
A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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LOS ANGELES, CA

MARCH 21, 2014
ABSTRACT


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My senior thesis examines Mary Wollstonecraft’s trajectory of thinking from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) to Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman (1798) to investigate how her notions of heroism and sensibility influence her feminist politics. I contend that Wollstonecraft gradually comes to recognize the double potential of sensibility to either subjugate or empower women, and that she redefines sensibility as a social and heroic virtue in her later works. Wollstonecraft’s reconstruction of sensibility and the figure of the sentimental heroine allows her to create a positive model of femininity, with which she hoped to inspire her female readers to work towards political, legal, and social reform. Investigating Wollstonecraft’s feminist politics, as they operated under the conventions of eighteenth-century British society, leads us to a fuller understanding of the progress and shortcomings of the feminist movement within the past few decades.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my thesis advisor, Professor Mitchum Huehls. Thank you for constantly asking questions that challenged and expanded my thinking. You were incredibly supportive and responded with great patience to my panicked emails; I really appreciate your guidance. In addition, I would like to thank Professor Karen Cunningham for providing me with much-needed moral support and encouragement, as well as getting me started on researching this project way back in our spring quarter seminar class. Finally, thank you to my fellow thesis writers and my friends, especially Amy Ngo, Charlotte Rose, Hannah Jones, Jessica Yang, and Stacey Shin. Without your support, I would have found writing this thesis a much more miserable and difficult process.
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Introduction

Many second-wave feminists regarded Mary Wollstonecraft as a heroine, whose insights spoke particularly to their contemporary concerns. Second-wave feminism focused on the notion that “the personal is political,” rejecting the “ideological division of public and private spheres that dismissed women’s claims of injustice as merely personal” (Freedman 87). Male power structures had a deep influence on women’s personal lives, and second-wave feminists formed consciousness-raising groups to discuss how patriarchal oppression manifested in their everyday lives; they recognized that power “[operates] within and through personal relations” (Freedman 87). Wollstonecraft’s writings demonstrate a similar awareness of this concept, nearly two hundred years before second-wave feminism adopted “the personal is political” as a slogan. Yet Wollstonecraft can also be seen as symptomatizing the problems of second-wave feminism. Both she and second-wave feminists largely focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women, resulting in the creation of an exclusive feminism.

Critics of second-wave feminism pointed out that the feminist movement would never fully achieve solidarity between women if it neglected the perspectives of women who lacked access to social privilege, and if it ignored calls for understanding intersectional experiences. Kimberle Crenshaw has observed “the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed,” since women belonging to multiple socially marginalized groups suffer from overlapping types of oppression (1245). Barbara Smith, insisting on the necessity of discussing racism with white feminists, explained, “The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women” (96). Yet other women of color

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1 It was starting in the 1960s that Wollstonecraft studies began in earnest (Kaplan 252).
responded to their exclusion from “a theory that elevated gender at the expense of race or class identity” by establishing groups separate from the women’s movement of the 1970s (Freedman 89). They sought “a redefinition of identity politics,” hoping to create for themselves a feminism that would accept and include all their identities (Freedman 90).

Third-wave feminism thus emerged due to the perceived shortcomings of second-wave feminism. Contemporary feminism has split into several different branches as a result of third-wave feminists recognizing the complexity of identities, and seeking to include the perspectives of all women—“women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women—as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women” (Smith 96). In contrast to second-wave feminists, third-wave feminists focus on intersectionality, and do not assume that all women experience the same oppression. Yet there are also third-wave feminists such as Donna Haraway, who argue that identity politics remains a problem in feminism and that feminism must extend equality to include all genders, races, sexualities, and so forth. According to Haraway, feminists can accomplish this inclusiveness through emphasizing “affinity, not identity” (155).

Investigating Wollstonecraft’s works reveals the constraints of a feminism rooted in politics of identity. Wollstonecraft’s insistence on maintaining a class-based hierarchy between

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2 “Feminism,” as it is used in this thesis, draws on Virginia Sapiro’s definition in *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Sapiro rightly points out that this term is “best understood as a product of the early twentieth century,” and emphasizes the dangers of using such a term in relation to the eighteenth century, where no feminist movement existed (259). Sapiro assigns “feminism” a set of properties, prominent among them “opposition to [and awareness of] gender hierarchy” (259), as well as “the perception of women as a social group not just on the basis of denigrating treatment because of sex, but also as a group needing collective action to achieve change” (259).
women prevents her from fully exploring the progressive potential of a redefined sensibility. Her reconstruction of sensibility emphasizes “other-oriented fellow feeling,” and she portrays sensibility as pivotal to triggering political consciousness, engendering solidarity between women, and inspiring resistance against the institutions that enforce male dominance (Nyquist 78). Although Wollstonecraft, like many second-wave feminists, did not understand the need for a more inclusive feminism, her notion of sensibility points to the kind of affinity that modern feminists should cultivate to move beyond identity politics.

What exactly is sensibility? During the eighteenth century, the term “sensibility” came to hold a wide variety of occasionally overlapping meanings in fields ranging from philosophy to medicine. For the purposes of this thesis, I will confine my discussion of sensibility specifically to literary sensibility, which referred to “the faculty of feeling,” or “the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering” (Todd, Sensibility 7).

Sensibility gained popularity in the eighteenth century largely as a result of “the campaign for the reformation of manners” which accompanied Britain’s transformation into a consumer society (Barker-Benfield 215). Historian G.J. Barker-Benfield claims that a “culture of sensibility” arose in the eighteenth century, coinciding with the rise of humanitarianism (225). The culture of sensibility sought to liberate women “from their internalized and brutally enforced limitations” and to reform the manners of men, teaching men politeness and how to treat women more humanely (Barker-Benfield 225). At the same time, to those worried about their culture’s increasing promotion of the self and self-interest, sensibility seemed an “ideal moral antidote” (Novak and Mellor 14). Sensibility also appealed particularly to the middle class, since it fulfilled the “middle-class need for a code of manners which challenged aristocratic ideals and
fashions” (Langford 461). The sentimental man or sentimental woman needed neither land nor rank to prove his or her sensibility.

Notably, sensibility was culturally identified as feminine, viewed as “a distinctly feminine field of knowledge…particularly associated with the behavior and experience of women” (Ellis 24). It thus possessed the double potential to either empower or subjugate women. At its inception, sensibility leaned towards the former, promising new and improved relations for men and women. As J.M.S. Tompkins points out, the “cult of sensibility” initially seemed to give “some measure of approximation in the ethical ideals and emotional sensitiveness of the two sexes” (148). It was also generally acknowledged that women possessed superior sensibility to men, since it was believed that women’s nerves were finer and more delicate than men’s (Barker-Benfield 16). Women’s superior sensibility allowed them to claim moral superiority over men to some extent, since it endowed them with “a greater capacity for more refined feelings (whether emotional, aesthetic, or moral) and for spirituality” (Novak and Mellor 15).

However, sensibility also associated women with passivity, susceptibility, and even derangement, reinforcing men’s perception of women as the weaker sex. According to popular belief, women’s greater sensibility rendered them more vulnerable to the imbalance of passions that led to insanity. An instance of this can be seen in Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771), a sentimental novel published at the height of sensibility’s popularity during the eighteenth century. When the protagonist Harley encounters a madwoman in Bedlam, he learns from the madhouse keeper that “what between her despair at the death of [her lover] and her aversion to [her arranged marriage], the poor young lady was reduced to the condition you see her in” (26). The use of passive voice portrays “despair” and “aversion” as external forces acting
on the “poor young lady,” emphasizing her lack of control over her emotions; the explanation suggests that the madwoman’s inability to moderate her sensibility led to her derangement.

Sensibility thus reinforced, not subverted, the hierarchal relationship between the two sexes by gendering the realm of emotion and unreason as feminine. The threat of madness remained confined specifically to women of feeling. Men of feeling, such as Harley, remained impervious to the threat of madness due to their “masculine firmness of character” (Barker-Benfield 218). Somewhat paradoxically, men claimed that women’s superior sensibility evinced their overall inferiority, since “excess exhibition of feeling demonstrated weakness of character” (Conger 15).

Yet despite men’s immunity to the more dangerous aspects of excessive sensibility, the culture of sensibility threatened to blur the line between manliness and effeminacy. Manhood was “traditionally bound up with classical and warrior ideals” (Barker-Benfield 104), but sensibility encouraged men to “engage in and display behaviors classically associated with women: fainting, weeping, blushing, being overpowered by feeling” (Johnson, *Equivocal* 14). Sensibility thus prompted new ways of perceiving and thinking about gender, and “eighteenth-century fiction in general propagated a ‘new ideology of femininity’ and of masculinity” (Barker-Benfield 215).

While the primary aim of a sentimental novel was to teach “its consumers to produce a response equivalent to the one presented in its episodes,” sentimental literature also served as a

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3 Depictions of women deranged by their excessive sensibility were common in eighteenth-century sentimental novels. The specter of madness has lurked behind female sensibility since the creation of one of the first sentimental heroines, Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa Harlowe, who, immediately following her rape, can write only in incoherent fragments.
medium for writers to construct or advocate certain models of femininity and masculinity (Todd, *Sensibility* 4). For example, Samuel Richardson sought through his novels to instruct female readers on the necessity of cultivating a chaste and virtuous femininity. *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa, or, the History of A Young Lady* (1748) popularized the plot of “the chaste suffering woman, happily rewarded in marriage or elevated into redemptive death” (Todd, *Sensibility* 4). In *Clarissa*, the sentimental heroine attempts to maintain her virtue in a world determined to deprive her of it. Clarissa struggles against not only the designs of her family, who wish her to enter a loveless marriage in exchange for increased wealth, but also the devious and predatory rake Lovelace. Lovelace succeeds in raping Clarissa, but she dies shortly after, leaving him heartbroken and remorseful. In the preface to *Clarissa*, Richardson makes explicit his intention of creating Clarissa as a model for his female readers, explaining earnestly, “In the Letters of the two young Ladies [Clarissa and Anna], it is presumed will be found…such Delicacy of Sentiments…as are strongly to be recommended to the observation of the younger part (more especially) of Female Readers. The principal of these two young Ladies is proposed as an Exemplar to her Sex” (29).

