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MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY COMMONWEALTHWOMAN

BY G. J. BARKER-BENFIELD

The subject to which Mary Wollstonecraft devoted the largest amount of her prose was politics. *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) should be grouped with the preceding *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and the succeeding *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794) as her contributions to the great Anglo-French revolutionary debate of the 1790s. Wollstonecraft tells us in the dedication of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that it was intended to influence the revisions to the French revolutionary constitution then being made. She and others in her radical, "Jacobin" circle in England were in close touch with French revolutionaries. And she, no less than her fellow urban radicals, drew upon "the antiquarian and Commonwealth tradition handed on by the Protestant Dissenters. . . ."¹ Contrary to the opinion of the most recent historian of "the eighteenth-century feminist mind" there was a relationship between eighteenth-century feminism and "other political ideas of the time. . . ."² Wollstonecraft's achievement was to extend the Commonwealth analysis of male corruption and program for male reform to women. The following essay discusses those elements of Commonwealth thought on which Wollstonecraft would draw and suggests, moreover, that one can see signs of its influence in her early work. The essay then argues that the key moment of Wollstonecraft's breakthrough as a political thinker was her answer to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*; and finally it demonstrates that her second and more famous *Vindication* is a result of this breakthrough.

English radicals of the 1790s were the latest exemplars of an indigenous tradition of political and moral thought. Identifying themselves as "Real," "True," and "Honest" Whigs, they looked back to the "Commonwealthmen" of the English revolutions of the seventeenth century.³

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¹ Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 99.

² Alice Browne, *The Eighteenth-Century Feminist Mind* (Brighton, U.K., 1987), 19.

³ Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961); J. G. A. Pocock, "The Varieties of Whiggism from Exclusion to Reform: a History of Ideology

Among the leaders of this tradition were religious nonconformists, the Dissenters, who suffered legal and political disabilities imposed by the Test and Corporation Acts, part of the religious settlement following the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. They saw themselves barred from the full expression of individual talents and understood that the removal of these disabilities required Parliamentary reform: annual Parliaments, the removal of placemen, the redistribution of seats; and extension of the franchise, eventually to universal manhood suffrage.⁴ In the latter part of the eighteenth century English Dissent was headed by the Reverend Richard Price (1723-91) and his friend, the Reverend Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). They were at the heart of the last Commonwealth generation, and for a time they were close to the pinnacle of British political power as part of Lord Shelburne's brain trust. Moreover, Price contributed importantly to Pitt's economic reforms.⁵ A third Dissenting Commonwealthman of whom we must take note was James Burgh (1714-75), Price's close friend and neighbor in Newington Green. His *Political Disquisitions* (1774, 1775), "the most elaborate and detailed indictment so far available of the corrupt nature of English parliamentary representation and its social and political consequences," was "the standard source book for reform propagandists in the 1780s," "the key book of this generation."⁶ These Commonwealthmen linked the revolution of 1688 to the American Revolution, to which they were sympathetic. They were to look favorably on changes in France in 1789 and call for similar changes in Britain.⁷

and Discourse," *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985), 215-310.

⁴ H. T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution 1789-1815* (New York, 1985), 1-8, provides a succinct summary of these reform proposals.

⁵ Robbins, *Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, 335-53; Carl Cone, *Torchbearer of Freedom: The Influence of Richard Price on Eighteenth Century Thought* (Lexington, Ky., 1952); Bernard Peach (ed.), *Richard Price and the Ethical Foundations of the American Revolution: Selections from his Pamphlets with Appendices* (Durham, N.C., 1979); D. O. Thomas, "Richard Price, 1723-91," *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorioun* (1971), 46-64; D. D. Raphael, "Introduction," Richard Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* (Oxford, 1974); Joseph Priestley, "Memoirs of the Rev. Dr. Joseph Priestley to the Year 1795, Written by Himself," in Ira V. Brown (ed.), *Joseph Priestley: Selections from his Writings* (University Park, Penn., 1962) 4, 3-75; Joseph Priestley, *Priestley's Writings on Philosophy, Science, and Politics*, ed. John A. Passmore (New York, 1965); Derek Jarrett, *The Begetters of Revolution: England's Involvement with France, 1759-1789* (Totowa, N.J., 1973) is valuable for Price's and Priestley's relations with Shelburne.

⁶ Carla H. Hay, *James Burgh, Spokesman for Reform in Hanoverian England* (Washington, 1979); Robbins, *Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, 363-68; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 52; Black quoted by Hay, *Burgh*, 4; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 41.

⁷ Robbins, *Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, 7 and ch. 9; John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), ch. 10.

The Dissenting edge of this tradition emphasized that to be virtuous one must be free. Time and again Dissenters insisted that independence of mind was the individual's essential right: in Price's words, "to be obliged from our birth to look up to a creature no better than ourselves as the master of our fortunes and to receive his will as law—what can be more humiliating? What elevated ideas can enter a mind in such a situation?" One can see how the Dissenters' demand for freedom of religious conscience could be extended to the rights of men generally, but one can see, too, its appeal to women.⁸ The Dissenters identified such independence with the exercise of reason: their party is often called that of "Rational Dissenters," in contrast to "enthusiasts" like the Methodists. They urged that the individual be freed from the control of his own and government's unnatural passions and prejudices. Like other Commonwealthmen, they were deeply critical of the luxury and dissipation of the "ins," the ruling class. Conversely, they presented "the middling people" as the repository of morality and civic virtue. It was a class which Edmund Burke and the traditional rulers whose power he justified would find "increasing reason to fear. . . ."⁹

The moralizing perspective of the Commonwealthmen was a response to conditions particular to the modern state. For example, in the late seventeenth century, the phrase, "standing army" was beginning to denote an army of professional officers and long-service soldiers . . . paid for by the state." The Commonwealthmen opposed "the poor swaggering idler(s) in a red coat" who made up this force. A "financial revolution" allowed the state "to maintain larger and more permanent armies and bureaucracies . . . increasing the resources at the disposal of political patronage. . . ."¹⁰ As Professor Pocock has argued, in earlier times an Englishman's civic consciousness had been first rooted in "the bearing of arms" under circumstances where "the possession of untenured land in nondependent tenure" was its "material basis." James Harrington's notion of *populo armato* was "the foundation on which a republican

⁸ Price quoted in William Stafford, *Socialism, Radicalism, and Nostalgia: Social Criticism in Britain, 1775-1830* (Cambridge, 1987), 88-89; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, ch. 3.

