here, now, in this world. Although such may very well be the eternal aspiration of imaginative literature, the particular intensity of this longing at the end of the eighteenth century signals the inadequacies of empiricism and rationalism to fill the vacuum left by Enlightenment challenges to orthodox religion. Other contemporary literary expressions of the same desire include not only the novels of Richardson and Rousseau, but also the wishful conclusion of Johnson's "Vanity of Human Wishes" and the entire aesthetic program of Wordsworth's natural supernaturalism.

The sentimental narrative, then, must be understood as more than just an effete sibling in the otherwise hardy literary lineage that includes Tom Jones and Huck

Finn. Rather, the sentimental novel is a logical development of the secularized realistic novel: it is the cry for transcendent meaning in a profane world; it is social realism nostalgic for the absolutism of romance narratives. But by the end of the eighteenth century, the cultural quest which formed the nucleus of the first romances had become a quest of the individual heart, and the grail had become the private treasure of romantic love. Late eighteenth-century sentimentalism, in other words, is the secular romance of individualism—and therein lies the dilemma. For in a society constituted upon *economic* individualism, upon marketplace competition, the feeling heart cannot compete with cash. And, even more critically, that myth of personal autonomy perpetuated by sentimentalism—like the myth of bourgeois individualism itself—tended to blind its adherents to the way in which the individual romance is “written” by the social text of which it is, in fact, only one episode. Sentimentalism was no more an effective solution to the spiritual impoverishment of bourgeois society than it was to the continuing political and economic injustices of the class system. For to believe that an individual could achieve personal happiness within an enlightened marriage—as Maria and Wollstonecraft continue to do—was to ignore the systemic oppression integral to the legal and economic institution of eighteenth-century marriage. And to believe that, despite this institution, personal happiness could be hoarded up, like private property, within the storehouse of the human heart, was to underestimate the complex social and economic factors that delineated the opportunities for, even the forms of, happiness available. Maria’s celebration of the “humanizing affections” of the individual actually constitutes Wollstonecraft’s retreat from that insight to which she was so close in *The Rights of Woman*—the recognition that the individual’s “situation,” his or her position within class, gender, economics, and history—really delimits freedom and effectively defines the “self.”

No doubt the problem of sentimentalism loomed large for any late eighteenth-century liberal (Rousseau is a case in point), but for women the dilemma was particularly acute. For women both had a special investment in sentimentalism and were its particular victims. Not only did the “humanizing affections” theoretically natural to women and privileged by sentimentalism give the fair sex an important function in a society increasingly dominated by economic competition, but sentimentalism was also effectively the only genre in which women were allowed legitimate self-expression. A woman’s only “business,” as Wollstonecraft recognized in *The Rights of Woman*, was the “business” of the heart; for her, sentiments constituted the only “events.”¹⁴

The consequences of this social and cultural position were far-reaching indeed, for it set the stage for sentimentality’s particular victimization of women. Instead of having access to the Enlightenment myth of self-determination, instead of having opportunities to “make” themselves professionally, women were defined strictly by their sexuality. “The male is only a male now and again,” as Rousseau phrased it; “the female is always a female . . . ; everything reminds her of her

¹⁴ *The Rights of Woman*, p. 183.

sex. . . ."¹⁵ Because women were so defined, they were actively encouraged to envision emotional and even spiritual fulfillment in sensual terms and yet, at the same time, because their sexuality had to be susceptible to the control of marriage, they were enjoined to sublimate, to desexualize, their literal sexuality into highly euphemistic terms. Bourgeois ideology simultaneously shackled women's aspirations to the fatal parabola of physical desire and denied them either free sexual self-expression or a cultural myth of female sexual transcendence. The fusion of "self" with sexuality, in other words, enslaved a woman to the ineluctable fact that the apparently illimitable longing of physical desire inevitably finds death in satisfaction. And because female sexuality was not accorded the same symbolic significance that man's theoretically more abstract, less material sexuality has traditionally been granted, women were not encouraged to value even the momentary pleasure accorded by literal sexual self-expression. Indeed, given the restrictions placed upon the expression of female sexuality in eighteenth-century society, women were encouraged to view their sexuality as a function of *male* initiative, a response to present and future relationships, not as self-expression at all. This is the murderous paradox sentimental novels expounded for women in particular: they encouraged women to formulate both social definition and transcendent meaning only in sexual terms, yet they denied female sexuality autonomous, much less transcendent meaning.

The twist given female sexuality by bourgeois society is the heart of darkness Mary Wollstonecraft never identified. Yet it helps explain why sentimentalism was so appealing and so fatal to her as well as to many less thoughtful eighteenth-century women. Mary Wollstonecraft could not renounce "true sensibility" because it was the only form her society allowed her to express either her sexuality or her craving for transcendent meaning. Yet retaining that form of expression—indeed, that self-definition—prohibited her from disentangling her femaleness from male institutions or control. And it also helps explain Wollstonecraft's self-contradictory presentation of sexuality in *Maria*. For, on the one hand, Wollstonecraft insists in this novel—to a degree remarkable for any eighteenth-century novelist—on the importance of female sexual expression. Yet, on the other hand, despite Wollstonecraft's insistence that sexual fulfillment is not only necessary but possible, every sexual relationship she depicts is explicitly dehumanizing and graphically revolting. Descriptions of sexuality are virtually the only descriptions in this novel with any degree of physical specificity, and they—like Venables' "tainted breath, pimpled face, and blood-shot eyes"—suggest grotesqueness, violence, and contamination.