Women writers recognized that sensibility offered expanded possibilities for women. They wanted their own sentimental heroines to possess Clarissa’s “social power,” but unsurprisingly, also wanted to avoid the rape and death preceding the attainment of that power (Todd, *Sensibility* 113). Hannah More, “the most influential woman living in England in Wollstonecraft’s day” (Mellor, “Woman Writers” 147), also sought to redefine sensibility to her own ends, and depicted sensibility as a positive trait for women (Novak and Mellor 17). More argues in her poem “Slavery” for the abolishment of slavery on the basis of sensibility: “Tho’ few can reason, all mankind can feel” (150). Feeling, rather than reason, defines humanity. She
reverses the positions of the slaves and slave traders by portraying the latter as more unfeeling, and thus as the actual “savage[s]” deserving cruel treatment (211). More also appeals to the reader through employing the conventions of sentimental literature, portraying in her poem heartrending scenes such as the following: “See the dire victim torn from social life / The shrieking babe, the agonizing wife!” (99-100). More relies on this description of the “babe” and “wife” to conjure feelings of protectiveness, tenderness, and most importantly, sympathy for the slaves; the verb “torn” emphasizes the violence and horror of the separation. In her poem, More suggests that sensibility involves moral work that alleviates the distress of marginalized social groups, and that sensibility can lead to the reformation of society as a whole.

Wollstonecraft similarly turns towards portraying sensibility as a positive attribute in her later works. Initially, however, Wollstonecraft condemns sensibility in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), presenting it as the reason for men’s current effeminacy, and by extension, the cause of all societal ills. Along with decrying sensibility in her polemical text, Wollstonecraft castigates women of sensibility with a harshness that many literary critics have picked up on. Claudia L. Johnson argues that Wollstonecraft deliberately adopts a “querulous, sarcastic, and dour” *masculine* voice, seeking to promote republican manhood (*Equivocal* 23). Yet Mary Poovey has argued that Wollstonecraft’s disassociation from other women results from distrust of her own sexuality, and that Wollstonecraft “aspires not to a masculine voice but to a voice totally unconscious of sexuality” (82). In contrast to both Johnson and Poovey, Gary Kelly argues that Wollstonecraft “avoids an objective, detached, learned, syllogistic or sarcastic and sharply polemical style that could be considered as that which a man would use,” and instead speaks as a woman to demonstrate that women can also reach “full moral, intellectual, social and civic being” (108).
I concur with Johnson’s assertion that Wollstonecraft primarily focuses on conceptualizing manhood in *Rights of Woman*, and speaks to her readers as a man. Yet unlike Johnson, I locate the masculinity that Wollstonecraft champions not in the Commonwealth tradition of English republicanism, but in her notion of “heroic masculinity.” My thesis argues that Wollstonecraft exemplifies and promotes in *Rights of Woman* a masculinity centered on strength of mind and virtue. *Rights of Woman* revolves around this vision of a reformed and virtuous masculinity, while markedly devoid of any positive depictions of femininity; underlying the discourse of *Rights of Woman* is the assumption that only men can effectively bring about political and social change.

However, Wollstonecraft’s later works suggest disillusionment with heroic manhood. In these works, Wollstonecraft moves towards redefining sensibility as a social and heroic female virtue. This redefinition allows for the development of a positive model of female subjectivity, which Wollstonecraft achieves through reconstructing the figure of the sentimental heroine. She disregards the model of sentimental heroinism recommended by conventional sentimental novels, such as Richardson’s *Clarissa*, and instead portrays the sentimental heroine as possessing fortitude as well as sensibility. According to Wollstonecraft, the sentimental heroine harnesses her sensibility to try and bring about large-scale political and social reform.

Read together, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and *Maria, or: The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) illustrate Wollstonecraft’s gradual shift towards a feminist politics that welcomes rather than disdains femininity—a shift enabled by reconstructing sensibility as a positive and empowering attribute for women. However, Wollstonecraft’s model of feminist politics falls short of grasping the need for collective political action and for welcoming all women. It demonstrates the same blindness that characterized second-wave feminism—a
blindness that threatens to reproduce oppressive power dynamics and erase the narratives of women who lack access to race and class privilege. While Wollstonecraft remained unable to envision the full implications of her revised notion of sensibility, her writing offers us the insight that what should unite us is neither common identities nor experiences, but instead, affinity based on the common commitment to opposing oppression in all its forms.

In light of the progress made by second-wave and third-wave feminists, it would be easy to dismiss Wollstonecraft’s works as outdated and of no use. Yet Wollstonecraft touches on the very tensions that continue to persist in modern feminism, and her writing remains useful in examining the limits of a feminism based on identity politics. Since writing Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft’s voice has resonated with generations of feminists, and as Virginia Woolf has noted, Wollstonecraft has achieved a kind of immortality with us: Wollstonecraft is “alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living” (176).

*Rights of Woman: Heroic Manhood and Sensibility as the Culprit of Effeminacy*

Wollstonecraft was an early advocate of “liberal feminism,” which asserts that no essential difference exists between men and women. Rights of Woman rests heavily on the conception of sameness between the sexes, basing the thrust of its argument on the premise that “females are in all the most important aspects the same as males, possessing the same souls, the same mental capacities, and thus the same human rights” (Mellor, “The Rights of Woman” 141). In the introduction to Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft states, “The first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex ” (25-6). She promotes the importance of the shared humanity of men and women over their sexual
difference from one another, arguing that women should not be denied achieving the same
standard of virtue merely on the basis of their sex.

However, Wollstonecraft does not argue for the complete abolishment of sexual
differences in contexts outside of pursuing virtue. Describing her vision of the ideal couple,
Wollstonecraft explains that the wife and husband are “equally necessary and independent of
each other, because each fulfilled the respective duties of their station” (173). That is to say, each
sex has a separate duty to carry out. Rather than encouraging an inversion of the current social
order, Wollstonecraft accepts that social cohesion depends on a gendered division of duties as
well as stable and distinction conceptions of gender. What she primarily objects to is
contemporary conventional definitions of gender, which she believes prevent men and women
from becoming truly virtuous; Wollstonecraft thus attempts to redefine masculinity and
femininity in her writing.

Yet Rights of Woman focuses more on promoting Wollstonecraft’s notion of ideal
masculinity than on fully exploring the possibilities of “a positive discourse of femininity”
(Johnson, Equivocal 24). At this point in her literary and feminist career, Wollstonecraft remains
unable to consider women as capable of becoming the instigators of change, much less “a group
capable of achieving solidarity” (Poovey 79). This inability largely stems from the simple fact
that no feminist movement existed in “politics or intellectual life in her time” (Sapiro 279).
Rights of Woman ultimately pins its hopes on men to carry out the revolution of female manners
and education that Wollstonecraft calls for, revealing Wollstonecraft’s faith in reformed
masculinity to overthrow patriarchal power structures. As such, she chooses to primarily address
her male readers, though Rights of Woman can and has been read as an educational tract for
women as well.
Critic Mitzi Myers insightfully observes that in Wollstonecraft’s literary reviews, she adopts “a critical persona, who engenders an alternative selfhood while educating her audience,” and that she embodies in her writing “the ideal she would teach” (134). I would like to apply Myers’s argument to *Rights of Woman*, although I assert that Wollstonecraft takes on here not the persona of a “firm, wise mother,” but instead, that of a virtuous, courageous hero (126). Wollstonecraft uses this critical persona to instruct her audience on an alternative model of manhood, championing a “heroic masculinity” characterized by strength of mind and virtue. Through her heroic male persona, Wollstonecraft seeks to at once inspire and shame her male readers into becoming heroic men themselves, who will then understand that they must improve women’s current legal circumstances to create a more virtuous and enlightened society overall. Unfortunately, as I will discuss later in my thesis, Wollstonecraft’s discourse in *Rights of Woman* ultimately reinforces instead of subverts the perception of women as subservient to and dependent on men.

Wollstonecraft first establishes the need for an alternative model of manhood by portraying the current state of masculinity as rampant with weakness and effeminacy. She begins *Rights of Woman* by censuring the men meant to embody the epitome of manhood: military men. Wollstonecraft argues, “Standing armies can never consist of resolute, robust men…they will seldom contain men under the influence of strong passions, or with very vigorous faculties. And as for any depth of understanding…it is as rarely to be found in the army as amongst women” (41). Her condemnation of military men reveals some of the qualities that apparently define heroic manhood, the qualities that she herself seeks to display in her persona: resoluteness, and importantly, both passion and understanding. Military men not only fail to possess these
qualities, but they also display their opposite—these men have fallen prey to a corrupted kind of femininity, one characterized by artificiality and superficiality.

Wollstonecraft then extends this critique of military men to all other men, repeatedly condemning men for their lack of manliness. According to Wollstonecraft, “Husbands, thanks to early debauchery, [are] scarcely men in their outward form” (39-40). Wollstonecraft then goes on to explain, “Men are certainly more under the influence of their appetites than women; and their appetites are more depraved by unbridled indulgence and the fastidious contrivances of satiety” (168). As a result of these sexual appetites, men seek to “sink [women] still lower, merely to render [them] alluring objects for a moment…under the influence of their senses” (24). In attacking men for their sensualism, Wollstonecraft shifts all the blame for women’s behavior onto men. She also implies that men are hypocrites when they stereotype women as innately sexual beings (Poovey 74). Men, more so than women, Wollstonecraft implies, fail to utilize their higher faculties of thought and reason, and focus wrongly on mindless physical gratification. Due to men’s sexual appetites, virtue and knowledge have been “rendered a sounding nothing” (28).

