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Mary Wollstonecraft in Five Works: The Advocate of Women's Rights and Female Education

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Dissertação realizada no âmbito do Mestrado em Estudos Anglo-Americanos orientada
pelo Professor Doutor Jorge Bastos da Silva

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

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Declaração de honra

Declaro que o presente dissertação é de minha autoria e não foi utilizado previamente noutro curso ou unidade curricular, desta ou de outra instituição. As referências a outros autores (afirmações, ideias, pensamentos) respeitam escrupulosamente as regras da atribuição, e encontram-se devidamente indicadas no texto e nas referências bibliográficas, de acordo com as normas de referenciação. Tenho consciência de que a prática de plágio e auto-plágio constitui um ilícito académico.

Porto, 30 de Setembro de 2022

Bárbara Azevedo Martins

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Resumo

Ao longo das sucessivas gerações feministas, Mary Wollstonecraft foi sempre discutida com um grande fervor crítico. A sua defesa sagaz dos direitos da mulher levaram-na a ser caracterizada como proto-feminista. Acredito que o tema da educação moral e intelectual feminina é considerada por Wollstonecraft como a chave para a emancipação das mulheres no século dezoito, tema esse que considero transversal a todas as suas obras e demais contribuições literárias. Por isso, proponho estudar nesta dissertação cinco das suas obras mais influentes – *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787); *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788); *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792); *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796); e *Wrongs of Woman; or Maria* (1798). Desde um exemplo de livro de conduta, a uma história infantil, a um tratado filosófico e político, a uma narrativa de viagem imbuída de elementos autobiográficos e epistolares, e finalmente a um romance, Wollstonecraft provou a sua versatilidade literária. O seu dom de adaptar os seus pontos de vista distintos através de diferentes géneros literários confere-lhe uma ampla e interessante influência sobre os círculos académicos e artísticos da sua época, pois soube moldar habilmente o seu discurso sobre educação e direitos da mulher em diversos moldes.

Palavras-chave: Educação; Direitos das Mulheres; Revolução

Abstract

Throughout successive feminist generations, Mary Wollstonecraft was always discussed with great critical fervour. Her sagacious defence of women's rights led her to be characterised as a proto-feminist. I believe that the theme of female moral and intellectual education is considered by Wollstonecraft as the key to the emancipation of women in the eighteenth century and which is transversal to all her works and other literary contributions. Therefore, I propose to study in this dissertation five of Mary Wollstonecraft's major works – *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787); *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788); *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792); *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796); and *Wrongs of Woman; or Maria* (1798). From a conduct book, to a children's story, to a philosophical and political treatise, to a travel narrative imbued with autobiographical and epistolary elements, and finally to a novel, Wollstonecraft proved her literary versatility. Her gift for adapting her distinctive views through different literary genres grants her a wide and interesting influence over the academic and artistic circles of her period, for she knew how to skilfully shape her discourse on education and women's rights into diverse moulds.

Key-words: Education; Women's Rights; Revolution

A strong sense of unfinished business hovers about Wollstonecraft's legacy – the effects of a life cut short and a political agenda not yet met, but also of something less straightforward, emanating from the combined – but disjunctive – force of her life and work as well as yoked with the seductive fiction that revolution and romance have some natural and dangerously volatile affinity.

- Cora Kaplan, *Mary Wollstonecraft's reception and legacies* (2002)

*Thus WOLLSTONECRAFT, by fiery genius led,
Entwines the laurel round the female's head;
Contends with man for equal strength of mind,
And claims the rights estrang'd from womankind;
Dives to the depths of science and of art,
And leaves to fools the conquest of the heart;
Or mounts exulting through the fields of space,
On faith's strong pinions, to the throne of grace.*

- John Henry Colls, *A Poetical Epistle Addressed to Miss Wollstonecraft, Occasioned by Reading her Celebrated Essay on the Rights of Woman, and her Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794)

Introduction

In England, on September 10, 1797, Mary Wollstonecraft passed away due to complications from childbirth, leaving behind not only her two infant daughters and her husband, but also her celebrated career as a female critic and writer of the eighteenth-century. In January 1798, her husband, the prominent political philosopher William Godwin, published his notorious tribute to his late wife. However, still grieving her loss, he didn't anticipate the backlash his publication would originate, as his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* resulted in a failed and scandalous testimonial to Wollstonecraft's life rather than the suitable, albeit still quite candid, biographical homage he hoped for. Ultimately, William Godwin's *Memoirs* proved to be the most tragic thing to happen to Mary Wollstonecraft and her memory, seeing that for decades her legacy was largely diminished and relegated to an obscure and controversial place in history.

If not for her untimely death, I cannot help but imagine that Mary Wollstonecraft would keep on disputing the prejudicial takes on the deeply patriarchal and polarising living experiences of eighteenth-century English society, an idea supported in a similar fashion by Cora Kaplan in "Mary Wollstonecraft's Reception and Legacies". In that essay, Kaplan pronounces how a "strong sense of unfinished business hovers about Wollstonecraft's legacy – the effects of a life cut short and a political agenda not yet met" (2002: 246), consequently appointing her as a vital but still ambiguous and debated feminist figure whose diverse and uncompromising works accompanied the revolutionary pacing of the time she lived in, and of her restless existence as well.

Regarded by many as a proto-feminist of the eighteenth-century, the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* emerged amongst her contemporaries as a pioneer of sorts; as a female philosopher, writer and critic who passionately advocated for women's rights as part of the citizens' rights discourse, a complex and international debate that arose from the heavily politicized and revolutionary environment of the French Revolution. Yet, contrary to what many might think, Wollstonecraft's plea for female emancipation - whether in the political or the social spheres – was present from

early on in her writings, only perhaps manifesting itself more prominently from the moment she published *Rights of Woman* in 1792. Although possibly not so striking when compared to her later ones, Mary Wollstonecraft's initial works compose a perceptive criticism of the established rights, prejudices and detrimental expectations regarding womankind, presenting, also, a call for reformation in (female) education as the only way to improve the way the sexes are expected to interact with each other, thus hopefully bringing forth a cultural and social revolution.

However, even if her writings were first favourably received, that soon drastically changed around the mid- to late 1790s, mostly due to two main reasons. The first, and perhaps the most immediate factor, rests on the publication of William Godwin's *Memoirs*, whose immediate aftermath, as previously alluded, instigated a rejection of Wollstonecraft herself and her works – therefore stigmatizing both as deviant for their revolutionary aspirations. As it happened, many of her detractors took Godwin's *Memoirs* as the perfect example of how Mary Wollstonecraft exposed young female minds to unsuitable and threatening values, hence creating what Barbara Caine describes to be a “perfect illustration of the connection between women's rights and unrestrained female passion, proving that both not only were destructive of family life and social stability but also led to despair, attempted suicides, and a complete breakdown of any semblance of orderly life” (1999: 48). Pairing these circumstances with the additional scandals surrounding the Godwin-Shelley family circle later on – particularly centred on the figure of her second daughter, the renowned Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley – it comes as no surprise that the British public cemented their discriminatory opinions of her for quite a long time.

The second reason for her decline in public approval lay in the persistent rise of an anti-revolutionary and anti-French environment - something that was especially witnessed in countries that had a long history of conflicts with France, as was England's case. This circumstance was a direct consequence of the radical and perilous conjuncture following the French Revolution (1789), the vicious period of Terror that ensued and the subsequent Napoleonic wars (1803-1815). As a result, seeing as she supported what many considered to be alarming revolutionary ideals, Wollstonecraft's

works were branded as Jacobin, perceived to be, for that reason, “dangerous sources of political instability” (Botting, 2014: 2).

That is not to say that her name fell into absolute dishonour and completely vanished from the vocabulary of her contemporaries from that point onwards. Wollstonecraft continued to be read by some of the progressive minds and prominent figures of the nineteenth century. An example of such is Auguste Comte’s letter to John Stuart Mill in 1843, in which the French positivist philosopher declared how Wollstonecraft’s works shaped his early views on the relation between the sexes in the late 1790s:

All thinkers who seriously like women as something more than pretty playthings have nowadays passed through a similar phase, I believe. In my turn, I well recall the time when the strange book of Miss Mary Wollstonecraft—written before she married Godwin—influenced me strongly. (Mill and Comte 1995, 188 *apud* Botting, 2014: 2)

It is also, for instance, the case of the politician and America’s third vice-president, Aaron Burr. Unfazed by the negative impact of *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Burr described himself as an admirer of Mary Wollstonecraft and her works, which not only inspired him to educate his daughter on Wollstonecraft’s principles, but also made him write to William Godwin requesting “a polygraphic copy” to be created for him from Opie’s painting of her (*apud* Franklin, 2004: 204).