Wollstonecraft's own sexual betrayal by the American Gilbert Imlay might seem to explain her ambivalence toward sexuality, but the language of her tortured letters to Imlay indicates that Wollstonecraft's personal ambivalence was shaped by this distortion of sexuality by sentimentality which I have just described.¹⁶ The problem, I think, was a general dilemma for women of this

¹⁵ *Emile*, p. 324. Lovelace, in Richardson's *Clarissa*, underscores this definition when he refers to women simply as "the sex, the sex."

¹⁶ A passage from one of Wollstonecraft's letters to Imlay will suffice. "Yes, these are emotions, over

period. I want to suggest that the way in which sentimentalism, on the one hand, allowed female desire legitimate expression and, on the other, harnessed that expression to the prerogatives of bourgeois society, made it virtually impossible for a woman to disentangle her desire—whether it be the desire for sexual expression or creative expression—from the central assumptions and institutions of society. “True sensibility”—and the sentimental genre that best expressed this feeling—was implicated at nearly every level in the values by which eighteenth-century society made and interpreted itself. And women, at the heart of the heart of those values, were the most bound and gagged of all society’s prisoners.

Late eighteenth-century moralists were virtually unanimous in pointing out both the appeal of the sentimental novel for women¹⁷ and its dangers.¹⁸ Certainly, the genre seems to have posed nearly insurmountable problems for most of its practitioners. Perhaps, in fact, the only effective way a woman who thought as well as felt could successfully deal with the problem of feeling was to satirize “true sensibility,” as Jane Austen did in her juvenalia and in *Northanger Abbey*. The irony Austen was to perfect in her mature works can even be seen as a second and more sophisticated handling of feminine feeling, for the distance irony affords enables Austen to explore her characters’ “romantic expectations”—and delusions—without committing herself definitively to the same desires. Austen’s relationship to bourgeois assumptions remains protectively opaque—implicitly critical in isolated phrases at the same time that the narrative privileging of marriage seems to ratify the central bourgeois institution.

Yet despite Austen’s aesthetic “solution” to what is really a cultural dilemma, Mary Wollstonecraft’s frustration remains the characteristic gesture of a woman writer of her period. And we should not forget that hers was simply the first of many complaints about the inadequacies of genre to gender. In our own

which satiety has no power, and the recollection of which, even disappointment cannot disenchant; but they do not exist without self-denial. These emotions, more or less strong, appear to me to be the distinctive characteristic of genius, the foundation of taste, and of that exquisite relish for the beauties of nature, of which the common herd of eaters and drinkers and *child-begetters*, certainly have no idea. You will smile at an observation that has just occurred to me:—I consider those minds as the most strong and original, whose imagination acts as the stimulus to their senses.” *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Ralph Wardle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 291. In the last sentence of this passage, Wollstonecraft transfers the impetus of sexual excitation to the imagination in order to rob physical stimulation of its devastating primacy. But such a transfer comes close to purifying “love” of its physical component altogether.

¹⁷ The appeal of these novels is graphically conveyed by Hannah More: “Such is the frightful facility of this species of composition, that every raw girl, while she reads, is tempted to fancy that she can also write. . . . And as Corregio, on first beholding a picture which exhibited the perfection of the Graphic art, prophetically felt all his own future greatness, and cried out in rapture, ‘And I too am a painter!’ so a thorough paced novel-reading Miss, at the close of every tissue of hackney’d adventures, feels within herself the stirring impulse of corresponding genius, and triumphantly exclaims, ‘And I too am an author!’ The gluttoned imagination soon overflows with the redundancy of cheap sentiment and plentiful incident, and by a sort of arithmetical proportion, is enabled by the perusal of any three novels, to produce a fourth; till every fresh production, like the progeny of Banquo, is followed by

Another, and another, and another!”

Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: T. Cadell Jr. and W. Davies, 1799), I, 185.

¹⁸ Hannah More is equally eloquent on the danger of sentimental novels. Such works, she argues, “teach, that character is only individual attachment; that no duty exists that is not prompted by feeling; that impulse is the main spring of virtuous actions, while law and religion are only unjust restraints.” *Strictures*, I, 35–36.

century, for example, Virginia Woolf dreamed of a “play-poem” that could fuse the protective objectivity of drama with the expressive subjectivity of lyric.¹⁹ And, nearer to Wollstonecraft’s own day, the American Margaret Fuller lamented that “for all the tides of life that flow within me, I am dumb and ineffectual, when it comes to casting my thoughts into a form. No old one suits me. . . . I love best to be a woman; but womanhood is at present too straightly-bound to give me scope.”²⁰ Too “straightly-bound” by patriarchal definitions, Fuller might have added. And by the genres of feeling and self-expression that are women’s legacy from the era of “true sensibility.”

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953; Signet ed.), p. 134.

²⁰ Quoted in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 71.