Yet what exactly is the cause for men’s effeminacy, and by extension, the source of societal ills? Wollstonecraft identifies the major culprit as sensibility—men’s sensualism, or “voluptuous reveries,” are merely manifestations of their “overweening sensibility” (42). Wollstonecraft unequivocally attacks sensibility all throughout Rights of Woman, recognizing that men present sensibility as a desirable trait in women, while also paradoxically using women’s finer sensibility as evidence of their weaker character and inferiority to men. She is thus determined to strip sensibility of all appeal, at this point unwilling to view any aspect of it as potentially empowering for women. At one point, Wollstonecraft denounces sensibility as
“exquisitely polished instinct,” and at another point, as “a mixture of madness and folly” (85).

By labeling sensibility as “instinct,” Wollstonecraft links it with baseness, opposing the notion that sensibility serves as a marker of gentility and refinement. Sensibility, Wollstonecraft suggests, primarily concerns the senses instead of reason or “passions” that “unfold the faculties” (138). The verb “polished” further suggests that sensibility looks pleasing on the surface yet fails to contain any actual depth; women and men of sensibility become engrossed in appearing refined, focusing all their efforts on their appearance rather than actually becoming refined. The description of sensibility as “a mixture of madness and folly” also allows Wollstonecraft to criticize the very qualities of sensibility praised by its proponents—instantaneity and spontaneity.

She aligns sensibility with conventional femininity, that is, the debased form of femininity currently plaguing both men and women. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the popularity of sensibility during the eighteenth century allowed men to appropriate “affective qualities once assigned to women,” and to engage in traditionally feminine behaviors (Johnson, *Equivocal* 30). Wollstonecraft views sensibility as responsible for having contributed to men’s effeminacy, and suggests that men use sensibility as means of justifying their sensualism and indulging in their vices. Moreover, men have encouraged women to foster sensibility as well. Wollstonecraft’s harshness in censuring sentimental women arises from her conviction that they are complicit in reinforcing the current subservience of all women to men. Their preoccupation with cultivating personal beauty, even at the cost of neglecting their duties as wives and mothers, seems to prove true male sensualists’ belief that women exist primarily to please men. Wollstonecraft says disgustedly of sentimental women, “Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected…they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling” (82-3). She draws on the
eighteenth-century understanding of madness as located in “the imbalance of passions” to suggest not only that sensibility causes madness, but that it can become a form of madness as well (Martin 3).

Yet Wollstonecraft remains steadfast in her belief that men, first and foremost, deserve the blame for female sensibility. As Claudia L. Johnson points out, “Even where Rights of Woman censures the comportment of women, the shame falls upon men and the culture they have created to cater to their finicky sensibilities, not women’s” (Equivocal 31). Sentimental women merely follow the example of sentimental men when they neglect the duties of life. Both sexes’ commitment to sensibility has resulted in an ever-worsening spiral of immorality that has led to “the present corrupt state of society” (40). For change to occur, men must abandon their sensibility. Wollstonecraft cries, “Educated in slavish dependence, and enervated by luxury and sloth, where shall we find men who will stand forth to assert the rights of man;—or claim the privilege of moral beings, who should have but one road to excellence?” (64). Manhood as it is now remains characterized by unmanly “slavish dependence”; men fail to display either the “courage or fortitude” that Wollstonecraft associates with a truly masculine character (27).

Instead, Wollstonecraft suggests that she alone “[stands] forth” as a man, pointing out the “one road of excellence” that all men must take to become “moral beings.” Wollstonecraft speaks in a man’s voice to her readers by drawing on elements from discourses of her time period culturally marked as masculine. For instance, Wollstonecraft presents Rights of Woman in the form of a philosophical treatise, for philosophy was seen as an exclusively male discourse in the eighteenth century (Kelly 110). She claims that her polemical text is “a treatise…on female rights and manners,” and then further reinforces this claim by expressing her intention to systematically cover women’s moral character and ways to improve female education and
conduct (23). Wollstonecraft says, “I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures…and afterwards I shall more particularly point out their peculiar designation…it appears to be the very essence of an introduction to give a cursory account of the contents of the work it introduces” (25). She outlines and organizes her argument to emphasize its status as a philosophical treatise. Within the introduction, and throughout the rest of her work, Wollstonecraft even “uses terms found in philosophical argument, such as ‘hence,’ ‘inference’ and ‘therefore’” (Kelly 109).

In her acerbic critiques of men and women alike who have indulged in their sensibility and succumbed to “mere appetites,” Wollstonecraft embodies the virtuous male hero who remains untouched by superficiality and sensualism (48). She “adopts the argument from ethos” (Kelly 108) and employs a sharply critical tone throughout Rights of Woman, at once “querulous, sarcastic, and dour” (Johnson, Equivocal 23). Yet her combative tone serves as part of her rhetorical strategy, for she attempts to invoke in her male readers disgust for effeminacy and sensibility, and consequently a desire to reform themselves and women. Johnson has stressed that Rights of Woman’s strategy is “to rouse men to claim the liberties of their sex, and to convince them to invite women to share those liberties, for manly men, she hopes…would scorn to have women on other terms” (Equivocal 31).

The heroic masculinity that Wollstonecraft advocates in Rights of Woman calls for men to abandon those “deeply rooted prejudices” that “[cloud] reason” and to recognize women’s equal capacity for attaining reason (28). To accomplish this, men must gain “sufficient strength of mind to puff away the fumes which pride and sensuality have thus spread over the subject [of women] [emphasis added]” (43). However, gaining the strength of mind to disregard pride and sensuality, the trappings of sensibility, first requires men to cultivate their reason and feeling. As
Gary Kelly points out, Wollstonecraft suggests in *Rights of Woman* that “mind” is an inclusive category encompassing both reason and feeling (21).

Instead of arguing for the dominance of reason in the psyche, Wollstonecraft stresses the necessity of developing reason in conjunction with feeling. She explains, “The most perfect education…is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart” (38). Wollstonecraft sees both “body” and “heart”—both reason and feeling—as equally significant. The conjunction “and” further suggests that Wollstonecraft views reason and feeling as working together, instead of as opposing internal forces. Susan Khin Zaw has noted that during the eighteenth century, “The realm of reason was not always regarded as completely separate from that of the heart, for ‘heart’ could be used as a synonym for conscience” (108). Wollstonecraft also takes particular care to stress the importance of cultivating “strong, persevering passions” (98) simultaneously with “unclouded Reason” (150) at least partially because the revolution she demands depends heavily on men’s sympathy for women’s plight.

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4 Wollstonecraft insists on the necessity of experiencing passions, arguing, “The world cannot be seen by an unmoved spectator, we must mix in the throng, and feel as men feel before we can judge of their feelings” (140). She refutes Adam Smith’s notion of the “cool and impartial spectator,” which claims that the spectator does not actually feel what the sufferer feels; instead, the spectator must imagine feeling those emotions. Smith’s theory emphasizes the distance between spectator and sufferer, for as John Mullan points out, “The metaphor of spectatorial scrutiny is simply at odds with a version of sympathy which allows for the natural mutuality of passions and sentiments” (45). Wollstonecraft insists on the very mutuality of passions and sentiments that Smith denies, and in claiming that “we must…feel as men feel,” she dismisses the idea of emotionless detachment, suggesting that is undesirable. Instead, judgment depends equally on “compassionate forbearance” and reason (140).
Through her critical persona and writing style, Wollstonecraft implicitly shows her male readers how a virtuous man should think and feel, even as she explicitly urges them to cultivate their “understanding” and “strong passions” instead of pursuing their sensual appetites (41). Her writing style employs language that combines “experience and reflection” with the “faithful expression of [her] feelings”—in other words, language infused with both reason and emotion, appealing equally to head and heart (39). Wollstonecraft asserts that her reflections in *Rights of Woman* arise from objective and universal “first principles” and “simple truths,” but balances each of her reasoned arguments with displays of emotion (28). A notable instance of sentimentality takes place early on, when Wollstonecraft informs her reader, “I shall not waste my time in rounding periods or in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings, which, coming from the head, never reach the heart” (26). Here, Wollstonecraft explicitly expresses a desire to address the reader’s heart, seeking to speak “spontaneously and making no attempts to polish or embellish that spontaneous expression” (Conger 125).