But, aside from rare cases such as these, the name of Mary Wollstonecraft remained largely marginalised, and, unsurprisingly, the majority of her detractors still kept focusing almost exclusively on her unconventional life story. It wasn’t until the beginning of the twentieth century, and of what we now recognize as the first wave of feminism, that the public began transferring its attention from a prejudicial scrutiny of her personal life to a careful study of her writings. As a result, Mary Wollstonecraft became the elected fore-mother of the suffragette movement, a founding figure who, as Ashley Tauchert explains in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Accent of Feminine*, combined

“intellectual independence and political consciousness in her engagement with, and resistance to, Enlightenment discourses; with a biography challenging to historical and modern models of female propriety” (2002: 4). From that moment on, her name would be evoked and refashioned by the feminist academic circles throughout the decades, in order to adapt their interpretation of Wollstonecraft and her works according to the goals of the different momentums of this “millennial feminism” (Tauchert, 2002: 5). An example of such is the third wave feminism which, generally speaking, focused more on her as a complicated historical figure whose status as a feminist bears a number of inconsistencies and shortcomings (*apud ibidem*).

Nevertheless, one thing remains clear within the history and ambitions of the many waves of feminism: Mary Wollstonecraft is much more than whatever living and amorous arrangements she chose and which erroneously occupied the critics’ sole interest for the longest time. Yet, it is undeniable that her life played a significant part in the type of works she created, the way she addressed topics such as educational reform or women’s need for political rights. It is precisely because we cannot separate an individual’s personal growth and evolution from their works and reasoning that we must look at them together – or, at the very least, be aware of the influence they have on each other. Thus, I am of the opinion that Wollstonecraft’s life is intimately connected to her writings, the way her personal experiences changed the way she wrote and thought throughout the years, during the course of her career as a critic, as a fiction and nonfiction writer and, ultimately, as a militant for female emancipation via her unique type of rhetoric.

Bearing that in mind, I propose to analyse in this dissertation five of the many critical and literary works Mary Wollstonecraft produced: *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787); *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788); *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792); *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796); and, finally, *Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* (1798). My choice of these five works rests mainly on the fact that they represent distinct literary genres – a conduct book; a children’s book; a political and philosophical treatise; a travel narrative; and a novel, respectively – written at very different points in the author’s life and career.

Still, I believe it is possible to discern a common and explicit string of thought that is transversal to all five, a clear theme that brings these works into convergence when thinking of their author and looking into her life. Even though such works are outlined differently from one another when it comes to their literary genres, my goal is to study the evolution, the possible similarities and divergences of Mary Wollstonecraft's reasoning through these five works - specifically how she developed and promoted a middle-class ideology focused on female emancipation by predominantly advocating for a moral and rational education.

In order to better explain the possible evolutions or even regressions of thought in these five works, first we ought to briefly look into Mary Wollstonecraft's life so that we are able to understand exactly how those writings accommodated her changing opinions, which undeniably reflect her life experiences. This I will pan out in the following section of this introduction.

Mary Wollstonecraft: A Biographical Sketch

As has been previously mentioned, Mary Wollstonecraft had what many consider to be an unconventional life for her time. But what exactly does this mean? And was her life story so indecorous and brash as her critics made it to be? Or was it simply a life led without futile social restrictions, an existence guided by deep feelings and resilient opinions met with limited and sensationalised misunderstandings, even in the eyes of her own husband, the author of the ill-fated *Memoirs*?

One can argue that it was Mary Wollstonecraft's tumultuous childhood¹ that made her sensible to women's plight. And had it been different, better I mean, then perhaps

¹ As it stands, the source of most of our - especially of the first critics' - information about Mary Wollstonecraft's early life resides in her husband's *Memoirs*. William Godwin claimed to have written it based on the stories his wife had told him, and on her friends and relatives' letters and recollections, as well (*apud* Franklin, 2004: 200). The unprecedented frankness of the manuscript, in regards to more sensitive material, was later revised and subdued in a second edition published in August 1798. As such,

we would have never found her name in the annals of history. Moreover, this first period of her life became the one where she bravely faced uncertainty and acquired strong values that remained with her throughout her life. In fact, her childhood played such an important part in modelling her character that it comes as no surprise that she often drew inspiration from her own family experiences to create fictional works with many autobiographical elements in them.²

Born in London, on April 27th, 1759, Mary was the second child and eldest daughter of Edward and Elizabeth (née Dickson) Wollstonecraft. Her family, as formerly alluded, did little to provide a loving and stable home for the young Mary. Her father proved to be an alcoholic brute with lofty ambitions who did not hesitate to abuse his wife and children. As for her mother, she not only failed to protect her seven children from her husband's temper, but also displayed an explicit favouritism for her eldest son, Ned, while refusing young Mary the care and affection that the motherly figure archetypally provides. Her father's inflated social aspirations did not prevent him from living off his own late father's inheritance and off the generosity of his creditors. However, this arrangement proved to be defective, given that he contracted many debts he couldn't settle, thus leading him to frequently move his family from place to place in the hopes of achieving the wealth and social status he so desired and thought himself deserving of. Hence, and in the words of Caroline Franklin, if "Mary's secondary status in the eyes of her parents through her sex and age was calculated to sting Wollstonecraft into proving herself, then her loss of economic and class status as a young woman would be another spur" (2002: 1).

Nevertheless, in the midst of this particularly unstable household, during her younger years Mary Wollstonecraft managed to secure an interesting selection of friends and

while the *Memoirs* didn't explicitly refer, for instance, to Edward Wollstonecraft's physical abuse towards his wife, it still remains clear the context it portrays.

² With this, I refer to the fact that the names of many female protagonists in Wollstonecraft's fiction bear variations of the author's name (as is the case in *Mary: A Fiction*, or even in *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman*), or even the fact that her heroines' relationship with their families also resemble Wollstonecraft's, with abusive fathers and distant mothers.

relations whose intellect and character would deeply influence her for the rest of her life. Jane Gardiner (née Arden) was perhaps the first meaningful companion of Wollstonecraft's youth. The latter's intense attachment to this friendship is a clear reflection of Mary's feelings of emotional abandonment, as well as her need for close personal relations and affection, hence Wollstonecraft's frequent jealousy over her. "I have formed romantic notions of friendship....I am a little singular in my thoughts of love and friendship; I must have the first place or none" (*apud* Gordon, 2015: 30) – Mary's words to Jane not only reflect Wollstonecraft's possessive behaviour towards this particular friendship, but also hint at what would become a common element of the author's future relations, whether romantic or platonic. Furthermore, Jane's father also proved to be a valuable acquaintance for the young Wollstonecraft, seeing that John Arden was her first instructor, in an informal manner so to speak, by including her in the lessons he gave his children, where science and philosophical thought were constant topics of discussion.

When she was sixteen years old, Mary Wollstonecraft made yet another acquaintance who brooded her education even further. Reverend Henry Clare and his wife lived in Hoxton, a Dissenting Community where Wollstonecraft's family moved to after yet another impulsive decision from her father. Revd. Clare, known to be an eccentric man, took her under his wing, and nurtured her intellect by introducing her to central ideas of the chief intellectuals of the Enlightenment. Among them, John Locke struck an impressive chord with Wollstonecraft's younger self, seeing that she quickly adhered to his political and philosophical theories. As a result, Mary Wollstonecraft began to assimilate a higher set of principles, which were not only in accordance with what she had learned from her various teachers (as informal in status as they were) and readings throughout the years, but a stronger sense of self, as well, which she based on the rational belief that human nature would continue to mature and thrive off the insurgence against tyranny and conformity. In the words of Charlotte Gordon in her book *Romantic Outlaws*, Mary Wollstonecraft in all likelihood had the following realization: that

after reading Locke, she had an ethical foundation for her feelings. Not only was it her right to shape her own future; it was everyone's right. In fact, Locke's social contract made protest seem the only rational response to injustice; it was humanity's obligation to overthrow tyranny; a government that does not protect the people's freedom is illegitimate. A father who abuses his wife and children forfeits his power. (2015: 49)

Through the Clares, Mary Wollstonecraft was introduced to Fanny Blood, a young woman not much older than her, but whose character was viewed with admiration and as a role model; ultimately, Blood was someone who captivated Wollstonecraft's affections for the remainder of the latter's life. Upon meeting her, Mary Wollstonecraft's infatuation with Jane Arden was soon replaced by the desire to learn from Blood, to emulate her and secure a lasting friendship with her. "A friend whom I love better than all the world beside, a friend to whom I am bound by every tie of gratitude and inclination: to live with this friend is the height of my ambition' (*apud* Franklin, 2004: 9 *apud* CLMW, p. 67) – these were the words of Wollstonecraft to Jane Arden concerning her acquaintance with Fanny Blood, which in a way can't help but denounce her hypocrisy, given that she completely shifted the intensity of her feelings from her oldest friend to Blood. As a result, she would occupy Wollstonecraft's heart well after the Blood's death in 1785. As William Godwin assures his readers in his *Memoirs of an Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, it was Blood who awakened in Mary Wollstonecraft a taste for literary studies. Her friendship with Fanny, especially the correspondence she received from her new friend, made her understand writing as an art, a talent that, despite being influenced by one's genius, had to be worked on and polished. In Godwin's words:

She had read, to gratify the ardour of an inextinguishable thirst of knowledge; but she had not thought of writing as an art. Her ambition to excel was now awakened, and she applied herself with passion and earnestness. Fanny undertook to be her

instructor; and, so far as related to accuracy and method, her lessons were given with considerable skill. (2015: 10)

Additionally, being an illustrator for a botanical periodical, Fanny Blood's role as the main provider for her family further enticed Wollstonecraft's admiration for her friend. Although often ill, Blood proved to Wollstonecraft how female (financial) independence was a possibility within their existing reality – a realization that the latter retained and fought for throughout her life.