⁹ Priestley's *Writings*, 17; Priestley, *Memoirs*, 37; Wollstonecraft shows contempt for Methodists in, for example, her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 225, n. 2. For the aggrandizement of the middle class, see James Burgh, *Political Disquisitions: An Enquiry with Public Errors, Defects, and Abuses* (3 vols.; New York, 1971 [1774, 1775]), II, 39; Priestley, *An Essay on the first Principles of Government*, in *Priestley's Writings*, 203-4; Priestley, *Memoirs*, 49-50; Price, *Additional Observations on the Nature and Value of Civil Liberty and the War with America* in Peach, *Price . . . Selections*, 146-47; Pocock, "Varieties of Whiggism," 281.

¹⁰ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975), 411-12; Pocock, "Varieties of Whiggism," 246; Robbins, *Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, 104; Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 411, 425.

people erects the structure of its civic virtue." The eighteenth-century Commonwealthmen continued to adhere to these republican beliefs. One can see how this foundation for the Commonwealthmen's civic consciousness excluded women. As Professor Kerber points out, "republican" ideologues had not yet included women as political agents. Burgh held that God intended women "to be submissive to men . . . as loving wives, prudent mothers and mistresses of families, faithful friends, and good Christians. . . ." Price and Priestley thought of political rights strictly as a male prerogative. On the other hand Commonwealthmen *were* keenly interested in gender.¹¹ They inherited from seventeenth-century republicanism a powerful emphasis on "the release of personal virtue through civic participation," its trope, the parable of the talents: "God hath given no man a talent to be wrapped up in a napkin and not improved. . . ." The replacement of the citizen army by the state's mercenaries, the state's own "standing army," was seen as a degeneration of both civic virtue and manhood. This affected those exercising a corrupt political power, but also it contributed to an enervation of the whole of male society.¹² Burgh's vision is striking in this respect. Man's disposition had become "perverse," "degenerated into luxury," and the upper classes were refined into "adultery, gambling, cheating, blasphemy, rookery, and sodomy."¹³ According to another expression of the same vision, England, far "from being the nursery of heroes, became the residence of musicians, pimps, panders, and catamites."¹⁴ Burgh's conclusion about the tendency of such behavior illustrates the gender specific meaning of the *populo armato*: "A people enervated by luxury are but a nation of women and children."¹⁵

A vision of civil society's being corrupted by luxury and false refinements pervades Burgh's *Political Disquisitions*, both in his own language and in that of the Commonwealthmen he quotes. Burgh introduces the following quotation from Adam Ferguson's *History of Civilized Societies* as a description of "a people sliding into luxury and corruption."

The increasing regard with which men appear in the progress of commercial arts, to study their profit, or the delicacy with which they refine on their pleasures, even industry itself, or the habit of application to a tedious employment

¹¹ Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 335, 390, 372, 389; Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980), 27-32; Dickinson, "The Rights of Man from John Locke to Tom Paine," Owen Dudley Edwards and George Shepperson, *Scotland, Europe, and the American Revolution* (Edinburgh, 1976), 38-49: 45; Burgh quoted in Hay, *Burgh*, 65. See, too, Ruth Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs*, 13 (1987), 98-121: 102-05.

¹² Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 394, 313, 411-12.

¹³ Burgh, *Political Disquisitions*, III, 59; III, 11.

¹⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 136.

¹⁵ Burgh, *Political Disquisitions*, III, 59.

in which no honors are won [a reference to the preceding more virile and chivalric age], may perhaps be considered an indication of a growing attention to interest, or of effeminacy contracted in the enjoyment of ease and conveniency. Every successive art by which the individual is taught to improve on his fortune, is in reality an addition to his private engagements, and a new avocation of his mind from the public . . . it is in the midst of ["higher"] engagements that they are most likely to acquire or to preserve their virtues. The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties, not in engaging the repose of a pacific station; penetration and wisdom are the fruits of experience, not the lessons of retirement and leisure.¹⁶

As Pocock argues, such a change (or more precisely, such a belief), the "decisive abandonment of the classical (and at the same time Gothic) ideal of the citizen as an armed proprietor, and his replacement by a leisured, cultivated and acquisitive man who paid for others to defend and govern him" entailed "the emergence of new types of personality," that is of *male* personality. Here Ferguson characterizes such personality—refined, delicate, tediously employed, enjoying ease and convenience, above all, absorbed by the private—as "effeminate." The same political tradition also interpreted it as "hysterical and unstable" and Professor Pocock demonstrates further that the modern figure of degenerate manhood was associated with a female symbol of "Credit."¹⁷

The qualities Ferguson associates with "masculine" manhood, vigor of mind, penetration, and wisdom, were derived from "higher engagements." If "feeble and interested men" give up their "national and political efforts" and grow indifferent to "objects of a public nature" and "the exercise of freedom," Ferguson predicts "corruption to the national manners, as well as remissness to the national spirit." It is worth our while to read more of Ferguson's description of the kind of "effeminate" character to which absorption of private life led.

Men being relieved from the pressure of great occasions, bestow their attention on trifles; and having carried what they are pleased to call sensibility and delicacy on the subject of ease or molestation, as far as real weakness or folly can go, have recourse to affectation, in order to enhance the pretended demands, and accumulate the anxieties of a sickly fancy and enfeebled mind.

Such men degrade the "former ages" celebration of masculine "ardour, generosity and fortitude," explaining it away as mere necessity.

They congratulate themselves on having escaped the storm, which required the exercise of such arduous virtues; and with that vanity which accompanies the

¹⁶ Burgh, *Political Disquisitions*, II, 85-86. See Robbins, *Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, 199-203.

¹⁷ Pocock, "Varieties of Whiggism," 235; Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 410-42 and ch. 13, *passim*. See, too, Bloch, "Gendered Meanings," 106-7.

human race in the meanest condition, they boast of a scene of affectation of languor, or of folly as the standard of human felicity. . . .¹⁸

The Commonwealthman's particular sexualization of virtue and of corruption would provide a *point d'appui* for Wollstonecraft.