Wollstonecraft further expands on the kind of manhood that she promotes in *Rights of Woman* through her discussion of heroism, which emphasizes developing virtue. Two main components constitute Wollstonecraft’s personal conception of heroism in *Rights of Woman*: she portrays the individual who transgresses constrictive social norms as heroic, and she links heroism to the active fulfillment of “the duties of a citizen” (178). By redefining heroism in this manner, Wollstonecraft can also present herself as embodying heroism within *Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft seeks to exemplify heroic masculinity and to inspire her male readers to emulate her. Furthermore, this redefinition of heroism stresses Wollstonecraft’s point that men must adopt heroic masculinity for women to become virtuous, and for society itself to improve.
Wollstonecraft touches on the first component of her personal conception of heroism when she asks the reader, “Are not all heroes, as well as heroines, exceptions to general rules?” (101). She immediately follows this rhetorical question with, “I wish to see women neither heroines nor brutes, but reasonable creatures,” while yet suggesting that men should and must become heroes. Throughout Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft presents her masculine persona as an exception to the “general rules” governing her society—that is, societal rules that she decries as corrupt and mistaken (101). For instance, Wollstonecraft declares at one point:

Let me now as from an eminence survey the world stripped of all its false delusive charms. The clear atmosphere enables me to see each object in its true point of view, while my heart is still. I am calm as the prospect in a morning when the mists, slowly dispersing, silently unveil the beauties of nature, refreshed by rest. In what light will the world now appear? (138)

In her reading, Mary Poovey argues that this passage portrays Wollstonecraft as “[transcending] her femaleness—and with it, presumably, the agitations that make her female heart, now still, cry out” (82). I agree that Wollstonecraft indeed strives for an “ideal, disembodied state” here (Poovey 82). However, I would also argue that this passage represents Wollstonecraft’s effort at portraying herself as a hero, or one who transgresses “general rules” and transcends societal definitions of gender, which hold “false delusive charms” for men and women governed completely by their sensual appetites. Her heroism allows her to ascend to a state of being “above” the rest of the world, a state that she links closely to the natural world. The last sentence of the passage ends with Wollstonecraft’s identity as an individual human being, an “I,” dissolving into an elaborate nature-centered metaphor; she becomes one with nature, emphasizing the naturalness of her current state.
In contrast, her society remains corrupted by its “false views of life,” which are the “mists” preventing men and women from attaining genuine virtue (138). Wollstonecraft’s emphasis on the depraved state of her society allows her to suggest that the act of speaking out against social conventions demonstrates her “courage and resolution,” or her heroism, rather than censurable behavior (101). Wollstonecraft stresses the distinction of her heroic status through repeating personal pronouns “I” and “me,” which draw the reader’s attention back to Wollstonecraft even as she describes scenes of nature. Interspersing personal pronouns with descriptions of the natural world, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the link between the individual and the universal—the universal truths she seeks to illuminate to the reader arise from individual experience, and the individual reformation of male readers should lead to the large-scale reformation of society.

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft presents her elevated state as one characterized by a balance of reason and feeling: unlike men under the influence of petty passions such as greed or ambition, Wollstonecraft’s calmness enables her to “survey” and “see” objects clearly and truly. Yet at the same time that Wollstonecraft seeks to convey the objectivity of her observations, the language within this passage is one of feeling, eloquent and evocative. The repeated “s” sound makes the sentences flow smoothly, and the vivid, detailed imagery seeks to elicit in the reader the tranquility that Wollstonecraft describes. She informs the reader that her heart “is still,” but by mentioning her heart, she draws the reader’s attention to it—it is in fact the only part of her body that she explicitly mentions. Within this passage, Wollstonecraft apparently achieves the balance of reason and feeling that gives her the strength of mind to observe moral truths about her society no one else can.
Wollstonecraft’s discussion of “true heroism” reveals the second component of her notion of heroism, the fulfillment of civic duties. At first, she implies that true heroism no longer exists, claiming, “The days of true heroism are over, when a citizen fought for his country like a Fabricius or a Washington, and then returned to his farm to let his virtuous fervour run in a more placid…stream” (175). In this first detailed reference to heroism, Wollstonecraft portrays heroism as a trait belonging exclusively to men who have engaged in martial combat. She mourns the loss of manly virtue, linked to the current degraded state of men “inflamed” by pursuits such as gambling (175). However, equally central to Wollstonecraft’s notion of heroism is the domestic productivity represented by the farm. “Virtuous fervour” can find an outlet not only through war, but also through work during peacetime, which contributes to the well-being of the nation.

Further on in _Rights of Woman_, Wollstonecraft elaborates on the possibility of heroism within the domestic sphere when she discusses “true heroism” for the second and final time. She says, “If defensive war…were alone to be adopted as just and glorious, the true heroism of antiquity might again animate female bosoms” (178). She then playfully assures the reader that she does not anticipate women signing up as soldiers, but instead, believes that the “wife, also an active citizen, should be equally intent to manage her family, educate her children, and assist her neighbors [emphasis added]” (178). Her assurance to the reader acknowledges the traditional definition of heroism as valor displayed in martial combat, but Wollstonecraft seeks to expand this definition. She now conceives of heroism as accessible to men and women, albeit through different means.

Both men and women achieve heroism through living as active citizens, fulfilling their civic duties for the benefit of the whole society—yet Wollstonecraft implies that women cannot
fulfill their civic duties unless men first recognize that women should be rational and independent creatures like themselves. Even as Wollstonecraft opens up the possibility of women also attaining “true heroism,” she continues to depict women as dependent on men’s efforts, rather than their own, to achieve that heroism. She chooses to primarily address her male readers, excluding women from this discourse: “To render her [the wife] really virtuous and useful, she must not, if she discharge her civil duties, want, individually, the protection of civil laws” (178). Before women can become virtuous members of society, men must embrace heroic masculinity, and change the corrupt social conventions and laws preventing women from carrying out their civic duties. This, in turn, will lead to a genuinely moral and productive social order.

Wollstonecraft suggests that she herself demonstrates heroism in Rights of Woman by informing and modeling for her readers the heroic manhood that men should strive to attain, for the redemption of men will lead to an improvement in the state of their nation. She claims, “My arguments…are dictated by a disinterested spirit…it is then an affection for the whole human race that makes my pen dart rapidly along to support what I believe to be the cause of virtue” (15). By correcting “prejudices that give a sex to virtue, and confound simple truths with sensual reveries,” Wollstonecraft fulfills her civic duty in trying to better her society (27).

Wollstonecraft’s intense focus on conceptualizing a new kind of masculinity in Rights of Woman represents an early effort on her part to imagine how best to change the laws reinforcing the gender hierarchy that characterized her society. At this point in her feminist career, Wollstonecraft recognizes that women face systematic oppression and that political and social changes must occur for their situation to improve. Yet even as Wollstonecraft criticizes women for their dependence on men, she can conceive of no way for change to occur other than through
the efforts of men. She makes multiple appeals to her male readers in *Rights of Woman*, most notably when she calls for a revolution: “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them their lost dignity” (65). Although this declaration concerns women, she does not address them at all. Instead, she positions men as the ones participating in this revolution, while women (the “them”) simply wait for the restoration of their dignity rather than taking direct action themselves. As Poovey puts it, “Wollstonecraft is generally not challenging women to act” (79). The concluding lines of *Rights of Woman* make Wollstonecraft’s expectations for her male readers (and her lack of any for her female readers) even more clear—Wollstonecraft pleads passionately, “Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated, or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty…Be just then, O ye men of understanding!” (232). Wollstonecraft neither identifies herself with her own sex nor addresses them, choosing instead to end *Rights of Woman* with an entreaty to “men of understanding.”

Accusations of “anti-womanism” make all too apparent the flaws of Wollstonecraft’s feminist mode in *Rights of Woman* (Taylor 17). Even as Wollstonecraft urges male readers to give women the opportunity to prove themselves just as capable of attaining rationality and virtue, she unmercifully denounces women throughout her text for exhibiting “classic feminine follies” (Taylor 13). Scholars such as Anne K. Mellor have argued for remembering the reason behind Wollstonecraft’s attacks on women: “We must keep in mind that she blamed…female follies on the failure of men to provide education, respect, and opportunity to become anything other than fools” (“Introduction to Rights” 12). Yet Wollstonecraft apparently sets the tone of *Rights of Woman*’s attitude towards women in the introduction, where she claims, “When [women] marry they act as such children may be expected to act:—they dress; they paint, and
nickname God’s creatures.—Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio!” (26-7).

Barbara Taylor rightly notes that the “rhetorical weight of Wollstonecraft’s attack” against women threatens to obscure the feminist point behind it (13).⁵

Wollstonecraft’s insistence on championing a model of masculinity, while heaping scorn on femininity, unfortunately serves to “[invite] disdain for the ‘feminine’ in all its manifestations, including those associated with the lives and bodies of women” (Marso 51). Although Wollstonecraft’s heroic male persona may allow her to speak from a position of authority to her male readers, it inhibits her from creating positive discourses of femininity. *Rights of Woman* concerns itself with castigating corrupt and diseased femininity, offering no positive alternatives to the femininity it derides. In addition, the narrative that Wollstonecraft produces in *Rights of Woman* revolves around women’s dependence on men and their inability to save or reform themselves. For instance, in the ending lines of *Rights of Woman*, as discussed earlier, Wollstonecraft appeals to her male readers alone, and frames this last plea in terms that connote a parent-child relationship between the two sexes. Men have “authority” over women, and it is only if they give women their permission—that is to say, “let” them—that women can “emulate the virtues” of men. At the same time that *Rights of Woman* argues against viewing women as “in a state of perpetual childhood” (25), incapable of thinking or acting by themselves, it implicitly supports this view through its refusal to depict them as capable of carrying out the very “revolution in female manners” (65) that should free them from their subservience to men. In other words, the logic of Wollstonecraft’s discourse ultimately reinscribes the very oppression she is trying to overcome.

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⁵ This hostility might also explain Wollstonecraft’s ventriloquism of masculinity.
In her later works, Wollstonecraft demonstrates not only her recognition of the limitations of the feminist mode used in *Rights of Woman*, but also her gradual awareness that most men of her time period were not interested in ending the gender discrimination entrenched in their legal system. A rhetorical strategy appealing solely to her male readers cannot inspire any political or social reform. She finally turns towards a different feminist mode, expanding on notions of the female self in *Wrongs of Woman*. In my next section, I will investigate the positive discourse of femininity that Wollstonecraft invents in this novel, and examine how she depicts sensibility as the basis for female solidarity and empowerment. *Wrongs of Woman* reveals that it is necessary to develop a model of empowered femininity to create a feminist politics that welcomes women.