With the help of John Arden and Revd. Clare, as informal as it was at certain times, Mary Wollstonecraft grew into an autodidact surrounded by the teachings of her time, in accordance with the inquisitive and progressive spirit of the Enlightenment. She aspired to achieve more, to do and be better by following her teachers and the many lessons she studied from the great minds of the age. In this manner, one could say that Wollstonecraft was ambitious like her father, yet, paradoxically to his views, she looked at education, and not at wealth and status, as the key to her independence. Her desire to pursue a formal and broader education had to be postponed, however, for her family kept contracting significant debts, leaving her with no inheritance and no option but to find paid employment in order to subsist. Therefore, at twenty years old, Mary Wollstonecraft became the companion to a wealthy, older widow in Bath, a position she found demeaning but necessary.

Roughly three years later, Wollstonecraft left her position to return home and nurse her dying mother - an experience based on filial duty carried out with care and aptitude, even with no promise of reconciliation between mother and daughter. In the end, all that was left was melancholy and a sense of never being sufficient that would remain with Wollstonecraft well past her mother's death in 1782. Now responsible for supporting her sisters, Wollstonecraft envisioned a new life for them: with Fanny's help, they would open a school, a place where they would be able to make a respectable living on their own accord, a place for Wollstonecraft to continue her studies and put into practice her educational theories, as well. In this manner, the school was founded in

1784, first located in Islington and then transferred to Newington Green, a community that had a “reputation both as a nonconformist educational centre and home to progressive thinkers” (Franklin, 2004: 13), such as Daniel Defoe - the author of the renowned *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) - and the educationalist Thomas Day. Wollstonecraft came to befriend one of the most influential thinkers of the Rational Dissenter community of Newington Green at the time: Revd. Richard Price. A prominent Welsh insurrectionary preacher, the sexagenary had quickly become a mentor for Wollstonecraft, introducing her to new ideas of social and educational reform, as well as to other reputable figures of their circle, including the elderly Samuel Johnson, who all undoubtedly left their marks on Wollstonecraft’s eager mind.

In spite of her drive to make the school succeed, which almost single-handedly kept the establishment afloat for two and a half years, the project eventually failed. Fanny Blood, her most intimate friend, had left England to marry the Irish businessman Hugh Skeys and settle with him in Lisbon. When she learned of her friend’s pregnancy, Wollstonecraft travelled to Portugal to attend Blood, who had always had a very frail health. For this reason, Blood didn’t survive the post-partum, leading to her death in 1785. Still deeply grieving the loss of her dear friend (as she would continue to do for the remainder of her life), Wollstonecraft returned to England to find her project in disarray, which inevitably led to its end. Deep in debt, she had no choice but to depend on others for employment yet again. Accordingly, she became the governess for the Anglo-Irish Kingsborough family in Ireland in the summer of 1786. Although this post didn’t last longer than a year, seeing that she and Lady Kingsborough didn’t get along, Mary Wollstonecraft formed a strong bond with the children. In spite of her fears of lacking the proper education to tutor them, Wollstonecraft soon understood their educational needs were different, thus cultivating their minds and characters in matters that would go far beyond the merely academic sphere. Her long-lasting influence on the children would be most strongly felt in the youngest Kingsborough daughter. The favoured pupil, Margaret King - or Mrs. Mason, or even Lady Mount Cashel as she would also be known – would forever remember Wollstonecraft:

almost the only person of superior merit with whom I had been intimate in my early days was an enthusiastic female who was my governess from fourteen to fifteen years old, for whom I felt an unbounded admiration because her mind appeared more noble and understanding, more cultivated than any others I had known – from the time she left me my chief objects were to correct those faults she had pointed out and to cultivate my understanding as much as possible. (*apud* Franklin, 2004: 26)

While working as a governess, Mary Wollstonecraft found the time to further her own education as well, mostly owing to having unlimited access to her employers' library. It was also during this period of her life that Wollstonecraft firmly proclaimed her desire to live only by her pen. As such, she began her career as a writer with *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), a conduct book printed by the Unitarian Joseph Johnson – a publisher of the late Enlightenment who would become Wollstonecraft's long-life patron and mentor, and whose far-reaching merit translated his investment and promotion of young authors, his known support of female writers, as well as his preference for publishing Dissenting content. "I am going to be the first of a new genus," Mary Wollstonecraft declared in a letter to her sister Everina (*apud ibidem*: 38 *apud* CLMW p. 164), and in what we now pinpoint as the time when she began exclusively writing as a living. While it is true Mary Wollstonecraft was not the first woman ever to be published, nor the first female writer to attain literary merit and reputation, the significance of that statement is undeniable in the light of her desire to accomplish independence and recognition in a growing industry that was still deeply dominated by male prerogatives.

When she reunited with Joseph Johnson in the summer of 1787, she came under his proper tutelage, not only as a relatively young writer seeking assistance from an experienced and kind publisher, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a reviewer for his new periodical, the *Analytical Review* (1788-1798). For the subsequent four years, Mary Wollstonecraft worked in the periodical alongside him and his associate and editor, Thomas Christie. Although she specialized in a few subjects – such as literature,

travel writing, and education – Wollstonecraft contributed heavily to the *Analytical* in a variety of issues and topics during its first few years. This experience proved to be a great asset for her, in view of the fact that it was during these years that her studies were deeply nurtured and expanded thanks to the vast readings and critical thinking she had to exercise for her work.

Moreover, it was through Johnson that Wollstonecraft had the opportunity to engage with a surprising circle of intellectuals and artists. Among such talented and notorious figures were, for instance: the polemicist and revolutionary, Thomas Paine; American diplomat, poet and pamphleteer, Joel Barlow; her future husband, the anarchist political philosopher and novelist, William Godwin; the renowned English poet, painter and engraver, William Blake; the painter, John Opie; and the Swiss artist, Henry Fuseli. Among these, it was Henry Fuseli and not William Godwin who first conquered her attention. His cynicism and Rousseauistic views of women led to many intellectual and philosophical battles with Wollstonecraft, which not only rendered a valuable practice for her to exercise her counter-arguments to Rousseau's female models, but also influenced Fuseli into thinking of her as an intellectual adversary instead of a mere "termagent" (*apud ibid*: 109). Mary Wollstonecraft, in turn, developed romantic feelings for him, even going as far as to propose to the Fuseli couple a *menage à trois* kind of arrangement, in which she would occupy the role of intellectual and platonic companion and his wife the lover. To escape the humiliating and scandalous backlash her proposition caused, Mary Wollstonecraft left for France.

Her time in Republican France wasn't all spent on forgetting her infatuation, however. Instead, Wollstonecraft devoted her time to meeting notable people – British compatriots and fellow French Revolution enthusiasts who frequently met to discuss the new political atmosphere. She also witnessed first-hand the viciousness of the Reign of Terror, a period of the French Revolution that perpetuated chaos, mass harassment and execution of anyone who posed a threat to the new Jacobin government, thus explaining the negative attention focused on the British expatriates and Girondin supporters. As a young man named I. B. Johnson once wrote to Godwin after Wollstonecraft's passing, "Miss Wollstonecraft was always particularly anxious for the success of the [Revolution]

& the hideous aspect of the then political horizon hurt her exceedingly. She always thought, however, it would finally succeed" (*apud ibidem*: 127), hence compelling her to write her *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794).

It was also during her stay in France that she met Gilbert Imlay, an American businessman. She became infatuated with him, or rather, with the idealization she had of him, seeing she actually had little knowledge of his true character and undertakings. Nonetheless, their relationship evolved quickly; and by losing the strong puritanical air that she had advocated both in her personal life and in her earlier works, and even in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft had now admitted sexuality as an intrinsic part of relationships. And although she still held a strong sense of morality, it didn't deflate her equally strong nonconforming opinions and newfound amorous arrangement. At one point, Imlay had her registered as his wife in the American embassy so that she could at least have the protection of American citizenship amidst the increasing persecutions lead during the Terror. They were not actually married, as was Wollstonecraft's wish, but she still liked to style herself Mary Imlay privately, preferring to separate her personal life and her career. On May 14, 1794, her daughter with Gilbert Imlay was born, named Frances after her dearest friend, Fanny Blood.