Wollstonecraft had already been introduced to the real Whig/Dissenting tradition when she moved to the Dissenting community at Newington Green in 1783. Price was its minister, and Burgh had kept a successful academy there with his wife until his death in 1775. His widow, Hannah Harding Burgh (1710-88), played a key role in Wollstonecraft's life, treating her as if she had been, in Wollstonecraft's words, "her own daughter."¹⁹ In the end Wollstonecraft would break free of this complex relationship;²⁰ but Hannah Burgh's introduction of Wollstonecraft to her and her husband's circle of friends, her experience running a school with her husband, her willingness to lend Wollstonecraft money, and her practical and emotional support for Wollstonecraft and her sisters over the next few years were crucial. Most important, Hannah Burgh, it seems clear, introduced Wollstonecraft to her husband's ideas and his writings. According to another leading Dissenter and the Burghs's good friend, the Reverend Andrew Kippis, Hannah Burgh "zealously concurred with [James] in promoting all his laudable and useful undertakings."²¹ We can imagine this zealous and childless widow, taking the twenty-four-year-old Wollstonecraft under her wing, identifying herself closely with her efforts to perpetuate education in her community, and pulling out copies of her dead husband's books to aid in those efforts, perhaps first his *Thoughts on Education* (1747).²² (She may well have proudly shown her "daughter" Burgh's *magnum opus*, his *Political Disquisitions*, although Price or Joseph Johnson, her publisher, could have loaned it to Wollstonecraft.) It is possible that the title of Wollstonecraft's first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), was a tribute to the Burghs.

Devoting only five pages of the *Thoughts on Education* to female education, Burgh had intimated the need for a more extended work on the subject. The chief burden of those five pages was that women are as rational as men and as accountable in the world to come, that they should develop their minds rather than their shortlived charms, that they should resist the male flattery and rakery fostered by plays and novels, and that

¹⁸ Burgh, *Political Disquisitions*, II, 86.

¹⁹ Hay, *Burgh*, 20, 114, n. 47; Wollstonecraft to Eliza W. Bishop, Sept. 23, 1786 in Wardle (ed.), *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1979), 113. These are the best source for Wollstonecraft's relationship with Hannah Burgh.

²⁰ Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, Feb. 10, 1787; March 4, 1787; and Nov. 7, 1787 (*Collected Letters*, 134, 142, and 164).

²¹ Kippis quoted in Hay, *Burgh*, 19.

²² Eleanor Flexner, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Biography* (Baltimore, 1972), 48; Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York, 1974), 40.

they should do so in the interest of a rational marital partnership. Burgh provided Wollstonecraft with the nub of her first book, *The Female Reader* (1789), as well as a theme that would culminate in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Burgh's views were part and parcel of a political vision in which education was crucial.²³ Wollstonecraft's other early work—all published by Joseph Johnson—can be linked to the same political views. One also finds in her *Original Stories From Real Life* (1788) views of economic relationships which have been informed by the views of the Commonwealthmen. Her story of the indebtedness of the stationer's wife and family embodies exactly that perspective on the "client economy [that] was an integral part of aristocratic and courtly politics," a politics buttressed by "a system of graft and corruption." Wollstonecraft's writing here may be seen as an expression of the "out-of-doors" politics described by John Brewer.²⁴ Her 1788 translation of Jacques Necker's *De l'importance des opinions religieuses* is another intriguing link with politics.²⁵ Commissioned by Johnson, Wollstonecraft must have undertaken it at first for income, but she told her sister in Paris that the book pleased her and she wanted "to know the character of the man [Necker] in domestic life and public estimation and the opinion the French have of his literary abilities." We cannot ignore the personal links between Price and Necker and the fact that Wollstonecraft wrote to Necker and sent him some papers while working on the translation.²⁶ Necker was famous in England as the reformer of French governmental finances but famous, too, as a Protestant who had risen to power in a Catholic country. He was seen by British Dissenters as a symbol of "the movement for the civil emancipation of the French Protestants" and thereby of their own aspirations in their campaign against the religious and political establishment. Chapter XVI of *De l'importance* makes a strong case against "religious intolerance."²⁷ Above all, we should note the timing of Wollstonecraft's translation in the midst of three successive applications for the repeal in Parliament of the Test and Corporation Acts by Dissenters and their allies in March 1787, May 1789, and March 1790.

²³ Burgh, *Thoughts on Education: Tending chiefly to recommend to the Attention of the Public, some Particulars relating to that Subject; which are not generally considered with the Regard their Importance deserves* (Boston, Mass., 1749 [1747]), 53-58.

²⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from Real Life: with Conversation, Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (n.p., 1972 [1791]), 83; Brewer, "Commercialization and Politics," Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, Ind., 1982), 195-262, 199.

²⁵ London, 1788.

²⁶ Wollstonecraft to Everina Wollstonecraft, March 22, 1788 (*Collected Letters* 173); Wardle, *Wollstonecraft*, 33; Cone, *Torchbearer*, 160; Peach, *Price . . . Selections*, 14, 177.

²⁷ Jarrett, *Begetters of Revolution*, ch. 7; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 91, 92, 81; Necker, *Religious Opinions*, ch. 16, "Reflexions on Intolerance," 204.

In a letter written in March 1788 to her sister, Everina, who was in Paris, and while working on the translation of Necker's *De l'importance*, Wollstonecraft requested her sister "*immediately*, without delay" (her emphasis) to deliver a letter to the French minister by way of a French contact, Mr. Laurent, together "with some papers" and reiterated her urgency a third time, "do not lose time." Professor Wardle suggests that Laurent was a business associate of Johnson.²⁸ Those mysterious papers cry out for research. In any case one can see the political value of Wollstonecraft's translation of Necker's book to the British Dissenters' Parliamentary campaign, then at its height. Not only was Necker seen by *them* as a symbol, he was also deeply respected by more conservative Whigs for his efforts at financial reform, which Burke attempted to emulate in 1780 and cited frequently in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, that is, even after his break with the Dissenters and their Whig allies.²⁹ Necker's views could serve to broaden the appeal of the upcoming assault in Parliament on the Dissenters' disabilities. Johnson's commissioning Wollstonecraft's translation was characteristic of his lifelong habit of publishing radical works of the greatest political immediacy to the Dissenting group to which he and Wollstonecraft belonged.

Johnson played an important part in the publication of the original work by Wollstonecraft which illustrates unequivocally and dramatically her participation in British politics, her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*.³⁰ This was her response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* of the same year, in turn provoked most immediately by Price's "A Discourse on the Love of Our Country" a sermon delivered November 4, 1789, the anniversary of England's 1688 revolution. It was an annual event, and its place, audience, and occasion epitomized the expression and values of this last generation of Commonwealthman: Price preached at the Dissenters' Meeting House at Old Jewry, before members of the London Revolution Society, preceding their formal proceedings and dinner at the London Tavern.³¹ By November 1789 Price could feel buoyed by the near-success in May of the challenge in Parliament to the Test and Corporation Acts; Price's sermon linked that challenge expressly to the return that summer of Necker, (characterizing him as "a professed Dissenter") to power in France. Price could also celebrate the fall of the

²⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Collected Letters*, 174, n. 2. For unofficial contact between Shelburne (Price's patron and a Dissenters' supporter) and Necker in the spring of 1789, see Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 104-6.