**Wrongs of Woman: Sentimental Heroinism and the Power of Female Solidarity**

Written six years after *Rights of Woman*, *Wrongs of Woman* is a fictional sequel illustrating the wrongs inflicted by men on women in eighteenth-century England. The novel begins with Maria imprisoned in a madhouse and deprived of her daughter by her husband, George Venables. Patriarchal institutions such as marriage left women at the (occasionally nonexistent) mercy of their husbands, for the legal doctrine of coverture meant that married women “could not own or distribute their own property or possess custody of their own children” (“Introduction to *Rights*” 9). Over the course of the novel, Maria encounters many other women whose plights similarly illustrate the suffering caused by “partial laws” favoring men over women (319). Prominent among these women is Jemima, the asylum keeper whom Maria befriends. She also encounters Henry Darnford, imprisoned by his enemies in the same madhouse. Through revealing the circumstances of Maria’s marriage and imprisonment within the asylum, as well as depicting her subsequent struggle to find freedom, Wollstonecraft
illuminates the difficulties faced by a woman seeking independence in eighteenth-century England.

Unlike in *Rights of Woman*, in this novel, Wollstonecraft recognizes that sensibility can be a positive and empowering attribute for women rather than a negative one. Yet even though Wollstonecraft’s redefined sensibility holds promise for creating a fully inclusive feminism, *Wrongs of Woman* fails to carry out this promise for reasons that I will expand on later in my thesis. Wollstonecraft redefines sensibility as the “auxiliary of virtue, and the soul of genius” (336). Maria tells us, “True sensibility…is in society so occupied with the feelings of others, as scarcely to regard its own sensations…a desire to comfort those, whose misfortunes [are] comparatively trivial” (336). In this definition, “true” sensibility displays itself through altruism and compassion, the opposite of selfishness. It is other-directed rather than self-directed, and stresses “the connection between the subjective and the social,” thus holding “revolutionary potential” for marginalized social groups (Kelly 41). Moreover, this definition of sensibility has social utility—it strengthens the social bonds between human beings, uniting people of different backgrounds through mutual sympathy, while also promoting benevolent action that, on a larger scale, leads to social reform.

Wollstonecraft’s change in attitude towards sensibility can be explained by her desire to not only address a wider female audience, but also to reform the genre of sentimental novels. Previously, Wollstonecraft condemned sentimental novels as “stale tales” containing “meretricious scenes, all retailed in a sentimental jargon, which equally tend to corrupt the taste, and draw the heart aside from its daily duties” (*RoW* 220). Yet *Wrongs of Woman* attempts to
reform the genre of sentimental novels by reconstructing sensibility as an “active, heroic virtue” (Conger 177).  

Contrary to rejecting or condemning the tie between sensibility and femininity, Wollstonecraft embraces it in *Wrongs of Woman*, and turns towards exploring female subjectivity. She invents a positive discourse of femininity centered on a revised notion of the sentimental heroine. The sentimental heroine, according to Wollstonecraft, displays her sensibility through selflessness and an active concern with political and social change, and her heroinism through her fortitude. As Maria explains it, “Genuine fortitude [consists] in governing our own emotions, and making allowances for the weaknesses in our friends, that we would not tolerate in ourselves” (336). In other words, fortitude consists of self-control, preventing emotions from growing excessive and self-destructive, or interfering with one’s capacity to discern truth from fiction. Only after cultivating true sensibility and developing their fortitude can women become sentimental heroines who possess the strength to break out of their madhouse-prisons. 

Sensibility would seem to hold progressive potential for men as well, but Wollstonecraft portrays the sentimental hero in a far more skeptical light than the sentimental heroine. Maria reflects, “A man of feeling thinks not of seducing, he is himself seduced by all the noblest emotions of his soul…Every situation in which his imagination places [the woman of sensibility], touches his heart, and fires his passions” (318). In contrast to the heroic manhood Wollstonecraft championed so fiercely in *Rights of Woman*, the sentimental hero does not strive

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6 Sydy M. Conger similarly argues that *Wrongs of Woman* depicts sensibility as a sign of heroism. In contrast to Conger, however, I believe that sensibility does not allow Maria and Jemima to reach lasting equality with one another; the feminist sisterhood that *Wrongs of Woman* portrays remains fraught with class tensions.
to achieve a balance between reason and passion; instead, his passion and imagination serve as his defining characteristic. While the assertion that he “thinks not of seducing” would seem to indicate proof of the man of feeling’s virtue, the emphasis put on his emotions “[seducing] him” indicates that he may not “think” at all, acting purely on passion instead of reason.

Wollstonecraft’s portrait of the man of feeling suggests not only that he is a passive victim of his feelings, but also that a distinction exists between male and female sensibility. Unlike female sensibility, male sensibility is primarily concerned with the self rather than with others, and thus, cannot be harnessed to engineer reform in the public sphere.

Wollstonecraft’s shift in focus from conceptualizing manhood to conceptualizing womanhood reveals how her feminist politics have changed since writing *Rights of Woman*. Firstly, this shift in focus reflects her disillusionment with heroic masculinity and implies that she views the current state of society as “so corrupt as to make affective reciprocity between the sexes impossible” (Johnson, *Equivocal* 65). This disillusionment can be explained by men’s complete lack of action following the publication of *Rights of Woman*. Despite its favorable reception, as Johnson has observed, “The *Rights of Woman* was always fighting something of a lost cause, addressed not to reactionaries after all, but to political allies who…had already disappointed her by clinging to demeaning notions of sexual difference” (“Mary Wollstonecraft’s Novels” 199). The inaction of her fellow (male) radicals, not to mention the failure of the French Revolution, suggests that Wollstonecraft realized she must appeal to female readers if she wished to see her feminist vision a reality (Johnson, “Mary Wollstonecraft’s Novels” 199). Women must rely on their own efforts, rather than on men, to extricate themselves from their difficulties and to enact social and political change.
Secondly, Wollstonecraft’s turn towards creating “a positive culture of the feminine and female solidarity” in *Wrongs of Woman* illustrates her new awareness of one of the major challenges women face in a patriarchy (Johnson, *Equivocal* 23). As articulated by Simone de Beauvoir, “Women…do not posit themselves authentically as Subjects…They live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests, and social conditions to certain men—fathers or husbands—more closely than to other women” (8). That is to say, women lack “a feminist subjectivity,” which hinders them from “[asserting] themselves as women” and moving beyond conventional definitions of femininity (Marso 58). Wollstonecraft attempts to overcome this problem by developing in *Wrongs of Woman* a model of female subjectivity that she hopes will promote a shared political consciousness among women, and inspire them to work towards political and social reform.

Before any change can begin, however, women must become aware of their oppressed state, and the ways in which they are complicit in their own oppression. Wollstonecraft makes it no secret that she sees women as partially to blame for their current situation. Mellor has noted that the title refers not only to the wrongs done to women by men, but also to the wrongs that women inflict on other women, as well as on themselves: “The wrongs ‘of’ woman are both the wrongs done to women and the wrongs done by women” (“Introduction to *Wrongs*” 236). At the same time that the novel celebrates female solidarity, it also illustrates in detail the difficulty of attaining it, for patriarchal laws set women against each other, distracting them from working together to end their shared oppression.

Wollstonecraft chooses to tackle in *Wrongs of Woman* a model of femininity she views as particularly damaging to young women, and one initially exemplified by Maria: the romantic woman. The romantic woman fosters her fancy at the expense of her reason and fortitude, and
indulges in her emotions excessively. As Todd points out, “The romantic woman lives for love of a man and to this end her thoughts are dedicated,” rather than to the end of improving her mind and character, or the situation of her sex (“Reason and Sensibility” 17). By devoting herself to gaining men’s approval at the expense of herself and other women, the romantic woman is complicit in the continuance of corrupt masculinity, and by extension, her own oppression.

At the start of the novel, Maria is the perfect picture of a romantic woman. She appears “like a large proportion of her sex, only born to feel,” and has an “ardent imagination” (207). Furthermore, she repeatedly allows her fancy to overrule her reason, preferring to indulge in romantic notions more than exercising unclouded reason. A major consequence of this is her disastrous romantic relationship with Venables. She falls in love with him precisely because her romantic fantasies, encouraged by her exposure to sentimental novels, cause her to believe that he is a genuine man of feeling. For instance, Maria recounts in her memoir her response to Venables’s following act of charity, which, in her mind, cements his status as a sentimental hero:

George slid a guinea into my hand…What a revolution took place, not only in my train of thoughts, but feelings! I trembled with emotion—now, indeed, I was in love. Such delicacy too, to enhance his benevolence! I felt in my pocket every five minutes, only to feel the guinea; and its magic touch invested my hero with more than mortal beauty. My fancy had found a basis to erect its model of perfection on; and quickly went to work. (302)

The language of sensibility dominates this passage, as Maria’s own sensibility is awakened by this seeming demonstration of Venables’s. To convey a sense of breathlessness and wonder, Maria employs a large number of commas, dashes, and exclamation marks, which cause repeated stops. Emotion overwhelms Maria to the point where she cannot speak; she demonstrates the
same “broken syntax and typographical exuberance” (Todd, Sensibility 125) that marks sentimental novels, and her very inarticulacy draws on the eighteenth-century reader’s understanding that “the ultimate emotion is inexpressible and language is always genuflecting to the inarticulateness of high sensibility” (Todd, Sensibility 125-6).

In actuality though, Maria misreads Venables’s mere “virtuous impulse” for a deeper commitment to “principles of virtue” (302). Instead of waiting to see more proof of his kindness, she elevates Venables into a “model of perfection” based on a single act of charity. The “magic touch” of the guinea applies not to Venables, but to Maria, who physically touches the coin, and is emotionally touched by the benevolence it apparently signifies. Yet the guinea in fact carries sinister implications, for as Mellor has observed, it connotes the slave trade: it was “the coin mined by the Royal African Trading Society specifically to pay for kidnapped and enslaved Africans” (“Introduction to Wrongs” 237). Maria’s acceptance of Venables’s guinea signals his future ownership of her. He “buys” her by agreeing to marry her after her uncle bestows £5,000 on her as a dowry. The guinea hints at the inequality that will come to characterize Venables and Maria’s relationship, and emphasizes Wollstonecraft’s point that coverture reduces women to “born slaves,” little more than property to be exchanged between men (253).

