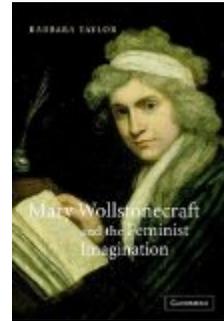


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The Making of Feminist Heroines

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The making of feminist heroines is tricky business. To be heroic, the woman must prove exceptional for her time, in many ways more advanced than her female contemporaries. Yet to be a feminist heroine, she must continue to view her own destiny as intimately, even inextricably, linked to the fates of those same contemporaries. In other words, even as she charts out a path that implicitly critiques the choices of her female peers, she cannot look down on them or even openly distinguish her own fate from theirs. Within this paradox of feminist historiography, Mary Wollstonecraft, for many the founding mother of modern feminism, has never fared well. Wollstonecraft was not one to guard her feelings, and when confronted with the indignities of gender inequity, could lash out—quite literally—at her sisters, Everina and Eliza, in her personal letters, and more philosophically at the broader “sisterhood” of women, when she made the case for women’s full enfranchisement in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by attacking the intellectual weaknesses of women when denied the right to reason. Thus, her biographers often come away from her letters disappointed by the tenor of her personal comments, and critics, although united in finding her work significant, remain divided about the value of her contribution. This tension in Wollstonecraft criticism came to a head with Susan Gubar’s claim in 1994 that not only did Wollstonecraft reproduce the male misogyny of her period in *Vindication*, but also that she gave birth to a rhetorical tradition of “feminist misogyny” that continues in femi-

nism even today.[1]

The extraordinary power of Barbara Taylor’s *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* lies in its willingness to address unflinchingly this tension in Wollstonecraft scholarship, and to do so by embracing the paradoxes in Wollstonecraft’s work and reception. No one writes of Wollstonecraft without noting the often contradictory nature of her writings, but Taylor provides a detailed historical context that saves Wollstonecraft from accusations of inconsistency, and instead reveals how much she was of her time, how like in temperament and ideology to her social and political cohort, yet still how exceptional her ability to wrest from these paradoxes of revolutionary period the founding tenets of modern feminism.

The first half of Taylor’s book, entitled “Imagining Women,” wrestles with the “chimera of womanhood” that haunted both Wollstonecraft’s period and her early work. As Taylor notes, “criticism of female manners was so prolific in the second half of the eighteenth century as to form an entire sub-genre of prescriptive literature” (p. 56), and *Vindication*—with its emphasis on “women’s duties” rather than on their rights—fits squarely within that tradition. Wollstonecraft may have chosen a rather standard object of attack in this work, the spoiled upper-class lady—Taylor concedes—yet the effect of this work was no less radical. For what Wollstonecraft ultimately argued for in *Vindication*, as well as in her personal writings, was an “authenticity of self,” a concept “sharply at odds with

the masquerades of femininity” (p. 33).

This commitment, as well as her deep egalitarianism, could also get Wollstonecraft into a few intellectual quagmires. For example, in her argument with Edmund Burke in *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790), Wollstonecraft asserts that he, in effect, masquerades as feminine, indulging in both empty rhetorical flourish and high-flown “romantic excess” (p. 67). A fairly standard criticism of political conservatism during the period—again Taylor concedes—yet in Wollstonecraft’s hands it proves at once more problematic and more promising. It allows Wollstonecraft “to take to herself a position of rhetorical masculinity” yet “[e]untouched the division between female fancifulness and masculine rationalism” (p. 67). This conclusion is not particularly novel in Wollstonecraft criticism, but what distinguishes Taylor’s reading is how firmly she makes the case that Wollstonecraft must work within the terms of her period, and how its shifting rhetorical flourishes made for unexpected alliances. Indeed, she follows this discussion of Burke with a stunning reading of Rousseau, that makes of him not Wollstonecraft’s adversary as he is usually represented, but rather her near soul mate. For both, woman functioned as a chimera, a symbol of “duplicity and dependence” (p. 84), but it was Wollstonecraft who ultimately argued for the radical contingency of that ideal.

Within this mesh of paradox, Taylor offers up one stabilizing truth: Wollstonecraft was guided by religion. Taylor makes Wollstonecraft’s faith—long considered of little interest by Wollstonecraft’s scholars—the cornerstone of her own reading: “If Wollstonecraft’s faith becomes a dead letter to us, then so does much of her feminism, so closely are they harnessed together” (p. 94). Indeed, Taylor argues, it is Wollstonecraft’s grounding in the tradition of Rational Dissent that allowed her to posit women’s perfectibility and to affirm woman’s aspirations toward reason, and not simply reiterate the gendered tensions of her period. Moreover, it became the mechanism by which she reclaimed her own ardor, the eros of her own philosophical imagination. For it was through women’s “amatory identification with God”—a concept derived from the Christian Platonic tradition—that they could transcend these tensions and find their own “female moral subjectivity” (p. 129). Thus, within Taylor’s reading, even this “truth” of Wollstonecraft becomes its own paradox—the spirit becomes Wollstonecraft’s way of reinvesting in the value of the body, and Taylor herself offers an ingenious solution to the current critical con-

flict over whether Wollstonecraft embraces or rejects the sensual.

In the second half of the book, entitled “Feminism and Revolution,” Taylor turns to Wollstonecraft’s career post-*Vindication* and continues to make the case for how Wollstonecraft both worked within the paradoxes of her period and forged new intellectual terrain. More specifically, she looks at British Radicalism and the intellectual fissures within its ideology that both inspired a wave of “gallic philosophesses”—the title of the section’s third chapter—yet left Wollstonecraft the lone progenitor of a modern feminism. With Gubar’s claim of “feminist misogyny” vaguely in the distance, Taylor points to the self-sufficient figure of Maria in Wollstonecraft’s final novel, *The Wrongs of Woman*, and the image of female solidarity that emerges with this character’s expected alliance with the lower-class Jemima as heralding the birth of modern feminism.

Indeed, my only quibble with this extraordinary book is that it remains unduly haunted by Gubar’s accusation. This work, through its nuanced, contextual readings of Wollstonecraft’s writings, proves emphatically Wollstonecraft’s growth as a writer, and even more importantly as a human being. Yet Taylor’s own narrative returns elliptically to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as though Wollstonecraft’s own development as a writer remained stunted by this early foray into resolving, or at least exploiting, the gendered tensions of her period. Rather, as Taylor’s book makes generously clear, it is our own readings of Wollstonecraft that have remained stunted, up to now unable to recognize fully how much she was of her time, and how R/radical she remains in our own. What Taylor gives us is not only a highly insightful reading of Wollstonecraft, but also an exemplary piece of feminist scholarship. Rigorous in its reasoned use of historical detail, compassionate in its psychological framing, it fuses together the reason and feeling so central to Wollstonecraft’s own philosophy of full moral subjectivity, and in the process creates the kind of critical analysis that can put to rest Gubar’s concerns that feminist scholarship must repeat the divisive tensions of its past.

Note

[1]. Susan Gubar, “Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of ‘It Takes One to Know One,’” *Feminist Studies* 20 (1994): pp. 452-473.

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