²⁹ Jarrett, *Begetters of Revolution*, 160; Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (New York, 1968 [1790]), 220-21, 232, 234-35, 238, 367.

³⁰ William Godwin, *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. W. Clark Durant (New York, 1969 [1798]), 52-53; I have used the edition of *Vindication of the Rights of Men* published in Boston, 1790 (Gainesville, Fla., 1960).

³¹ Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 106.

Bastille that July.³² The failure in Parliament the following May to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts was largely because of the decisive intervention of Burke, who read Price's sermon to Parliament. Burke was then hard at work on his counter-revolutionary manifesto. This was a turning point in British politics, confirming "the inherent radicalism of Dissent and provid[ing] the new working-class reformers with the political leadership and intellectual stamina that enabled them in the years ahead to acquire political credibility and to develop . . . large-scale organization."³³

Wollstonecraft, then, was a participant in this struggle, an ally of Price, the most celebrated Dissenter in England, who, because of his relationship with Shelburne and Pitt, was the symbol to Burke of the political principles that threatened his road back to office. The Dissenters' abandonment of the Rockinghamites in the 1784 election in favor of Pitt had sent Burke into the political wilderness.³⁴ In his *Reflections*, as in his *Thoughts on the Present Discontents* twenty years earlier, Burke was attempting no less than a redefinition of the Whig party. It was this that Wollstonecraft was taking on.³⁵

Wollstonecraft's closeness to Price as she was writing this reply is indicated by her inclusion in a footnote of the correction Price made in the fourth edition of his *Discourse* to Burke's misrepresentations. Her identification with Price and his fellow "revolutionaries" is further suggested by her addressing precisely those reform issues, the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, the blatant inequity of "the penal law," the press gang, and the game laws, which were the subjects of toasts by the London Revolutionary Society at its 1788 meeting, and whose proceedings, published in 1789, she very probably had at hand. Wollstonecraft gives a post-Bastille definition of liberty: "the birthright of man . . . such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual . . . in a social compact. . . ." Her representation of the effects of luxury, idleness, and the maldistribution of power and property shows the influence of Burgh as well as Price.³⁶

³² Price, "A Discourse on the Love of our Country . . ." (London, 1790), 31-32; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 88, 90, 92.

³³ Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 96-97, 98.

³⁴ Priestley, "A Discourse on the Occasion of the Death of Dr. Price; delivered at Hackney, Sunday, May 1, 1791," *Gentleman's Magazine*, I, xi, no. 1 (1791), 557-59; Burke, *Reflections*, 25; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 76; Pocock, "Varieties of Whiggism," 279. Burke's hostility to Dissenters went back to the early 1770s, Frank O'Gorman, *Edmund Burke: His Political Philosophy* (Bloomington, Ind., 1973), 64.

³⁵ *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford, 1981), II, 203-4; O'Gorman, *Burke*, 109.

³⁶ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 55n; the fourth edition of Price's "Discourse" was published one week earlier; James Boulton, *Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London, 1963), 266; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 85-86; Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 7-8 and 22, 100. Stafford, *Socialism*,

Most striking in Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* is its focus on Burke (in her correspondence she referred to it as her "answer to Burke"). Her title could well have been a reference to Burke's early satire on the intellectual tradition Wollstonecraft was now defending, entitled *A Vindication of Natural Society*; if so, she is calling his satire truth.³⁷ But there is no doubt of Wollstonecraft's sustained, two-pronged attack on Burke in her text. The first prong is composed of a series of references to his political career. That he was in 1790 "an old Member of Parliament"; a man not born to office but having had to win it for himself, now sunk into oblivion. It was from that position that he was represented by Wollstonecraft as envious of Price who, like Burke, had supplied his aristocratic patrons with economic expertise.³⁸ Wollstonecraft refers to Burke's plan of "oeconomical reform" and, it seems, to its being nipped in the bud by the Gordon Riots.³⁹ She suggests that his concern for the plight of Indians under corrupt British rule is now revealed to have been concern for the caste system, above all Brahmin domination. With similar irony she refers to Burke's defense of "disinterested conduct" in relation to his constituents, and she mentions his erstwhile sympathy for revolution in the American case. She tells Burke that she has "been reading . . . several of your insensible and profane speeches during the King's illness" that is, during the Regency Crisis the previous year, which Burke had seen as an opportunity to regain office under the Prince of Wales.⁴⁰ Here, too, the Dissenters had been on the opposite side to Burke and it was likely that one of them, Price perhaps, or Johnson, supplied Wollstonecraft with the published speeches on the controversy, for example, Stockdale's *The History of the Lords and Commons of Great Britain . . . with regard to the Regency* (1789). She refers to Burke's reputation for unbridled passion and even madness;⁴¹ she alludes throughout to his putative Catholicism⁴² (his mother was Catholic and he was intensely loyal to his Catholic kin) and, more slyly but with equal nastiness, to his Irishness.⁴³

Radicalism, and Nostalgia, 77; Dickinson, "Rights of Man," 45; Dickinson, "The Eighteenth-Century Debate on the 'Glorious Revolution,'" *History*, 61 (1971), 28-45.

³⁷ Wollstonecraft to William Godwin, Oct. 26, 1796 (*Collected Letters*, 358); Burke, *A Vindication of National Society*, in *Works* (8 vols.; London, 1854), I, 1-49.

³⁸ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 42, 107, 110.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 20, 89; Jarrett, *Begetters of Revolution*, 174-75.

⁴⁰ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 130, 85, 87-88, 61; Pocock, "Varieties of Whiggism," 279.

⁴¹ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 4, 6; these are running themes. Compare O'Gorman, *Burke*, 127, n. 57, 140; Jarrett, *Begetters of Revolution*, 175; F. P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, 1985), 147-48.

⁴² Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 17, 18, 21, 23, 32, 40, 74, 81, 93, 120, 124-25.

⁴³ O'Brien's introduction to Burke, *Reflections*, 29-30; Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 23.