The novel gradually reveals Venables as a false sentimental hero, who merely engages in acts of charity when it best suits his interests. Venables comes to embody the corrupt masculinity that Wollstonecraft censures in Rights of Woman—a masculinity characterized by licentiousness and sensualism. Over the course of their marriage, Maria discovers that Venables spends his time gambling and frequenting brothels, pursuits which Wollstonecraft condemns in her earlier work as leading to “inflamed” passions for men (RoW 175). His overwhelming focus on satisfying his sensual appetites, at the expense of all else, renders him unfit to fulfill his duties as either a
husband or an active citizen, and he can no longer recognize virtue in himself or others. Maria says, “Commerce and gross relaxations…[shut him] against any possibility of improvement, till, by stifling every spark of virtue in himself, he began to imagine that it no where [sic] existed” (307). Intent on personal gratification, Venables becomes unable to understand virtue, suggesting that redemption is impossible for him and the corrupt masculinity he represents.

Looking back on her interactions with Venables, Maria admits, “I fancied myself in love—in love with the disinterestedness, fortitude, generosity, dignity, and humanity, with which I had invested the hero I dubbed” (298). The repetition of the personal pronoun “I” and the use of active voice in this sentence highlight Maria’s responsibility for her self-delusion. Her romantic beliefs prevent her from discerning reality from fantasy, resulting directly in her misery and indirectly in her confinement to a madhouse. The madhouse very aptly marks the consequences of being a romantic woman: it leads to “privileging…the imaginary, fanciful, over a perception of reality as guided by reason” (Ingram and Faubert 143).

Yet despite realizing retrospectively that her romantic notions caused her self-delusion about Venables, even within the madhouse, Maria remains committed to romance. She first encounters Darnford through reading his annotations in the books lent to her. Immediately, “fancy, treacherous fancy, [begins] to sketch a character, congenial with her own” (258). Although Maria at first does not have enough knowledge about Darnford to make an accurate and unbiased judgment of his character, she readily imagines him a “St. Preux…the demi-god of her fancy” (262). She falls into the same trap Wollstonecraft mentions in Rights of Woman, when she demands, “Can the crude fruit of casual observation, never brought to the test of judgment, formed by comparing speculation and experience, deserve such a distinction?” (RoW 41). Maria
makes the mistake of relying too heavily on casual observation all throughout the novel, unable to muster enough self-control to moderate her romantic notions.

In the case of Darnford, however, Maria proves to be only partially self-deluded. He is indeed a genuine man of feeling—at least while he resides in the madhouse. When first introduced to Maria, Darnford has apparently been redeemed from his past sensualism by his present commitment to sensibility. He explains to Maria that his sensual exploits were the faults of a “thoughtless, extravagant young man,” suggesting that he has since grown and learned from his experience (266). Yet while Wollstonecraft never finished writing *Wrongs of Woman*, leaving behind only fragmentary endings at her death, in all six of these fragments, Darnford and Maria’s relationship founders after they escape from the madhouse. Darnford resumes his libertine ways, with Maria usually committing suicide after discovering his unfaithfulness. How to explain the transformation in Darnford, from sentimental hero (back) into unrepentant libertine?

Pivotal to understanding the reason for Darnford’s eventual transformation is his first message to Maria, written on a sheet of paper when he learns of her imprisonment in the madhouse: “Whoever you are, who partake of my fate, accept my sincere commiseration—I would have said protection; but *the privilege of man* is denied me [emphasis added]” (263). Here, Darnford draws on a cultural discourse that positions men as the “natural, lawful protectors” of women (Nyquist 69). The “privilege of man” consists of being able to offer protection to women; it is a sign of men’s superior power to and over women while both sexes live in a patriarchal society. Mary Nyquist has shown that Wollstonecraft criticizes this patriarchal protection, exposing its hollowness—in fact, the rhetoric of protection aids in masking the extent to which men hold legal and social power over women. What women truly
need is the ability to protect themselves, which they can only gain through “legal personhood and protection” (Nyquist 69).

As Venables demonstrates in his and Maria’s marriage, men can very easily abuse their power over women, transforming protection into tyranny. Yet Darnford’s acknowledgement that he cannot offer Maria “protection” suggests that the usual power dynamics characterizing relations between the sexes do not apply to them. His imprisonment renders him as socially vulnerable and powerless as a woman; he is as powerless as Maria while they are both confined in the madhouse. Ironically, the madhouse in Wrongs of Woman proves to be the one place where Wollstonecraft can imagine gender-based inequalities disappearing. The conditions of the madhouse are such that Darnford can transform into a genuine man of feeling.

Together, Darnford and Maria create a self-contained world filled with mutual passion, with Darnford experiencing sentiments appropriate of a sentimental hero: “Desire was lost in more ineffable emotions…to make her happy…[seemed] the most noble duty of [Darnford’s] life” (272). Darnford does not simply seek to seduce Maria, but instead feels the “ineffable emotions” that characterize a man of feeling, whose emotions are often of such magnitude that they cannot be verbally expressed. Moreover, after reading Maria’s memoirs and learning of the suffering she has experienced, Darnford reacts exactly as expected of a sentimental hero, displaying both sympathy and passion. The narrator informs us, “Maria now, imagining that she had found a being of celestial mould—was happy,—nor was she deceived.—He was then plastic in her impassioned hand—and reflected all the sentiments which animated and warmed her [emphasis added]” (345). The description here emphasizes the extent of Maria’s influence over Darnford, implicitly drawing on the metaphor of a potter shaping clay in its references to “mould,” “plastic,” and “hand.”
Although Maria displays erroneous judgment throughout much of the novel, she does not entirely mistake the sincerity of Darnford’s love for her while they both reside within the madhouse. Critics who claim that Maria misconstrues Darnford’s passion for true sensibility when he is only “seemingly sympathetic” (Conger 174), or who argue that Darnford is “a weak and impetuous womanizer, selfish yet priding himself on his emotions” (Todd, “Reason and Sensibility” 19), risk oversimplifying Darnford’s character. The restoration of Darnford’s male privilege once he escapes from the madhouse is what results in his transformation into a libertine. Wollstonecraft suggests through Darnford that under the proper conditions—when men no longer hold political, legal, and economic advantages over women—men can become sentimental heroes. Yet the current conditions of society reinforcing the gender hierarchy do not allow for sentimental heroes to become a reality. That Darnford can only become a sentimental hero while residing in a madhouse, a place typically viewed as “a realm of the nonrational and possibly criminal,” merely serves to further emphasize the degree to which eighteenth-century British society is in need of reform (Conger 175).

Even though Darnford turns out to be a genuine sentimental hero while inhabiting the madhouse, Wollstonecraft reveals some of her ambivalence towards the figure of the sentimental hero by portraying him as unable to help Maria find liberation, either physically or mentally. Maria remains captive to her romantic notions all throughout her relationship with Darnford, emphasizing Wollstonecraft’s point that women cannot depend on men—even men who are sentimental heroes—to liberate them; women must liberate themselves. Furthermore, the novel reveals that romantic love is immensely dangerous for women: Maria’s romantic love for Darnford comes to imprison her more effectively than any physical prison. After Maria falls in love with Darnford, “A magic lamp now seemed to be suspended in Maria’s prison, and fairy
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landscapes flitted around the gloomy walls, late so blank...She was beloved, and every emotion was rapturous” (270). Instead of thinking of liberty, or even of her daughter, Maria becomes complacent in her situation, willing to forgo plans for escaping the madhouse in favor of spending more time with Darnford. In this way, romantic love serves as a “will-o’-the-wisp for women...[a trap] to enslave and debase an entire sex” (Todd, “Reason and Sensibility” 17).

Rendered content by being beloved, romantic women, says Wollstonecraft scornfully, “hug their chains, and fawn like the spaniel” (RoW 107).

To break free from both mental and physical imprisonment, Maria must acquire fortitude and move from self-absorption to genuine sympathy, transforming from a romantic woman into a sentimental heroine. Literary critics have disagreed about the extent to which Maria frees herself from her romantic delusions. Poovey maintains that the narrative ambivalence surrounding Darnford and Maria’s romantic relationship illustrates “the theoretical wisdom of the narrator simply [collapsing] into the longing of the character” (105). Rather than successfully critiquing romantic womanhood, the narrator, and by extension Wollstonecraft herself, is seduced by “the very delusion it is the object of this novel to criticize” (Poovey 98).

Yet to me, it seems clear from Jemima’s presence in novel that Wollstonecraft is aware of, and advocates resisting, the seductive appeal of romantic womanhood. The person who initiates Maria’s transformation into a sentimental heroine is not the sentimental hero Darnford, but Jemima, a fellow woman. Female friendship, not romantic love, proves to be key to Maria’s development into a sentimental heroine, and the novel chooses to celebrate the power of the former instead of the latter. Wrongs of Woman depicts the two women facilitating each other’s personal growth through their interactions with one another: whereas Jemima reveals to Maria the importance of acquiring fortitude, Maria awakens Jemima’s sensibility. Furthermore, their
friendship reveals the power of sensibility to bring about political consciousness, create a sense of affinity, and inspire active resistance against patriarchal institutions. Eventually, the “redemptive sisterhood” that Maria and Jemima form gives them the strength to defy the norms of their society that enforce male dominance (Conger 161).