Yet, as much as Wollstonecraft rejoiced in daughter's birth, she soon understood Imlay's true nature after his rejection of her, when she learned of his affairs upon her return to London in 1795. Although she had made independence her most valuable belief, she now exhibited an excessive dependence on him, which proved once again the intensity of her emotional attachments. Unfortunately, her fixation resulted in two suicide attempts in that year, in May and October, respectively: the first by ingesting laudanum and the second by jumping into the River Thames in a drowning attempt.

Before her second attempt, though, Mary Wollstonecraft had tried to reconcile with Imlay, and, for that reason, she travelled to Scandinavia. Accompanied by her daughter and a young French nurse, Wollstonecraft visited Sweden, Norway and Denmark, not only to conduct business in Imlay's name (in the hopes of regaining his affection), but also as a means to benefit from the therapeutic effects that the

Scandinavian scenery offered. Even though this journey didn't reunite Wollstonecraft and Imlay romantically, it did result in a great educational and cultural opportunity for Wollstonecraft, culminating with the publication of her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), a travel narrative which stands as her most sold book during her lifetime and perhaps the one which cemented her name into the literary circles of the period.

In January 1796, upon her return to London after touring through Scandinavia, Mary Wollstonecraft met William Godwin once again through mutual acquaintances. Their initial dislike for each other was slowly replaced by respect and friendship. Godwin, especially, was intrigued by her character and intellect, even more so after reading her *Letters from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, of which he admitted:

If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book. She speaks of her sorrows in a way that fills us with melancholy, and dissolves us in tenderness, at the same time that she displays a genius which commands all our admiration. (2015: 44)

Their relationship evolved quickly after that, and by August they had declared their love for each other, hence initiating their affair. Even though they both endorsed a rather free relationship dynamic, their negation of marriage was soon overturned when Mary Wollstonecraft found herself pregnant. In order to protect their future child from the brand of illegitimacy, they decided to get married at the end of March of the following year, while still adopting fairly independent living arrangements. Yet, their marriage, while aiming to prevent a future scandal, did exactly the opposite, because it was then revealed that Wollstonecraft had never truly married Imlay, causing her to lose friends.

Not long after, Mary Wollstonecraft gave birth to her second daughter, Mary – the future Mary Shelley – on August 30, 1797. However, this labour and delivery would not be similar to Wollstonecraft's childbirth experience with her eldest daughter, Fanny.

This time, she experienced a series of complications that, despite her midwife and physicians' best efforts, resulted in a puerperal fever – a sign of sepsis caused by the infected remnants of placenta that had been broken and left in the womb after childbirth. And so, unable to fight the sickness, Mary Wollstonecraft died on September 10, 1797, a mere ten days after the birth of her second child, leaving not only her newfound family, but her promising career as one of the most controversial, yet significant critics and female writers of the second half of the eighteenth century.

1. Chapter I - *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*

By the end of her life, Mary Wollstonecraft had been significantly involved in nearly every field of education. Her substantial knowledge and first-hand experience hailed not only from her studies of various educational theories, but also from the considerable time she spent as an educator herself – first as a teacher in the school she had founded with her sisters and close friend in Newington Green, and subsequently as a governess for the Anglo-Irish Kingsborough family. From being a school teacher, a governess, an author of children’s narratives, a well-known critic of pedagogical theories and texts, and eventually reaching the stage of motherhood herself, she proved to be deeply interested in and connected to this topic throughout her life. As a result, it comes as no surprise that Wollstonecraft’s first published work, the one that initiates her career in the literary circles of the time, is centred on that very same subject.

In truth, it was in 1787, at twenty-eight years of age, that Mary Wollstonecraft’s name first appeared on the printed press. And even though her first published work revealed itself only to be moderately successful during her lifetime, it marked the beginning of her desire to become the “first of a new genus” – a female intellectual who wished to live solely by the profit of her writings, and as someone who did not fear the potential social repercussions that her lifestyle would bring. Thus, it is in this framework that her first manuscript, fully titled *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with a reflection on female conduct, in the more important duties of life*, came into existence.

Issued by Wollstonecraft’s publisher and ever since then lifelong friend and mentor, Joseph Johnson, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* compiled its author’s short reflections on children’s education, more specifically, on young female education in late eighteenth-century Britain. In addition to what may seem a merely written contemplation on the author’s part to give her input on the topic, the text also presents itself as a conduct book whose ultimate goal is to advise young females and mothers of the emerging British middle class on how to best educate their progeny and themselves to become what Wollstonecraft deems as suitable members of society.

It is important to note that by the time Wollstonecraft published *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* there was already a reputable tradition for this literary genre. In fact, Caroline Franklin affirms, “conduct and advice books as a genre had been adapted by Protestant culture from renaissance guides to courtly behaviour and etiquette” (2004: 19). Built on a sizeable and rich history of educational purposes and ideological indoctrination, conduct books were since past centuries a significant source of instruction not only for proper decorum in social situations but also for established good morals, cultural norms and gender roles. This literary genre advertised an ideal paradigm of the social structure in which religious narratives and specific notions of societal conventions would dictate the status of the younger and future generations. Correspondingly, it comes as no surprise that conduct books became predominantly marketed to the female youth, therefore dictating cultural archetypes of femininity, companionship in marriage and motherhood as well.

The eighteenth century saw, however, a significant increase in this literary genre in the burgeoning book market. Both male and female authors published several renditions of their own reflections on the matter, especially aiming their counsel and admonitions to their female audiences. “It is true, many treatises have been already written; yet it occurred to me, that much still remained to be said” (Wollstonecraft, 2016: 324)³, acknowledges the *Thoughts*’ author in the preface to her first published work. It wouldn’t be, therefore, completely without reason to state that Mary Wollstonecraft was most likely familiar with the majority of renowned essays on education that preceded hers – given that she would later refer to them in her future writings, either to praise them or to criticise them, and from all of which she couldn’t help but learn while she was conceiving her own ideas on the subject. Some of those intellectual authorities that Mary Wollstonecraft drew her critical commentary from consist of male-authored classics such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Émile, ou De l’éducation* (1762), James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (1765) – often known as

³ All further quotations from this particular Wollstonecraft work are from this edition. For this reason, only page numbers will be indicated within parenthesis from now on.

Fordyce's Sermons – and John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), but also works of female writers such as Sarah Pennington's *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to Her Absent Daughters; in a Letter to Miss Pennington* (1761) and Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773).⁴

Moreover, not only were conduct books part of this cultural and literary change, but also other types of printed material, such as periodicals, for instance. Published by Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele, the famous *The Spectator* (1711-14) issued essays and reviews (often moral satirical in nature) whose main goal was to promote ideals of cultured and courteous sociability. Vivian Jones, the author of *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Literature of Advice and Instruction*, further explains:

The Spectator encourages its readers, who importantly include women, to identify with the new bourgeois culture, in which commercial values are refined and mitigated by domestic pleasures and "polite" taste. Indeed, it makes female

⁴ An interesting note to add is Gary Kelly's thoughts on the differences between the rhetoric between conduct books written by female and by male authors. In his book, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft*, he writes the following:

Women writers in this tradition follow the same principles and topics set forth in books by men, such as Halifax's *Advice to a Daughter* (1688) and Fenelon's *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (1687; English translation, 1707). But there are differences. Whereas the men admonish and exhort, books such as Lady Sarah Pennington's *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to Her Absent Daughters* (1761) and Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady* (1773) also sympathize and console, view women's lot gloomily, recommend intellectual and moral development as defence against the inevitable disappointments of a woman's life, criticize women contaminated by vulgarity or corrupted by courtliness, and often use imperative verbs and words such as 'must' and 'only'. (1992: 29)

improvement both a sign of, and, in its stress on “well regulated Families,” a means to social progress. (2002: 128)

And, even though Wollstonecraft writes *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* with the same intention in mind, she begins by emphasising the tone and particular characteristic that demarks her work from others. As a result, the author presents *Thoughts* with a preface in which she notifies the reader that her following words “may be insipid to the gay” (324) and that she is “afraid, indeed, the reflections will, by some, be thought too grave; but [she] could not make them less so without writing affectedly” (*ibidem*). By this confession, the reader begins to understand the author’s character is well-adjusted to her writing style, seeing as it inherently conveys her feature sober tone and rationality in what is an earnest and authentic view on the ongoing debate that is female education in the eighteenth century. This style is not only prevalent in her first manuscript though, as Wollstonecraft’s candour is a reality that spans all her works, no matter the genre. In fact, and by her own admission in “Reading” (the seventh chapter in *Thoughts*), the author defends that a “florid style mostly passes with the ignorant for fine writing; many sentences are admired that have no meaning in them, though they contain ‘words of thundering sound,’ and others that have nothing to recommend them but sweet and musical terminations” (339). In other words, by encouraging young women to prefer simple but sincere writings to more frivolous literary embellishments, Wollstonecraft is advocating a rational but accessible and sensible approach to literary selection in the hopes of not only promoting to her readers the benefits of critical thinking, but also the development of strong and rightful dispositions of character.