The second prong was pointed at Burke's hitherto most famous work, most influential in literary and artistic culture, his *A Philosophical Enquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, to which she referred throughout her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*.⁴⁴ She saw that Burke's "categories" in his *Reflections* "were essentially his own aesthetic ones of the *Enquiry*," which she replaced with her own definitions of the sublime and the beautiful.⁴⁵ Her immersion in the *Enquiry* was linked to her extremely close intellectual and personal relationship with the painter, Henry Fuseli, who was deeply influenced by Burke's aesthetics and whose unhappy experience as a tutor to Lord Chewton Wollstonecraft mentioned obliquely in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*.⁴⁶

The climax of this, the most striking organizing principle of her answer to Burke's *Reflections*, is Wollstonecraft's quotation of and commentary on Burke's prescriptive depiction of women in his *Enquiry*: "little, smooth, delicate fair creatures, never designed that they should exercise their reason . . ." but taught they "should lisp, to totter in their walk and nick-name God's creatures."⁴⁷ The former phrases show Wollstonecraft's understanding of Burke's identification of "the beautiful" with women as a separate human and aesthetic category. Burke's sexual invidiousness here is, of course, the same as Rousseau's (particularly in *Emile*), a primary target of Wollstonecraft's second *Vindication*.⁴⁸

By contrast, she identifies *herself* with the rights of man: "I reverence the rights of men. Sacred rights for which I acquire a more profound respect the more I look into my own mind. . . ." She writes of "our liberty," "our constitution," and "our faculties." She will fight Burke with the manly "weapons" of reason. He on the other hand, is infantile and effeminate, "the slave of impulse," at the mercy of his organs and passions. She compares him to a coquette, ever on the watch for conquest by way of exercising emotion, a creature that had never exercised reason.

⁴⁴ Boulton, "Editor's Introduction" to Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1958), xv-cxxvii. Wollstonecraft refers on her first page to the fact that Burke's "literary abilities have raised him to notice in the state" and thereafter mentions or quotes the *Enquiry* throughout, 2, 5, 6, 10, 11, 13, 28, 42-43, 76-77, 78, 98, 111-14, 116, 117, 119, 120, 121, 122, 131, 136-37, 140-41, 150, 152-53.

⁴⁵ Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution, 1789-1820* (New Haven, Conn., 1983), 81; Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 2, 5-6, 136-37, 140, 141, 145.

⁴⁶ Godwin, *Memoirs*, 57-62; Boulton, *Language of Politics*, cxiv-cxvi; Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 90.

⁴⁷ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 113, 112; see Paulson, *Representations of Revolution*, 79-87.

⁴⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York, 1975 [1792]), 173-91 and *passim*. In that book she does not refer to Burke by name although she does refer to his views of women, for example, "libertine notions of beauty," 83. See, too, 288.

He is, then, an illustration of the rich she describes on the next page who, because they “supinely exist without exercising mind or body, have ceased to be men.” Wollstonecraft argues for a course of action which will “unfold the mind, and inspire a manly spirit of independence.”⁴⁹ Her use of “manly” here and throughout this book is the same as the Commonwealthman’s usage, manifest, say, in Burgh’s *Political Disquisitions*; but it also represents Wollstonecraft’s extension to women of the principles of true Whiggery and political radicalism.

This breakthrough was sponsored, as it were, by Wollstonecraft’s Burgh-like characterizations of the English magnates Burke was defending. Her standards of healthy citizenship, the receipt of a good education, and the exertion of mind and body under the bracing condition of liberty in order to produce virtue, look back to the “manly” political, moral tradition epitomized by Price, Burgh, and Priestley. What she says in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in criticism of upper-class degeneracy is identical to the description in Burgh’s *Political Disquisitions*, of “a people” (those men entrusted with power) “sliding into luxury and corruption.” How, she asks, can “a man of rank and fortune” “discover that he is a man, when all his wants are instantly supplied, and invention is never sharpened by necessity? Will he labour, for everything valuable must be the fruit of laborious exertions, to attain knowledge and virtue . . . pampered by flattery . . . the senses meet allurements on every side. . . .” The significance for the manhood on which civic virtue depends, is clear.⁵⁰

Prescription, the centerpiece of Burke’s argument in his *Reflections*, Wollstonecraft writes, is “raised as an immortal boundary against innovation.” The minds of the hereditarily rich “have been . . . warped by education. . . .”⁵¹ Were politics to be opened to “talents,” an old Commonwealth theme, “luxury and effeminacy would not introduce so much idiotism into the noble families which form one of the pillars of our state.” The effect of such “restless idleness” is contagious, spreading “through the whole mass of society.”⁵² Already “the profligate of rank, [are] emasculated by hereditary effeminacy. . . .” The tendency can be reversed only in the way pointed to by Ferguson and heralded by Price in his 1789 peroration, welcoming the revolutions in America and France. “Such a glorious change,” wrote Wollstonecraft in 1790, toward the rational values signified by the word “manly,” can only be produced by greater liberty and by less inequality. Finally, and crucially, she states

⁴⁹ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 78, 16-17, 23, 24, 9, 56, 6, 4-5, 10-11, 28.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 103-4.

⁵¹ O’Gorman, *Burke*, 117-18; Brewer, “Rockingham, Burke and Whig Political Argument,” *The Historical Journal*, 18 (1975), 188-201; 198-201; Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 104.

⁵² Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 51-52. See, too, 96-97, 104-5.

in her first *Vindication* that the same effeminizing system, (isolating, pampering, and warping the childrearing of a group defined hereditarily) "has an equally pernicious effect on female morals."⁵³ *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was essentially the exposition of this embryonic point.

Before showing that to have been the case it is necessary to note another, related aspect of Wollstonecraft's intellectual tradition. To the list of factors Wollstonecraft brought to her exposition of true Whiggery's moral vision for women in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* must be added her serious engagement (as reader, fiction writer, and reviewer of fiction) with the literature of sensibility. In fact she first approached Burke as a "literary" figure and took him on as an aesthetic theoretician whose sensibility could not be detached from his party politics. She criticizes him throughout for affecting sensibility rather than being genuinely a man of feeling. This criticism was a convention of her age. Her language in reviewing the sentimental novel, *Julia de Gramont* in the July 1789 issue of Johnson's *Analytical Review*, is identical in tone to the one she would use in condemning the sentimental and infantile coquette, Burke, in the following year. It is with heavy irony that she suggests the novel's artifice resembles a translation of "one of the *sublime* French romances" (her emphasis). She challenges its notion of "*inborn sensibility*," just as she will challenge "inbred" sensibility in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, only in the latter case she attributes it directly to one of the cult's chief theoretical sources, Burke's *Enquiry*, because she is writing a political pamphlet. In another review, she urged the replacement of "the *cant* of sensibility" (her emphasis) by the criterion of reason, just as she wishes "sentimental jargon" to be replaced in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. One can see in the reviews she was writing immediately before that book the further growth of the argument that would culminate in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. "Why do [female writers] poison the minds of their own sex, by strengthening a male prejudice that makes women systematically weak? We allude to the absurd fashion that prevails of making the heroine of a novel boast of a delicate constitution. . . ."⁵⁴ In the second *Vindication* Wollstonecraft will make her most thoroughgoing criticism of "the reveries of stupid novelists who,

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 97, 16-17, 47.