Maria first learns the necessity of acquiring fortitude after encountering Jemima. Despite her sympathy for Maria, Jemima at first remains skeptical of Maria’s assertions that she has been falsely imprisoned and stays unmoved by Maria’s outbursts of emotion. To convince Jemima of her sanity, Maria must govern the “impetuous, varying emotions” constantly preying on her, and moderate her passion (250). Maria realizes she must appeal not only to Jemima’s sympathy, but also to her sense. She informs Jemima, “I will preserve my senses; and convince even you…that my intellects have never been disturbed” (251). Gradually, Maria comes to understand for herself that excessive indulgence of emotion prevents “sober reflection” and threatens to make her a “fit companion” for the inhabitants of the madhouse (249). Attaining fortitude is necessary to gain liberty from the madhouse, and to prevent passion from tipping over into self-destruction.

Jemima also proves pivotal to Maria’s transformation into a sentimental heroine in another major way—contemplating Jemima’s suffering sweeps aside the distraction of romantic love and makes Maria’s self-absorption change into active sympathy.7 Maria’s “thoughts take a wider range” after hearing of the past abuses Jemima has endured, and she moves from simply contemplating “Jemima’s peculiar fate and her own” to “[considering] the oppressed state of women” everywhere (290). Analyzing this moment, Virginia Sapiro asserts that Maria and

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7 Notably, Jemima tells her personal history immediately after Darnford and Maria’s mutual confessions of love. Her story, which involves rape, forced abortion, and prostitution, cannot be romanticized in any shape or form, and it serves as a pointed reminder of the dangers that accompany romantic love for women.
Jemima realize through their exchange of personal stories that “the sources and possibly the solutions to their problems are not individual and personal” (267). Put differently, Maria demonstrates here the beginnings of political consciousness, recognizing that women face systematic forms of oppression rather than mere personal conflicts with men. As famously articulated by the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s, “Personal problems are political problems” (Hanisch 77). The conflicts that women experience in their personal lives reflect the power imbalance between sexes that characterizes a patriarchal society. Therefore, for the situation of women to improve, political, legal, and social reforms must take place first.

Adding to Sapiro’s argument, I would stress that Maria’s sensibility is critical to eliciting her awareness of women’s oppressed state. Her sensibility is what moves her from passivity to activity: “sympathy with Jemima” sharpens to “agony” (290) as she comes to understand that “the constitution of society” (293) itself entails misery on all women. This realization of women’s oppressed state leads to an even bigger realization for Maria—political and social reform must take place if not for her own sake, then for the sake of her daughter, or the next generation of women. By making Maria’s sensibility central to her awakening into political consciousness, Wollstonecraft emphasizes that true sensibility serves as a means of escaping the self-absorption that romantic womanhood encourages. Notably, Wollstonecraft also seeks to raise the consciousness of women through Wrongs of Woman, hoping to achieve a “shared political consciousness with her female readers” by invoking their sensibility (Sapiro 267).

While Jemima helps Maria learn how to develop into a true sentimental heroine, Maria awakens Jemima’s sensibility. Early on, Maria notes that Jemima has “an understanding above the common standard,” but Jemima’s sensibility has been stifled by misery and tyranny (252). Born a bastard, Jemima has been mistreated all her life without a mother to educate and protect
her. She was beaten by her stepmother and father, starved and raped by her master, thrown out into the streets penniless, forced to abort her child, and compelled to resort to prostitution to make a living. The wrongs inflicted by patriarchy on women have fallen heavily on Jemima, and her mind “sophisticated into misanthropy” as a result (253). Her stifled sensibility results in her inability to sympathize with the sufferings of others; initially, Jemima can only demonstrate “selfish prudence and reason just rising above instinct” (*Row* 140). As such, she remains isolated from the rest of society, at risk of losing her very humanity.

Yet upon hearing of Jemima’s past suffering, Maria takes Jemima’s hand, offering Jemima compassion and sympathy. Maria’s display of sensibility rouses Jemima’s own benumbed sensibility; overcome by Maria’s kindness, Jemima must “[hasten] out of the room to conceal her emotions” (289). Jemima’s “selfish prudence” falters as she realizes the necessity of acquiring sympathy—she can no longer remain emotionally distant from the suffering of others. Through awakening Jemima’s sensibility, Maria enables Jemima to move beyond a narrow sphere of self-interest and “[reconciles her] with the human race” (346).

Significantly, the above moment of connection between the two women arises due to Maria’s sensibility. Sensibility enables her to achieve affinity, or “sympathy with Jemima,” despite their widely different social statuses and backgrounds (290). Soon after hearing Jemima’s personal history, Maria requests that Jemima search for her daughter, telling her, “In the name of God, assist me…[and] I will teach her to consider you as her second mother” (290). Maria’s promise to make Jemima a “second mother” reveals that sensibility not only triggers political consciousness, but also enables women to bond together as a family. This promise offers a brief glimpse at full equality between the two women: they will both be mothers to Maria’s daughter, giving her their love and protection. Maria and Jemima unite around the common cause of
finding Maria’s daughter and shielding her from patriarchal tyranny. Wollstonecraft thus opens up the possibility that sensibility can lead to a collective sense of unity for all women, despite their different class identities and the “necessarily various” wrongs they have suffered (248).

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft portrays sensibility as extending beyond mere feeling to engendering direct action. Jemima’s newly awakened sensibility prompts her to carry out Maria’s request that she search for Maria’s daughter, and near the end of the novel, Jemima’s sensibility at last guides her into making the morally correct decision to defy the warden’s orders to keep Maria imprisoned in the madhouse. Jemima’s performance of these benevolent acts, which increase in scale as her sensibility further awakens, reveals how sensibility “inspires social involvement as well as self-improvement” (Conger 178). Her willingness to break the rules of the madhouse-prison also marks the power of female solidarity, fostered by sensibility, to defy the power structures that cause women’s oppression. Wollstonecraft suggests that women must protect and guide each other, as Maria and Jemima gradually do with each other and intend to do with Maria’s daughter, to avoid becoming helpless victims of the misery brought about by patriarchy.

By the time that Jemima aids Maria in escaping from the madhouse, Maria has sufficiently developed into a sentimental heroine with the strength to take action; she challenges the laws responsible for women’s continued subordination to men. Brought up on charges of adultery and seduction, Maria acts as her own defense, demonstrating a keen awareness of and willingness to address the injustices currently perpetuated by the legal system. Maria informs the judge and jury, “I appeal to the justice and humanity of the jury—a body of men, whose private judgment must be allowed to modify laws, that must be unjust, because definite rules can never apply to indefinite circumstances” (353). Maria hopes that by relating the “circumstances” of her
own disastrous marriage with Venables, she can make the judge and jury understand the suffering created by laws that reduce women to men’s property. Rather than advocating forms of protest involving collective action by women, Maria places her faith in changing laws from within the legal system through individual effort, and by appealing to those already in power.

However, *Wrongs of Woman* quickly shows Maria’s faith to be misplaced. The judge accuses Maria of madness and remains unconvinced by Maria’s defense, declaring, “What virtuous woman thought of her feelings?” (354). As Johnson points out, the judge is “someone who represents and enforces the rules of established power, as distinct from genuine social justice” (“Mary Wollstonecraft’s Novels” 201). Maria’s suffering neither elicits the judge and jury’s sympathy, nor makes them understand the need for political and legal reform. Venables’s successful lawsuit reveals that Maria’s imprisonment extends beyond the madhouse—all women are imprisoned by laws that refuse to grant them rights equal to men, and that enforce their subjugation to men. A woman who seeks to think independently for herself, “[consulting] her conscience, and [regulating] her conduct…by her own sense of right” (352), will simply be dismissed as irrational: “The conduct of the lady [Maria] did not appear that of a person of sane mind” (354). Perversely, Maria soon discovers that she found greater freedom within the madhouse than outside of it.

Maria’s failure to convince the judge and jury of the need for reform illustrates, as discussed earlier, Wollstonecraft’s recognition of the futility of appealing to men to change the status quo; she indicates that seeking to reform the system from within will not and cannot work. Moreover, any attempt to effect change in this manner still involves a degree of dependence on men. Women must be the instigators of change, taking action for themselves. Yet exactly what kind of action women should take remains nebulous. As Sapiro has argued, “Wollstonecraft did
not seem [able] to imagine…[how] enlightenment might be translated into political action” (268).

It is clear that Wollstonecraft wishes for her female readers to achieve a collective political consciousness—that is, a collective understanding that women are oppressed due to their sex, and that the constitution of society itself must change for women’s situation to improve. However, Wollstonecraft does not show women taking collective political action in *Wrongs of Woman*—Maria challenges the legal system governing her society without Jemima’s or other women’s help, modeling a form of politics centered on personal and individual action. Yet as a mere individual facing institutionalized oppression, it is inevitable that Maria fails to accomplish any political or social change. Wollstonecraft grasps at, but does not quite reach, the conclusion that collective—not individual—action is necessary to bring about the political, legal, and social reforms that will improve women’s situation. This failure of imagination in Wollstonecraft’s feminist vision is due to her classism, the implications of which I elaborate on further on in my thesis.