Accordingly, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* proves to be the literary framework of Wollstonecraft’s judgement on female education and conduct. Spanning twenty-one concise chapters, *Thoughts* is in truth a work that covers a wide range of topics, all of which propose the idea of women as social, cultural and moral agents of progress, prominently through the duty of motherhood – “As every kind of domestic concern and family business is properly a woman’s province, to enable her to discharge her duty she should study the different branches of it” (354). Indeed, the question that

is present the most throughout this author's work is "How then are the tender minds of children to be cultivated?" (327), proving again the dominance of this concern in her life and work. For the author, children's, especially young girls' minds, needed to be rightfully nurtured from an early age in order to capably contribute to their families and society – a concept that Wollstonecraft articulates very distinctly in *Thoughts*.

In this context, then, education acquires a broad meaning, not only naturally suggesting the usual scholastic subjects, but also converging in its sense everything that models a girl's character – a good grasp on religious lessons; suitable choice and development of talents and leisure pursuits; and also, a curriculum on children care, from breastfeeding, to infant swaddling, and parenting advice. An example of such guidance is the passage in which the author encourages mothers to breastfeed their babies, a duty often passed to wet nurses in the higher circles of society.

The mother (if there are not very weighty reasons to prevent her) ought to suckle her children. Her milk is their proper nutriment, and for some time is quite sufficient. Were a regular mode of suckling adopted, it would be far from being a laborious task. Children, who are left to the care of ignorant nurses, have their stomachs overloaded with improper food, which turns acid, and renders them very uncomfortable. We should be particularly careful to guard them in their infant state from bodily pain; as their minds can then afford them no amusement to alleviate it. The first years of a child's life are frequently made miserable through negligence or ignorance. (325)

This is a reality that Wollstonecraft very much condemns, as she reports cases of nurses' negligence and their unsuitability for being respectable caretakers, given that she believes them to be "ignorant and cunning" (358), and that if the children "are mostly left with servants; the first notions they imbibe, therefore, are mean and vulgar" (327). The manners often linked with the lower classes are not per what is demanded from a decent and reputable household. The dynamic between employer and servant is, therefore, a reflection of each other, and because of such circumstances, the

“masters” owe them good and moral examples. Nonetheless, and even if they could produce changes in character, Wollstonecraft still thinks the servants should not attend to the children, preferring the mother to suckle and educate her progeny herself. For she views it as a task that would not only nurture the bond between parent and child, but that would also be quite beneficial for the infant, a situation that would only bring a positive outcome for the family life and the child’s future.

All in all, Wollstonecraft plans children’s (mostly young females’) education as an all-rounded process that spans all the significant stages of a person’s life, all of which should be offered and reached in the person’s own time and never to the detriment of their education and maturity. As an example, in the chapter titled *Matrimony*, the author firmly states that “early marriages are”, in her opinion, “a stop to improvement” (351), soon justifying that it is almost impossible for a young woman to reach a mature and rational understanding of herself before the age of twenty years old.

Furthermore, and possibly as already perceived, the keywords that sustain this work are all within the lexical compass of “reason”. “Mind”, “rational”, “wit”, “maturity”, and “intelligence” are examples of how Wollstonecraft directs her views and counsel around this theme, even proclaiming that reason “is indeed the heaven-lighted lamp in man, and may safely be trusted when not entirely depended on” (362). As a result, this point once again ties with the idea of parents – mostly females in their title role as mothers – and the need for them to be rational and sensible individuals whose principal responsibility in life is to teach their children the right kind of education, and not merely existing as sensual beings with fleeting passions and diversions. She heavily criticises the vanity of which most young women are guilty of, all done with the intention of securing male attention and, hopefully, rendering them advantageous marriages – a feat that only would delay the discovery of their true character by their husbands and friends:

if caught by it a man marries a woman thus disguised, he may chance not to be satisfied with her real person. A made-up face may strike visitors, but will certainly disgust domestic friends. And one obvious inference is drawn, truth is not expected to govern the inhabitant of so artificial a form. The false life with which rouge

animates the eyes, is not of the most delicate kind; nor does a woman's dressing herself in a way to attract languishing glances, give us the most advantageous opinion of the purity of her mind. (335)

It is imperative to add that Wollstonecraft's views on her proposed educational plan very much align with John Locke's, the celebrated English philosopher from the Enlightenment period. Having published two influential treatises on the subject – *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), – Locke conceives his famous empiricist theory, in which he defends that individuals are born free of any innate or predetermined principles and knowledge, in other words, a *tabula rasa*; a blank slate. Therefore, the human mind is neutral and receptive to any experience or form of education presented to it, thus justifying the idea that the environment and type of parenting that a child is exposed to since birth is, in fact, the primary sculptor of their intellect and character. As Wollstonecraft argued, "Children very early contract the manners of those about them" (325), hence agreeing with "Mr. Locke's system" (327). And yet, even though the author of *Thoughts* places great emphasis on instilling good habits through discipline, Wollstonecraft – and perhaps being reminded of her own childhood – does not wish to see a child's spirit crushed by harsh and senseless punishments, since she believes that "it is only in years of childhood that the happiness of a human being depends entirely on others – and to embitter those years by needless restraint is cruel" (326).

Consequently, with this purpose in mind, Wollstonecraft avows the parents' need to "subdue their own passions" (327), since only then she will think of them as competent educators. To achieve that, parents (and more importantly, mothers) need to embrace an active role in shaping their children's future, which is only feasible when they are assured of their competence by a careful and mature introspection of themselves – a realisation that can only be reached after they collect the gains that experience, knowledge and insight feed them in adulthood. After all, and as Wollstonecraft herself questions in *Thoughts*, "Can they improve a child's understanding, when they are scarcely out of the state of childhood themselves?" (351).

Nonetheless, even though the author aims to create a positive outcome with her advice, all of the topics are brought forward mostly through negative examples. By means of an explanation, Wollstonecraft's ultimate goal is to advocate towards her own views of what should be deemed as the right method of managing one's upbringing. But she chooses to elucidate her point mostly by denouncing immoral practices and vices that she considers damaging, and which are, according to her, erroneously promoted as the socially accepted standard for female conduct. An example of such lies in Wollstonecraft's resolute criticism of the way (young) women, mostly of a "genteel life", choose to amuse themselves and employ their talents in card games – a diversion that brings no true value or development to their characters, nor to their educational experiences. "Cards are the universal refuge to which the idle and the ignorant resort, to pass life away, and to keep their inactive souls awake, by the tumult of hope and fear" (366), the author declares, further describing how such games corrupt their minds and "sour their temper".

In my understanding, this aspect ensures Mary Wollstonecraft's values connect with the rigid principles that guide the Church of England, and which strongly conditioned eighteenth-century British society as well. The fact that she chose to structure her criticism and advice by highlighting the negative aspects of those formative circumstances shows the reader that she still very much partakes in the traditional literary mechanisms used by religious and moral protestant narratives to educate her audience, by which I mean the preference for parables and examples of negative and decadent behaviour in order to teach moral propriety, etiquette lessons and righteous principles. Her husband, the author William Godwin, disclosed in his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) that Wollstonecraft regularly attended church services, thus confirming not only her religious faith but also the importance she places upon it in her education plan. The chapter in *Thoughts* titled "The Observance of Sunday" addresses this topic, in which Wollstonecraft defends that a "respect for this ordinance is [...] of the utmost consequence to national religion" (360), ending with the idea that she "never knew much social virtue to reside in a house where

the sabbath was grossly violated” (361), again supporting the concept of religion as one of the fundamental pillars of her education plan.

Conversely, her orthodox and strong religious views guide her critics to judge her first published work as too conservative. The majority of her detractors argue that conduct books belong to a genre that in itself constricted women to a predominantly domestic and private sphere of action, and that – even though Wollstonecraft argued for female education – she was planning her ideas based on limiting and confining women to secluded roles in society, a facet very much prevalent in that particular time. This judgment is largely instigated by twentieth-century feminist literary critics, during a time in which the role of women was being discussed and dissected profusely in academic circles. As Barbara Caine explains:

women faced an extraordinarily paradoxical situation. They were expected to be the religious and moral guides and leaders of men, to whom they were in every other way subordinate. Similarly, they were to raise the moral and religious tone of their family and household, and through this of the wider social world—a world to which they were denied direct access, at least in terms of political rights. (1999: 43)

That is also the opinion defended by the critic Vivian Jones. She highlights that while Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (and even other works in the conduct book genre by well-known and respectable female authors, such as Hester Chapone), praise female education in a more contemporary essence of the expression – that is to say, the encouragement of not only proper etiquette and a strong set of morals, but also the exercise and maturation of the intellect and critical reasoning – the bulk of the works of this sort seem to only condition women to a subservient, frivolous and unproductive existence in society. In other words, while conduct books helped form a middle-class ethos, Jones argues through the voices of Mary Poovey and Nancy Armstrong – renowned critical authors and scholars of the field – that the majority of works of this type also involved a limitation of the female character and of

women's role in eighteenth-century bourgeois society, something that Wollstonecraft's book may be blamed of as well.