⁵⁴ Wollstonecraft, review of *Julia de Gramont*, *Analytical Review*, 1 (1788). 334; Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 74 (and see 68); Wollstonecraft, review of *Edward and Harriet or the Happy Recovery: A Sentimental Novel*, *Analytical Review*, 1 (1788), 207; review of *A Simple Story* by Mrs. [Elizabeth] Inchbald, *Analytical Review*, 10 (1791), 102; for the still unsettled question of the attribution of Wollstonecraft's reviews, see Wardle, "Mary Wollstonecraft, *Analytical Reviewer*," *PMLA*, 62 (1947), 1000-9 and Derek Roper, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Reviews," *Notes and Queries* (Jan. 1958), 37-38.

knowing little of human nature, work up stale tales, and describe meretricious scenes all retained in a sentimental jargon."⁵⁵

One can see how Wollstonecraft's immersion in the literature of sensibility (a subject on which she had been and continued to be ambivalent⁵⁶) prepared her for a broadening of the "effeminacy" theme of Commonwealth thought. Other writers would also politicize the cult of sensibility much more directly in the 1790s, as part of the Jacobin—Anti-Jacobin debate. Jacobin novelists (of whom Wollstonecraft was one) were also heirs and heiresses of the Commonwealth tradition. They were accused by Anti-Jacobins of being led by Rousseau into over-cultivated sensibility and into revolution: indeed, the former led to the latter. But Jacobins, too, joined in criticizing the over-cultivation of sensibility in girls and women.⁵⁷ In her second *Vindication* Wollstonecraft united that Jacobin theme with its Commonwealth politics by way of the breakthrough she had made in the first *Vindication*, observing that half "the sex [women] in its present infantine state, would pine for a Lovelace. . . ."⁵⁸

Wollstonecraft begins *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* with the same, typically Commonwealth account of the falsely refined, idle, and unnatural rich, "weak artificial beings, raised above the common wants and affections of their race," which she gave in her first *Vindication*. They "spread corruption through the whole mass of society." The lower classes become "obsequious slaves." Wealth, she reiterates, has "enervated" men to the extent that "something more soft than women is sought for; till in Italy and Portugal, men attend the levees of equivocal beings, to sigh for more than female languor." In Burgh's version they turned to "sodomy." Wollstonecraft brings this traditional perspective to the lives of middle-class women, in fact, to "the whole female sex," who are acculturated into "the same condition as the rich, for they are born—I was speaking of a state of civilization with certain sexual privileges; and whilst they are gratuitously granted them, few will ever think of works of supererogation." It is women who, under the influence of an industrializing, consuming civilization, are now being required to

⁵⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 305.

⁵⁶ G. J. Barker-Benfield, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Depression and Diagnosis: the Relation between Sensibility and Women's Susceptibility to Nervous Disorders," *Psychohistory Review*, 13 (1985), 15-31.

⁵⁷ Barker-Benfield, "Approach and Avoidance: Women, the Cult of Sensibility and the Man of Feeling, 1790-1800." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Chicago, 1984; Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford, 1975); Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel* (Oxford, 1976). Jocelyn Harris (*Samuel Richardson* [New York, 1986]) has demonstrated that Samuel Richardson was a Commonwealthman in his political thought and that his novels are fraught with Commonwealth values. This is widely true of the literature of sensibility.

⁵⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 224.

perpetuate and spread “the seeds of false refinement, immorality, and vanity previously shed by the hereditarily great.”⁵⁹

Women, like rich, hereditarily defined men, are proscribed from work, from life, and corrupted by idleness and wealth. They are therefore susceptible “to enervating vices. . . .” It is those unnatural males’ unnatural demand “for more than female languor” that also leads to the exaggerated effeminization of women.

To satisfy this genus of men, women are more systematically voluptuous, and though they may not carry their libertinism to the same height, yet their heartless intercourse with the sex, which they allow themselves, depraves both sexes, because the taste of men is vitiated; and women, of all classes, naturally square their behavior to gratify the taste by which they obtain pleasure and power.⁶⁰

Men’s turning themselves into sodomites and catamites in pandering to power had shown women the way. Wollstonecraft goes on to suggest that the female equivalent of such an abrogation of manhood is the loss of motherhood—of republican motherhood as it were.

Women becoming, consequently, weaker, in mind and body, than they ought to be, were one of the grand ends of their being taken into account, that of bearing and nursing children, have not sufficient strength to discharge the first duty of a mother; and sacrificing to lasciviousness the parental affection that enables instinct, either destroy the embryo in the womb, or cast it off when born.

In sum the Commonwealthmen’s moral view of the ultimate degeneracy from the Harringtonian ideal of masculine civic consciousness is central to Wollstonecraft’s explanation for the degeneracy of women.⁶¹

We have seen that in the Commonwealth view the release of civic virtue and patriotism required a turning away from private preoccupations to politics. Wollstonecraft applies this to women, by showing them to be imprisoned in privacy, in contrast to men who “have various employments which engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind.” You men, she writes, “*force* all women, by denying them civil and political rights to remain immured in their families . . .” (her emphasis).⁶² In that famous 1789 sermon Price had warned that “we are

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 81, 141, 249; 147-48; 81.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 144, 249.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 144, 131, 87. This is a persistent theme. The emphasis in the following example alludes to Burke’s invidious view of women in his *Enquiry*, which she quoted in her previous book: “*littlenesses* would not degrade their character, if women were led to respect themselves, if political and moral subjects were opened to them . . .” (288). The passage goes on to “affirm” that such an opening would improve a woman’s “domestic duties.” Wollstonecraft wished to square an improvement of women’s lot on the basis of commonwealthman’s ideology—including its gender-shaped diagnosis of degeneracy—with the preservation of the commonwealthman’s definition of “masculine virtues.”

too apt to confine wisdom and virtue within the circle of our own acquaintance and party," including "our families."⁶³ Wollstonecraft has realized that if men have fallen off from civic virtue by their idleness, their preoccupation with "objects of sense," their refinement of feelings, and their abjuration of rights, in sum, by their effeminacy, how much more is that true of women, above all those novel-reading women, immersed in the cult of sensibility from womb to tomb? Thus, she writes, their "natural emotion" and "true dignity" are stifled, when such qualities "ought to sweeten the exercise of those severe duties, which educate a rational and mortal being for a nobler field of action." Women's effeminacy is the result of "prescription" just as privileged men's effeminacy is the result of the principle of heredity. In her view women's feebleness "arises less from nature than from education."⁶⁴