Despite Maria’s positive progress towards becoming a sentimental heroine, the very end of the novel portrays Maria regressing back into a romantic woman. What saves Maria at the last moment, and enables her transformation into a sentimental heroine, is Jemima’s intervention. The most extensive ending of *Wrongs of Woman* portrays Maria’s discovery of Darnford’s infidelity, and her subsequent attempt at suicide. Shortly after Maria has swallowed laudanum, however, Jemima locates Maria’s daughter and brings her to Maria:

> Maria gazed wildly at [her child], her whole frame was convulsed with emotion…she caught her to her bosom, and burst into a passion of tears—then, resting the child gently on the bed, as if afraid of killing it,—she put her hand to
her eyes to conceal as it were the agonizing struggle of her soul. She remained silent for five minutes, crossing her arms over her bosom, and reclining her head,—then exclaimed: ‘The conflict is over!—I will live for my child!’ (356-7)

Abandoning restraint over passion and making romantic love the center of her existence—in short, committing to romantic womanhood—nearly results in death for Maria. Yet in the last few lines, Maria undergoes a transformation: her decision to “live for [her] child” marks her as a sentimental heroine, who demonstrates both genuine sensibility and fortitude in her resolve to forgo a solitary experience of self-annihilation. Maria’s sensibility is what allows her to understand that her actions affect others beyond her individual self, namely, those within the larger community—in this case, her daughter and Jemima. Sensibility guides Maria away from self-centeredness, and moves her to consider “the feelings of others,” prompting the “agonizing struggle” of choosing between “high-minded, other-oriented fellow feeling and irrational, individual desire” (Nyquist 78). Maria ultimately makes the selfless decision to live so that neither her daughter nor Jemima will be left alone in the world, and demonstrates her fortitude by successfully subduing her violent and self-destructive emotions.

At last, Maria rejects the model of romantic womanhood and the self-destructiveness that accompanies it, moving away from the belief that women’s lives should revolve around romantic love. Thus, the novel’s ending affirms a model of womanhood that promotes community, generosity, and fortitude; sentimental heroinism triumphs over romantic womanhood. Presumably, Maria’s development into a sentimental heroine would also have been fleshed out in greater detail in the chapters preceding the ending, had Wollstonecraft finished writing the novel before her death.
Reflected in this ending is Wollstonecraft’s desire for her female readers to similarly transform from romantic women into sentimental heroines. Yet notably, unlike the female protagonists of more conventional sentimental novels, Maria does not succumb to a “sickly sensibility” that causes her to languish away passively after she has been disappointed in love (349). Instead, her decision at the end of the novel reinforces Wollstonecraft’s point that genuine sentimental heroism is defined by selflessness and fortitude—qualities Wollstonecraft hopes women will demonstrate in their daily lives. Wollstonecraft’s reconstruction of sensibility and the sentimental heroine in *Wrongs of Woman* holds larger implications as well: Wollstonecraft refuses to let men continue to define sensibility as “a sign of women’s inferiority,” instead reshaping sensibility, and by extension, the genre of sentimental novels, into a tool that women can use to break free from psychological oppression (Conger 172). Wollstonecraft shows in *Wrongs of Woman* that the very cultural constructs upholding patriarchal power can be appropriated to challenge that power.

Moreover, the ending of *Wrongs of Woman* implies that women can and must save each other, bonding together to resist the allure of romantic womanhood. Maria chooses at the last moment to form a female community of sympathy with her daughter and Jemima, understanding that she cannot leave her daughter “alone in the world, to endure what [Jemima has] endured” as a motherless child (356). Female solidarity, founded on sensibility, is pivotal to finding the strength to challenge structures of oppression. As Johnson has noted, Maria and Jemima’s friendship presages “a feminist solidarity it would take later generations to realize fully” (*Equivocal* 68). Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, while Wollstonecraft demonstrates an

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8 As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, sentimental novels typically ended with their sentimental heroines either happily married or dead due to disappointed love.
understanding that collective political consciousness can end women’s oppression, she fails to imagine how collective political action can bring about legal and social change.

What is the reason for this failure? The answer lies in Wollstonecraft’s expectations of whom the reader will identify with. It is clear that Wollstonecraft means for her female readers to identify primarily with Maria, whose narrative “uncritically privileges white, bourgeois experience” (Nyquist 80). Jemima’s brutal personal history renders her unrelatable to the typical reader of sentimental novels. Unlike Maria, Jemima’s position at the margins of society is permanent rather than temporary. Even though the novel stresses the power of female friendship, after Maria and Jemima have escaped from the madhouse, Jemima “[insists] on being considered as [Maria’s] house-keeper…[and] on no other terms would she remain with her friend” (347). Jemima remains subordinate to Maria on the basis of her lower social class. Wollstonecraft cannot imagine women overcoming class differences to treat each other as true equals, much less forming a movement together.

Wollstonecraft’s failure in this regard represents an important flaw in her feminist vision. As Audre Lorde reminds us, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (112). Though Lorde sought to critique racism and homophobia in the feminist movement, we can bring her criticism to bear on classism as well. Lorde argues that feminists who privilege certain races and sexual orientations risk silencing and alienating those whose contribution is necessary for the feminist movement to successfully challenge patriarchal power and bring about genuine change. Wollstonecraft’s insistence on privileging middle-class women above other women results in an ending where, instead of taking action together to defy and overcome oppressive power structures, Maria and Jemima retreat from society, unable to effect any large-scale change.
Ending gender-based oppression requires working collectively towards reform and regarding differences as a source of strength, rather than as a cause for division.

Furthermore, this tension in Wollstonecraft’s writing also illustrates how even a politics based on eliminating social and cultural inequalities can reproduce the very oppressive power dynamics that it sets out to challenge. Nyquist rightly claims, “[The] conception of difference—as (implicitly) difference from a white, bourgeois norm—has been a divisive, oppressive feature of mainstream Euro-American feminism” (84). Wollstonecraft’s insistence on maintaining the class-based hierarchy between Maria and Jemima fails to either address or remedy the specific difficulties and injustices faced by lower-class women. This insistence in fact reifies the unequal power dynamics between women of different social classes. bell hooks has observed, “As long as women are using class or race power to dominate other women, feminist sisterhood cannot be fully realized” (16). The feminism that Wollstonecraft envisions is ultimately an exclusive feminism rather than an inclusive one, privileging white, bourgeois women and failing to take into account the intersections of oppression faced by those belonging to multiple socially marginalized groups.

Contemporary feminist politics remains fraught by the same tensions that characterize Wollstonecraft’s works, as feminists struggle with creating inclusive spaces that do not privilege one group at the expense of another. The risks of identity politics can clearly be seen in Wollstonecraft’s failure to portray lasting equality between Maria and Jemima. They briefly achieve full equality when Maria promises to make Jemima a “second mother,” and their sensibility enables both women to commit to the common cause of finding Maria’s daughter and protecting her from gender-based oppression. Yet this equality vanishes once they escape from the madhouse together and Jemima assumes the role of Maria’s housekeeper. Wollstonecraft
stops short of unlocking sensibility’s potential to create an entirely inclusive feminism.

Nevertheless, her works prove instructive to modern feminists seeking to shift feminism’s emphasis from identity to affinity: Wollstonecraft’s notion of sensibility provides the starting point for imagining a more inclusive affinity—one that can serve as the basis of a feminism that welcomes otherness and difference (Haraway 155).

Despite Wollstonecraft’s misogyny in *Rights of Woman*, as well as her failure to imagine women overcoming differing class identities to take collective action, she deserves recognition for how her writing has shaped feminist thought. Sapiro has asserted that Wollstonecraft *cannot* be praised for her originality, as she was by no means “the first to notice and decry men’s overwhelming legal control over women or the prevalence of men’s use of violence against women” (260). Catharine Macaulay and Mary Astell espoused the same brand of liberal feminism that Wollstonecraft did, and indeed, Wollstonecraft openly acknowledges Macaulay in *Rights of Woman*, praising her for her “intellectual acquirements” and lamenting the fact that she died before the publication of *Rights of Woman* (132).

Nevertheless, while Wollstonecraft may not have been the first to write about the need for a “revolution in female manners,” her arguments struck a chord with nearly all the women writers of her time period. Although her works certainly had shortcomings, Wollstonecraft largely succeeded in her attempts to make her female readers conscious of the gender-based oppression caused by patriarchal laws and social conventions. In fact, the ideology expressed in Wollstonecraft’s works “became the dominant belief of the women writers of her day, across the entire feminist spectrum” (Mellor, “Women Writers” 156-7).

It was nearly impossible to ignore *Rights of Woman*, and Wollstonecraft’s writing inspired heated debates that exposed the “intellectual and psychological tensions that existed
between feminists in England in the 1790s” (Mellor, “Women Writers” 154). Mary Hays, for instance, was a staunch advocate of Wollstonecraft’s ideas, and promoted many of them in her own writing. On the other hand, Anna Letitia Barbauld disagreed with Wollstonecraft’s assertion that men and women should be judged by the same standards regarding their capacity to achieve virtue. Barbauld chose instead to emphasize that men and women are innately different, and that middle-class women in particular have ethical responsibilities differing from those of men (Mellor, “Women Writers” 154). Yet despite differences in perspective, most late eighteenth-century feminists agreed with Wollstonecraft’s overall argument in Rights of Woman that women needed better education and greater cultural authority.

Unfortunately, after Wollstonecraft’s death, her husband William Godwin made the mistake of publishing The Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1798), along with some of her unfinished works. In this biography of Wollstonecraft’s life, Godwin revealed her private and sexual transgressions, thereby providing her enemies with enough ammunition to destroy her reputation and demonize her. The attacks on Wollstonecraft arose partially out of a desire to “discredit Wollstonecraft and all who agreed with her” (Stafford 15), and largely out of “the hysterical British reaction against all French revolutionary ideas and practices” invoked by the Napoleonic Wars (Mellor, “Women Writers” 155).

It became difficult for women writers who wanted to be taken seriously to identify with Wollstonecraft. However, even when early nineteenth-century women writers were unwilling to invoke Wollstonecraft’s name publicly, they continued to refer to her feminist arguments in their own writing. Despite the failings of her texts, Wollstonecraft managed, even without the aid of a feminist movement in her own lifetime, to articulate the oppression caused by patriarchal institutions and power structures in a manner that resonated strongly with fellow women writers.
She had a profound impact on her female readers, inspiring various responses and active intellectual engagement from countless women in her time period. Although over two hundred years have passed since she first wrote *Rights of Woman* and *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft’s influence on feminist thought has yet to fade, and her writing remains a source of inspiration for many feminists.
Bibliography