Since the publication of Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* in 1984, in which Poovey analyzes women's writing as bearing the repressive scars of the cultural imperative that women become a version of the "proper lady," conduct books have been seen as symptomatic of, indeed have been held responsible for, most of the ills of eighteenth-century bourgeois femininity. Poovey's reading of the power of the conduct book's domestic ideal was reinforced and sophisticated by Nancy Armstrong in her *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), where she argues that it was "[o]n the domestic front" that "the middle-class struggle for dominance was fought and won"; that "this body of writing [conduct literature] [...] helped to generate the belief that there was such a thing as a middle class" and that the modest, submissive but morally and domestically competent woman it described was the first "modern individual". (2002: 121)

In truth, Wollstonecraft's work is full of dualities. On the one hand, the author preaches compliance and submission:

I am quite charmed when I see a sweet young creature, shrinking as it were from observation, and listening rather than talking. It is possible a girl may have this manner without having a very good understanding. If it should be so, this diffidence prevents her from being troublesome. (329)

On the other hand, she incites individual rebellion against the dogmas previously allowed to women – "I wish them to be taught to think" (*ibidem*). Essentially, she wants female readers to be introspective, realistic, critical and disciplined, good daughters, wives and then eventual caring and competent mothers. However – amidst all her plans for women to exercise a meaningful education and, subsequently, become great contributors to their families' honourable reputation and society's progress – she

relegates the extent of their activities to the domestic and private domains of action, not really explaining how she would have womankind go beyond those limits, nor how they are eventually to surpass the typical passive and veiled roles that society enforces on them.

Be that as it may, Wollstonecraft declares “intellectual improvements, like the growth and formation of the body, [to] be gradual” (328). In other words, the art of teaching and learning is, in reality, a constant exercise of curiosity, responsibility, persistence and resolve, all in the pursuit of a solid and purposeful education. Yet, one cannot forget that the author of *Thoughts* is still a product of her time – before, of course, her future radicalized stance on these issues, which only appear more prominently in later works. Hence, it comes as natural and perhaps even expected that this work, at this particular stage in Wollstonecraft’s life, reflects a more orthodox approach to female instruction without any distinct nor extreme changes to what was already being preached to young women of British eighteenth-century society. In my opinion, what many critics failed to see, though, is her potential. Her critics could not move past the fact that Wollstonecraft argued in favour of women’s presence and influence in the exclusive office that is the nuclear family life, thus criticising her lack of radical propositions to this problem, something that, as already explained, would only begin to form itself as a proper perspective in the author’s mind in later years and works.

Lastly, while taking everything into account, I find it undeniable that Wollstonecraft took her first steps towards her (future) views on female education and independence with this book. Her potential is not blatant but merely disguised in a conservative approach – an aspect that aids her detractors in finding fault with how this work became the author’s literary and ideological foundation. While I do agree that *Thoughts* is perhaps Wollstonecraft’s most conformist work, I deem it a solid starting point, not only to her career, but to the beginning of her journey as the intellectual and pragmatist crusader for female education that we all came to know.

2. Chapter II - *Original Stories from Real Life*

If *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* focused on a more straightforward, albeit dogmatic approach to girls and women's education, *Original Stories from Real Life* addresses children directly, without compromising the author's vision. The ability of children's literature to regulate and educate the young public is something that Wollstonecraft was already conscious of during the time she wrote and published her first work. As a matter of fact, Wollstonecraft alludes to a particular book in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters – The Perambulations of a Mouse* (1784), by Dorothy Kilner – as a necessary and impactful tool in young children's education. She asserts, "Animals are the first objects which catch their attention; and I think little stories about them would not only amuse but instruct at the same time, and have the best effect in forming the temper and cultivating the good dispositions of the heart" (Wollstonecraft, 2016: 328).⁵

Similarly, the author also proposes reading, and subsequently literature itself, as one of the most influential arts, oftentimes subtle but persuasive enough to impress the reader's mind – even more so, if the pupil is young and receptive.

A relish for reading, or any of the fine arts, should be cultivated very early in life; and those who reflect can tell, of what importance it is for the mind to have some resource in itself, and not to be entirely dependant on the senses for employment and amusement. (338)

This particular quality was, perhaps, the decisive reason why Wollstonecraft chose to write a children's book. Additionally, one noteworthy detail is the fact that Mary Wollstonecraft names "*Mrs. Trimmer's Fabulous Histories*" (262) in her book. Sarah Trimmer, a contemporary of Mary Wollstonecraft and an author in her own right, has

⁵ All further quotations from this particular Wollstonecraft work are from this edition. For this reason, only page numbers will be indicated within parenthesis from now on.

one of her most famous works brought up in *Original Stories* – “have you finished *Mrs. Trimmer’s Fabulous Histories*? Indeed we have, answered Caroline, mournfully, and I was very sorry to come to the end. I never read such a pretty book” (*ibidem*). Both published by Joseph Johnson, Wollstonecraft owes to Trimmer the great success of her work, since it was due to Trimmer’s literary fame that Wollstonecraft relished the opportunity of creating a similar work. The change in audience demographics to younger readers would ensure a slightly different public, and even though the format used was different, the message conveyed was the same – a determinant factor to Wollstonecraft ensuring that her views on (female) education would be better learned and preserved throughout the child’s life. Hence, she writes in the preface of the text in question, “These conversations and tales are accommodated to the present state of society; which obliges the author to attempt to cure those faults by reason, which might never to have taken root in the infant mind” (241).

First published anonymously in 1788, *Original Stories from Real Life (with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness)* became Mary Wollstonecraft’s greatest commercial success. Later reprints would be done under her name, then already well-recognised in the literary and cultural circles of her time, mostly due to her later (and perhaps most famous) work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* – and which will be later discussed in this thesis. In fact, *Original Stories* gained such traction that it was reprinted by Joseph Johnson quite a few times during the 1790s. In particular, the book’s second edition would be graced with William Blake’s illustrations, the most recognised being the one in which the book’s protagonists – Mrs. Mason, Caroline and Mary – are standing together, forming a triangular frame between the pupils and their governess. Yet, “its popularity outlasted Wollstonecraft’s respectability” (2004: 40), as Caroline Franklin puts it in her book *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Literary Life*. Ever since Godwin published his scandalous memoirs of his late wife, Wollstonecraft’s reputation decreased considerably, so much so, in fact, that posthumous editions of her work were either published anonymously or diluted almost until non-existence.

Despite that, *Original Stories from Real Life* continued to be read, even without Wollstonecraft's name visibly attached to it, for it was a time in which children's literature was beginning to achieve significant power in eighteenth-century society. As Clara Tuite informs, "this elevation of childhood as special state is also apparent in the proliferation of children's literature and toys, and in the rapid growth of institutional schooling for the middle classes" (1999: 129). In the past, childhood was mostly seen almost as an inconsequential stage in a person's life, in which children were treated practically as small adults, and without any specific care taken with their nurturing. It was only with the proliferation of John Locke's education theories – presented in the essays previously referred to, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) – that this perception began to change. By means of an explanation, John Locke's ideas on education rest on the fundamental principle of having a "blank slate" for a mind at the time of birth. In other words, Locke views individuals as products of their gradual development, beings that are the sum of their learnings and experiences; a course that begins at birth with a mind and character void of any inherent prejudices and knowledge. As a result, it brings into question the type of familiar and learning environment that children are exposed to since young age as it is during their formative years that a person's character is shaped.

This reality is something that Mary Wollstonecraft was very much aware of, not only because she was an admirer of Locke's philosophy, but due to her own experiences as well. Three significant moments in her life helped shape her views on children's education. The first is situated during Wollstonecraft's own childhood, given that she had a major part in raising her siblings during those troubled years. The second moment would be set in the period in which she taught at her school in Newington Green. And the third and last moment is to be found while she worked as a governess for the Anglo-Irish Kingsborough family. The collected experience of these years – in which she had the opportunity to face the challenges of education through different prisms – is, in my understanding, what led Mary Wollstonecraft to write about this subject, particularly so because she started working on *Original Stories from Real Life* right after being dismissed by the Kingsboroughs in 1787. As it happens, she began developing this work after the

time she spent with her pupils in Ireland, and in turn, her favoured student – Margaret King – would honour her governess by rebranding herself Mrs. Mason later in life.⁶

Having this context in mind, writing a children's book became Wollstonecraft's next step in her quest to reach new demographics with her views on education. Julie Carlson further explains that "the linkage between childrearing and inscribing a child's mind [...] stressed the centrality of proper reading to the child's development and sense of connection to the world. But [her book] for children also explore not only the effects of reading and writing on mental and emotional development but also how the 'world of books,' especially the world of children's books, predetermines a child's reality" (2007: 213).