Wollstonecraft's solutions in this book are inspired by the Commonwealth tradition. "How can a being be virtuous if not free?" She can be virtuous only "if freedom strengthens her reason till she comprehends her duty." Her duty includes the rearing of children inculcated with notions of civic virtue and patriotism. The book's "patriotic" note draws from the earlier tradition and it continues into a widespread, ideological view of childrearing, that "republican motherhood" described by historians Mary Beth Norton, Linda Kerber, and Jane Rendall.⁶⁵

But beyond motherhood, Wollstonecraft insists on women's economic "independence," "supporting themselves by their own industry." The cluster of values one can detect here and in her thoroughly Protestant emphasis on self-improvement for one's life-to-come focuses on the parable of the talents, which she quotes. If Pocock sees a link between the vision this parable embodies and the emergence of male civic consciousness, we can see how it would be linked to a new female consciousness. In sum, one finds throughout *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* a corollary of liberty for self-improvement that we saw in Ferguson's *History*, but now it is applied to women as well as men. "Happy is it when people have the cares of life to struggle with, for these struggles prevent their becoming a prey to enervating vices. . . ."⁶⁶

Wollstonecraft asks her audience, if "the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of woman, by parity of reasoning will not shrink from the same test. . . ."⁶⁷ Explicitly recognizing the arbitrariness of characterizing "talents and virtues" as "masculine" and

⁶³ Price, "Discourse," 7. 8.

⁶⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 81-82; 126 n. 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 259, 86-87; Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston, 1980); Kerber, *Women of the Republic*; Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France, and the United States* (Basingstoke, U.K., 1985), ch. 2.

⁶⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 261, 262, 139, 144.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

“manly” in the context of a debate over the rights of man, Wollstonecraft, vindicating the same rights for woman, declares that men who call women “masculine” are inveighing,

against the imitation of manly virtues, or more properly, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raises females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind, all those who view them with a philosophic eye must, I should think, wish with me, that they may every day grow more masculine.⁶⁸

That masculine standard is upheld in the Commonwealth tradition, as we have seen, by the middle class. “Abilities and virtues are absolutely necessary to raise men from the middle rank of life into notice, and the natural consequence is notorious—the middle rank contains the most virtue and abilities.” Necessity stimulates improvement, including virtue: “Men have thus, in one station, at least, an opportunity of exerting themselves with dignity, and of rising by the exertions which really improve a rational creature. . . .” Women, she infers, should be exposed to such necessities too.⁶⁹ It is the application of this value that leads Wollstonecraft to introduce her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by addressing “my sex . . . in the middle class because they appear in the most natural state.”⁷⁰

We have seen that Commonwealthmen urged men to move out from the preoccupations of private life “to the higher engagements of public life,” the “release of personal virtue through civic participation.” It is in accordance with that principle that Wollstonecraft proposes women break out of their domestic “immuring,” their preoccupation with sensual triflings, and the psychological and physical *sequelae*, including the “delicacy,” “refinement,” “leisure,” “sensibility,” “weakness,” “folly,” “sickly fancy,” “enfeebled mind,” and “affectation of languor,” all of which Ferguson saw in feminized males. Such language permeates Wollstonecraft’s second *Vindication*, assimilated therein to her criticism of women’s acculturation into over-developed sensibility. This was in an England where, she writes, an obsession with “shopping,” fashions, and emulation marked a new level of refined civilization among middle-class

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 80; see, too, 288. These passages may also be read as part of the lengthy eighteenth-century debate in England and its American colonies over the definition of manhood. Wollstonecraft’s contrasting definition here includes “ardour in hunting, shooting and gambling” (80), which should be compared to Burgh’s slighting those upper-class men who prefer “a cock-match, a horse-race, the preservation of the game, or the preservation of the court-places.” Quoted in Hay, *Burgh*, 24. Directly relevant is Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982).

⁶⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 147-48. Compare Priestley, *Memoirs*, 49.

⁷⁰ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 81.

women, of easeful, materialist culture. It is precisely the view that is characteristic of eighteenth-century, Commonwealth jeremiads.⁷¹

The alternative to this way of life, Wollstonecraft says, is for woman to be "an active citizen . . . discharge her civil duties," as well as those of a wife and mother. Thus free, she can exhibit virtue. To this end, women "ought to study politics, and thereby settle their benevolence on the broadest basis." Arguing the traditional case for women's education, that women have souls just as men do, Wollstonecraft also develops the Protestant notion of improvement in the typical language of Rational Dissent, "the perfectibility of human reason," the forming "of a being advancing gradually towards perfection . . ."; and she quotes Anna Laetitia Barbauld to make this point. This also illustrates that Puritan element in the origins of civic consciousness, picked out by Pocock, a "millennial expectation serv[ing] as a framework in which to present schemes of rational optimism and rational explanation. . . ." One finds this typical view in Burgh's *Thoughts on Education*.⁷²

It is only by realizing that Wollstonecraft's intention in her most well-known and revolutionary book is to extend the political values of the eighteenth-century Commonwealthman to woman that one can appreciate the value of her consideration of a "standing army." Based upon the Burghian effeminacy argument, Wollstonecraft's analogy between such soldiers' idle lives and that of women is her own. Secondly, like her Commonwealthmen colleagues, Wollstonecraft distinguishes between, on the one hand, the dynastic wars of greedy, overweening princes and corrupt, imperialistic governments and, on the other, wars necessary for defense. But it is consistent with her understanding of those virtues arbitrarily termed "masculine" that in such a "justifiable war" where "virtue can show its face and ripen amidst the rigours which purify the air on the mountain's top . . . the true heroism of antiquity might again animate female bosoms." Such invocations of ancient virtue was a commonplace of Commonwealth thinking. One may interpret Wollstonecraft here to be reaching back to the civic consciousness men had claimed as a *populo armato*. Women, she suggests, should have "the power to take the field and march and counter march like soldiers or wrangle in the senate to keep their faculties from rusting."⁷³

Wollstonecraft's account of the corruption of British politics ("multiplying dependents and contriving taxes which grind the poor to pamper the rich"), using a war as "a lucky turn-up of patronage for the minister, whose chief merit is keeping himself in place," must also be explained as her self-conscious adherence to this reform tradition. So too is the

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 260, 170.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 259, 261, 141, 143; Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 404; Burgh, *Thoughts on Education*, 11.