Original Stories, then, structures this subject through a frame narrative that illustrates the lives of Mrs. Mason and her two protégés, Mary (fourteen years old) and Caroline (twelve years old), during the latter's time with her in the countryside. Sent there by a widowed father who thought them "very troublesome at home" (243), Mary and Caroline are educated by the governess, Mrs. Mason – who the reader soon finds to be the literary stand-in for the author herself. Through a series of didactic tales, Mrs. Mason takes advantage of ordinary life experiences and routines in order to tutor the girls in matters of etiquette, morals and class issues. Or, in the words of Gary Kelly:

Wollstonecraft [...] uses a frame narrative and dialogues arising from commonplace, everyday domestic events to educate children in the full range of

⁶ Margaret King (1773-1835), also styled Mrs. Mason, or even known as Lady Mount Cashell, became Mary Wollstonecraft's favoured pupil. She devotedly adhered to Wollstonecraft's strong revolutionary principles, despite belonging to a wealthy aristocratic background. She openly supported progressive views on republicanism, education and women's rights. Ultimately, this guided her to a life of intrigue and scandal – not very far from the life her late governess led herself. Margaret separated from her first husband and remarried at least two more times, having lived and studied medicine both in Germany and Italy under the guise of being male. Her work as a physician and author, as well as her connection with the late Wollstonecraft, presented her with the opportunity of fostering a motherly and mentor connection with her governess's child, Mary Shelley (the renowned author of *Frankenstein*). Margaret King then welcomed her and her husband – the poet, Percy Shelley – and stepsister – Claire Clairmont – into her home and intellectual circle, becoming a constant and close circle of friends until Percy Shelley's death and Mary's return to England in 1822 (*apud* Carlson, 2007: 222).

professional middle-class beliefs, values and practices. But in its own right *Original Stories* is an important contribution to the new field of fictionalized educational writing for children. It was a step forward from *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, presenting more clearly Wollstonecraft's synthesis of Enlightenment philosophy, Sentimental culture and liberal Nonconformist ethical theology, focusing on the condition of women. (1992: 58)

Therefore, Wollstonecraft – through the character of Mrs. Mason – uses everyday surroundings as inspiration for her cautionary tales to teach children the meaning of a well-rounded education based on kindness and understanding of the natural world, as well as empathy for the less fortunate.

Moreover, another important factor that is worth taking note of is Wollstonecraft's reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau during her years as a governess, in particular his *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (in English, *Emile, or On Education*), "whose influence on the late eighteenth-century children's book is almost as great as that of Locke" (Richardson, 2002: 29). The relevance of Rousseau's work becomes apparent if one notices that he writes *Émile* (1762) around the premise that the protagonist of his treatise – and by extension, all children, really – should learn how to exercise virtue, self-restraint and introspection, even if society provides a different and imperfect outlet of existence. This educational process would be best experienced in communion with nature, seeing as Rousseau thought the countryside was a healthier and more practical environment than any enclosed classroom could be.

These notions are also shared by Wollstonecraft herself, seeing as she defends similar, if not the same principles, at times. For instance, she sets *Original Stories from Real Life* in the countryside, defending the superiority of the natural scenery in contextualizing opportunities for learning and building character based on a rational but humane and respectful understanding of the natural world –

Look, what a fine morning it is. Insects, birds, and animals, are all enjoying this sweet day. Thank God for permitting you to see it, and for giving you an understanding which teaches you that you ought, by doing good, to imitate Him. Other creatures only think of supporting themselves; but man is allowed to ennoble his nature, by cultivating his mind and enlarging his heart. (247)

Additionally, as much as Wollstonecraft found Rousseau's treatise too idealistic and patriarchal⁷, she still accepted many of his arguments regarding education. An example of such is how she agreed with Rousseau on how "instructing by circumstances" is preferable to "wasting time [...] in formal lessons and severe rebukes", since children learn by active experience, which would prevent them from forming artificial and unreasonable characters (Wollstonecraft *apud* Richardson, 2002: 29).

Yet, one cannot fault Wollstonecraft's work as being too idealistic. *Original Stories'* main purpose is to be a didactic book, after all – or the manuscript's title would not have been written in it the last segment "Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness". Accordingly, for Wollstonecraft, there would not be a greater instructor than real life itself, which explains the upsetting nature of some of her stories. An example of such is the amount of death and violence found in this text. In chapter one, whose initial keywords are "The treatment of animals. — The ant. — The bee. — Goodness. — The lark's nest. — The asses" (244), Mrs. Mason begins their stroll in the garden by asking her pupils "Do you know the meaning of the word Goodness?"

⁷ Rousseau's stance on female education is portrayed as patriarchal and castrating to eighteenth-century women. In *Émile*, Rousseau describes Sophie's education (Émile's bride-to-be) in complete opposition to the type of education he assigned to the title character. While Émile was strong, free, dominant, intellectual and cultured, Sophie was not. Rousseau wanted her – and by extension all women – to be meek, passive, pleasing, good housewives and nurturing mothers, thus essentially dedicating their existence to the male needs and desires that, in turn, commanded their lives. The response to this idea was significant, perhaps even surpassing the response of the work itself. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the critics who argued against Rousseau's plan for women. Most of her judicious commentary was addressed in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), which will be discussed at a later point in this dissertation. However, some criticism may be detected in *Original Stories from Real Life* as well. In fact, it is through the character of Mrs. Mason that Wollstonecraft protested against Rousseau's views on women, when she "demonstrated how easily girls can be educated, countering Rousseau's belief that women's minds were too weak to grasp moral truths and logical problems" (Gordon, 2015: 129).

(245), equating this virtue with empathy for the natural world. This question is preceded by the section in which the tutor carefully avoids stepping on a snail in her path, advising her wards to do the same, for she wishes

to make them happy; and, as I love my fellow-creatures still better than the brute creation, I would not allow those that I have any influence over, to grow habitually thoughtless and cruel, till they were unable to relish the greatest pleasure life affords, — that of resembling God, by doing good. (*ibidem*)

However, this sympathy is not to be understood as mere feminine sensitivity, since it is only a few paragraphs later that Mrs. Mason intentionally crushes the head of a wounded bird under her foot, killing it in the process so as to spare it from its agony. This creates an interesting association between the toughness of life and this daunting compassion, since it would be unreasonable to shield (young) girls from the reality of life and death, as they are unavoidable facets of existence. Such challenging circumstances would converge tenderness and strength of character, a prospect that, according to Wollstonecraft, is so familiar to women, as they know what the bodily burdens of their sex are: “The Almighty, who never afflicts but to produce some good end [...] sends diseases to children to teach them patience and fortitude”, while occasional “cold and hunger [...] make us feel what wretches feel” (309).

Subsequently, one can say that the author of *Original Stories* wishes to depart from the typical and nonsensical sensibility of the literature of the time, the one that portrays childhood as an idyllic state. In fact, this work is frequently perceived to be in direct opposition to the growing Romantic worship of childhood fantasies, creativity and innocence. Wollstonecraft does not shy away from including shocking and frightening details, attributes rarely present in polite children’s literature, but which bring a powerful realism to the tales she has Mrs. Mason share with Mary and Caroline.

For instance, the tale of “crazy Robin” – a man struck by poverty and various misfortunes – not only represents humanity’s impending and tragic predisposition for

becoming captives of their own minds, but it also symbolizes factual and physical imprisonments. By means of an explanation, when Robin lost his “cur dog” to a nobleman’s rage, he descended into a sickly melancholy that barred him from any form of survival instinct. So grief-stricken, Robin secluded himself in a cave, where he lamented the death of the only companion he had ever known, the one who was able to comfort him in his darkest moments. Mrs. Mason suggests that Robin’s cave – the place where the character grew increasingly insane, hopeless and isolated until his end – stands for the Bastille. The Parisian fortress, then, was synonymous with solitude and confinement, where the smallest of solaces were always temporary and, when lost, capable of reducing one’s mind to madness.