⁷³ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 97, 105-6; 258-60.

context within which she frames her "hint . . . that women ought to have representatives" in Parliament, "instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government." She laments "that women of a superior cast have not a road open by which they can pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence."⁷⁴ The body of thought she drew from, itself radicalized under the impact of the defeat of the Parliamentary campaign on behalf of the political rights of Dissenters and the French Revolution, was the true Whig, Pricean assault on the unrepresentative distribution of Parliamentary seats and franchise. Wollstonecraft writes:

But as the whole system of representation is now, in this country, only a convenient handle for despotism, they [women] need not complain, for they are as well represented as a numerous class of hard-working mechanics, who pay for the support of royalty when they can scarcely stop their children's mouths with bread.⁷⁵

Wollstonecraft's unmistakable call for a standard of political virtue common to both sexes was lost in the 1790s. Propertyless men came to claim citizenship on the basis simply of their physiology: Sheffield petitioners to Parliament in 1793 argued "though they may not be free holders, they *are men*, and do not consider themselves fairly used in being excluded from the rights of citizens" (emphasis in original).⁷⁶ By then this had been part of Commonwealth thought for twenty years. It seems clear that women's writings of all kinds, private correspondence through novels, as well as the pamphlets I have mentioned, together with a host of other political activities, from the salons to the streets, can be considered part of the "alternative structure of politics" under the eighteenth-century condition that the great mass of people were unenfranchised. But at the crucial, tavern level of this alternative structure, the culture was powerfully, self-consciously male, responding *en masse* to the insistently dramatized sexual style of Wilkes, a "belligerent scourge," "a wit, a rake and a man of extraordinary boldness," a member of the Hell-Fire Club and author of *The Essay on Woman*.⁷⁷ In Wollstonecraft's

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 259-60, and see *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 43. Fox may have been referring to these passages in a 1797 Parliamentary speech. See Karl von den Steinen, "The Discovery of Women in Eighteenth-Century Political Life," Barbara Kanner, ed., *The Women of England, From Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present: Interpretive Bibliographical Essays* (Hamden, Conn., 1979), 229-58; 242.

⁷⁵ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 260.

⁷⁶ The Sheffield petitioners quoted in Cone, "English Reform Ideas During the French Revolution," *Social Science Quarterly*, 27 (1946-47), 368-84; 380; for their political circumstances, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (New York, 1963) 149-52.

⁷⁷ Brewer, "Commercialization of Politics"; Barker-Benfield, "Approach and Avoidance." For the appeal of Wilkes's sexual style, see Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), 171 and ch. 9. *passim*.

conception Wilkes, and, presumably, his followers, “were always men in company of women,” when she would have it that both sexes be capable of laying aside sexuality, as it were, “excepting with a lover,” in order to be “agreeable and rational companions.”⁷⁸

Price, Burgh, and other Dissenters wished to separate reform from Wilkes’s or Fox’s style of masculinity. Of course, however modified their alternative style, it did not encompass the single standard of behavior and psychology (let alone politics) which Wollstonecraft came to envisage, any more than the archetypal Rousseau did. Thus Price addressed his “brethren” reformers, when he took up this issue in his famous 1789 “Discourse”:

brethren, while we shew our patriotic zeal, let us take care not to disgrace the cause of patriotism, by any licentious or immoral conduct—Oh! how earnestly do I wish that all who profess zeal in this cause, were as distinguished by the purity of their morals, as some of them were by their abilities. . . . Oh that I could see in men who oppose tyranny in the state, a disdain of low passions in themselves.⁷⁹

Price’s own personal style, unaffected, self-effacing, patient, paradoxically well-known for its “candour,” “meekness,” “benevolence,” “kindness,” “sincerity” and “simplicity”—Hester Chapone represented him as “Simplicius”—was in keeping with the kind of manhood advocated in the literature of sensibility as the “man of feeling,” a rebuke to the hard rake epitomized by Lovelace as well as Wilkes.⁸⁰ One can see the connection between that last sentence of Price’s, inferring the tyranny of low passions in men, and Wollstonecraft’s extension of its value to men’s relations with women. “Let not men, in the pride of power [over women], use the same arguments that tyrannic kings and venal ministers have used. . . .”⁸¹

That line of Wollstonecraft’s recalls Abigail Adams’s famous adjuration to her husband in 1776: “Remember all Men would be Tyrants if they could.” John Adams and American revolutionaries generally were saturated in Commonwealth thought, and so too were their womenfolk. It is not surprising that one can detect the application of Commonwealth

⁷⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 230 n. 99.

⁷⁹ Price, “Discourse,” 35-36; for the general point see Hay, *Burgh*, 36.

⁸⁰ Priestley, “A Discourse on the Occasion of the Death of Dr. Price”; Hester Chapone, “On Affectation and Simplicity,” *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (London, 1787), 20-23 (the relevant section is printed in Cone, *Torchbearer*, 57-58). See, too, Wollstonecraft’s description in *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 34-36, where she depicts Price as a saint, to be “reverenced,” his “hands clasped, and eyes devoutly fixed, praying with all the simple energy of unaffected piety. . . .”

⁸¹ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 132.

ideology to gender relations in the letters of such American women.⁸² (Indeed the application of seventeenth-century natural rights theory to the relations of husbands and wives goes back at least to Mary Astell's *Some Reflections upon Marriage* of 1700, although she was a High Tory. She derived it from John Locke.⁸³) And the greatest of female "Commonwealthmen," the transatlantic Catherine Sawbridge Macaulay, grasped the potential of that tradition for women in her last book, *Letters on Education*, published the same year as Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Men*. She did so with precisely the same argument that Wollstonecraft used, although it was far briefer than that of her younger contemporary and buried within a book devoted to other things.⁸⁴ In any case, on both sides of the Atlantic, "republican motherhood" came to be the counterpart of republican politics (as Burgh, typically, had believed it should be). Women, by definition and by prescription, remained locked in their particular sphere and identified with the home. The movement of middle-class women outward into civic life would be on that basis. Such a counterpart must be seen as one element in Wollstonecraft's thinking. Her broader attack on the belief that women were too weak physically and psychologically to sustain the world's full challenge was defeated for now but not forever.

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⁸² Lyman Butterfield (ed.), *Adams Family Correspondence* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), I, 370; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 225-27, 242, 270; Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York, 1986), 92, 94; Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority* (New York, 1982), ch. 5.

⁸³ Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage, occasion'd by the Duke and Dutchess of Mazarine's case; which is also considered With Additions* (New York, 1970 [1700]); Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago, 1986), ch. 6.

⁸⁴ Macaulay, *Letters on Education: with Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (New York, 1974 [1790]), 24-5, 49, 48, 61, 221. Intriguingly, John Wesley and James Otis also detected that Price's and the Commonwealthman argument (respectively) for political rights for men could be extended to women. Wesley, *Some Observations of Liberty Occasioned by a Late Tract*, "Appendix Three to Peace," *Price . . . Selections*, 245-52; Otis quoted Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 30-31.