I told you, that Robin was confined in a jail. In France they have a dreadful one, called the Bastille. The poor wretches who are confined in it live entirely alone; have not the pleasure of seeing men or animals; nor are they allowed books. — They live in comfortless solitude. Some have amused themselves by making figures on the wall; and others have laid straws in rows. One miserable captive found a spider; he nourished it for two or three years; it grew tame, and partook of his lonely meal. The keeper observed it, and mentioned the circumstance to a superiour, who ordered him to crush it. In vain did the man beg to have his spider spared. You find, Mary, that the nasty creature which you despised was a comfort in solitude. The keeper obeyed the cruel command; and the unhappy wretch felt more pain when he heard the crush, than he had ever experienced during his long confinement. He looked round a dreary apartment, and the small portion of light which the grated bars admitted, only served to shew him, that he breathed where nothing else drew breath. (253)

Hence, elements of “barbarity, illness and injury” (Franklin, 2004: 42) are employed throughout *Original Stories* in order to educate the girls on the world’s harsh reality – a sordid representation that acquires traces of what is often associated with Gothic ballads and folktales. On the other hand, Caroline Franklin argues that “the Gothicism

of these tales is calculated to work on the subjectivity of the child reader to engage the emotions in developing their moral idealism away from mere personal salvation and towards the good of society. A good example is the account of a ruined mansion-house at twilight” (2004: 45). In this particular tale in chapter ten, Mrs. Mason tells the story of a wealthy family whose ineptitude, lack of resolve and eventual insanity reduced them to a hollow ending. In this aspect, Mary Wollstonecraft seems to anticipate Edgar Allan Poe’s Gothic horror, as she extends the decadence, immorality and idleness of aristocracy to the physical descriptions of their surroundings. In this manner, the imagery of the uncanny atmosphere irradiating from the area translates into the suffocating atmosphere, which, in turn, influences the children’s response as they learn of its story.

Be calm, my child, and remember that you must attend to trifles; do all the good you can the present day, nay hour, if you would keep your conscience clear. This circumspection may not produce dazzling actions, nor will your silent virtue be supported by human applause; but your Father, who seeth in secret, will reward you. (280)

Once again, God’s paternal love for his children is employed to educate young girls to pursue proper religious doctrine, “for wisdom consists in searching Him out — and goodness in endeavouring to copy His attributes” (295). Thus, once more Wollstonecraft lays out her education plan by promoting a middle-class ethos itself based on Christian virtues but at the same time sensible qualities, such as self-discipline, morality, productivity, humility, frugality and industry – all of which would help any child, in particular young girls, to become suitable talents for social and cultural progress of in eighteenth-century society.

Accordingly, the female examples depicted lay on opposite spectrums of decency. Perhaps the most prominent are the ones of Lady Sly and Mrs. Trueman. Mrs. Mason tells Mary and Caroline the story of these two cousins, one malicious and false, the other

good and humble. Lady Sly, as Mrs. Mason reports to the reader, is someone vain who only lives for gossip and superficial and exhibitionist performances of wealth. In other words, she abides by “state, not dignity” (260), or as further explained:

This woman has a little soul, she never attended to truth, and obtaining great part of her fortune by falsehood, it has blighted all her enjoyments. She inhabits that superb house, wears the gayest clothes, and rides in that beautiful carriage, without feeling pleasure. Suspicion, and the cares it has given birth to, have wrinkled her countenance, and banished every trace of beauty, which paint in vain endeavours to repair. Her suspicious temper arises from a knowledge of her own heart, and the want of rational employments. (*ibidem*)

This results in her lack of goodness and virtue, which curbs her ability to pray to God and have real and loyal connections to those around her.

To kill time, and drive away the pangs of remorse, she goes from one house to another, collecting and propagating scandalous tales, to bring others on a level with herself. Even those who resemble her are afraid of her; she lives alone in the world, its good things are poisoned by her vices, and neither inspire joy nor gratitude. (*ibidem*)

In contrast, Mrs. Trueman is described as, perhaps, the most perfect example of femininity, motherhood and friendship in all *Original Stories from Real Life*. The curator’s wife is described as having experienced a “most liberal education” (262), which prepared her for a life of integrity and rational use of her learnings. Although her marriage was one of convenience, Mrs. Mason assures the reader that “in spite of their mutual disappointments, [they] are contented with their lot; and are preparing themselves and children for another world, where truth, virtue and happiness dwell together” (*ibidem*). The narrator expounds beyond this point when she declares:

Though she has not any outward decorations, she appears superior to her neighbours, who call her the *Gentlewoman*; indeed every gesture shews an accomplished and dignified mind, that relies on itself; when deprived of the fortune which contributed to polish and give it consequence. (261)

The title – Gentlewoman – is, therefore, a reflection not only of her courteous manners, but also of the elevation of her character, a form of respect that cannot be bought with money or aristocratic labels. For that reason, this honorary title is here applied as a more respected version of the term “lady” – a word that bears connections to the (moral) corruption usually found in the aristocratic class. Knowing this, the merit in Mrs. Trueman obtaining such praise from her peers becomes especially clear, when considering the application of this word is usually reserved for the masculine counterpart, even when their character does not particularly reflect the qualities and abilities expected from the bearers of such title.

That being said, it is common to find critics who view *Original Stories from Real Life* as an oppressive didactic book. Julie Carlson contends: “Overly didactic, overly domesticated and conventional, even prissy, these writings hardly suit the Amazonian feminist who will burst onto the intellectual scene in just a few years” (2007: 222). Others tend to focus their criticism on Mrs. Mason’s callous and cold manner of speech. The most frequently invoked example is when Mrs. Mason – while explaining humans’ duty to be good and protect nature’s inferior and defenceless beings – admits nonchalantly: “You are often troublesome — I am stronger than you — yet I do not kill you” (245). Even her protégé, Mary, admits at one point being frightened by her. “I am afraid of Mrs. Mason’s eyes — would you think, Caroline, that she who looks so very good-natured sometimes, could frighten one so?” (263). Although it is a perception that soon changes, this remark is often used to argue against Mrs. Mason’s harsh nature and manner of speaking – something that seems particularly austere to us, due to the natural evolution of language and ways of educating children throughout the centuries. In my understanding, I recognize that certain interactions between mentor and pupils seem

somewhat curious and singular (mainly due only to my contemporary perception), but I do not believe them to be particularly cruel, nor despotic. As for Blake's illustrations – often used to exemplify the overbearing relation between them – I propose that it could be a representation of a protective mentor towards her students, rather than tyrannical and repressive mother-figure.

I believe, however, that this work stands as a didactic book, and as a form of social critique as well. Not only did Wollstonecraft create a perspective on childhood that differs from those of the Romantics (as previously discussed), but also examines – and, consequently, criticizes – eighteenth-century problems, such as aristocratic faults, poverty, immorality, lack of self-reliance and general virtue in the educational codes of rising middle-class ethos.

Taking everything into account, her goal was to provide a guide suitable for children and their parents on how to best educate future generations. Through Mary and Caroline, Wollstonecraft built a convincing account of the natural growth of those young girls, by having them develop their minds and hearts instead of feeding them senseless fairy tales. They had first come to Mrs. Mason heavily influenced by deficient predisposition of characters – “They were shamefully ignorant [...]. If they had been merely ignorant, the task would not have appeared so arduous; but they had caught every prejudice that the vulgar casually instil” (243) – and by the end of their time with her, they were grateful for the lessons learnt in her company. And Mrs. Mason herself now viewed them as dear friends, instead of mere students. At the end of their time together, she gifts them a special book, a log of their experiences, for them to read and rely on in times of introspection and nostalgia, ending with the promise of growth and reunion.

I shall anxiously wait for the summer, to see what progress you have made by yourselves. [...] I now, as my last present, give you a book, in which I have written the subjects that we have discussed. Recur frequently to it, for the stories illustrating the instruction it contains, you will not feel in such a great degree the

want of my personal advice. Some of the reasoning you may not thoroughly comprehend, but, as your understandings ripen, you will feel its full force. (318)

On the whole, *Original Stories from Real Life* endures as Wollstonecraft's successful creation of a children's book. Although her Christian values still permeate her views on female education, the truth is that her once rigid religiosity is now diluting into more accommodating and even spontaneous methods of instruction and reflection. There are already faint traces of Wollstonecraft's progressive advocacy for women's education, which are developed with more detail and with added passion in her most renowned work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

3. Chapter III - *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Known to the world as Mary Wollstonecraft's most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* stands in history as "one of the few political or philosophical texts by a woman that is generally recognized as a classic of Western civilization" (Botting, 2014: 4). Regarded as one of the founding texts of modern feminism, this treatise's premise is clear from the start – women should be allowed the same rights and education as men, for it is only through an all-inclusive political and social existence that they could reach the complete essence of their "souls" (Wollstonecraft, 2008: 276).⁸

Rights of Woman was written against the violent and deeply contentious background that was the French Revolution. The Storming of the Bastille in 1789 would start a radical but prolific period in Europe's history, in which Britain would also be engaged.

This engagement began in what is now known as the Revolution Controversy, a British debate conducted from 1789 to 1795 through a pamphlet war between critics and admirers of the French Revolution. In response to Richard Price – a Dissenting clergyman and friend of Mary Wollstonecraft, as pointed out above – the Irish statesman, Edmund Burke, published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), a political text in which he denounced the drastic lengths led by the revolutionaries on the other side of the English Channel. A liberal Whig partisan, Burke argued against the violence and cruelty of the French radicals who wrongfully incited citizens to overthrow a legitimate government, since it would only generate anarchy and false notions of political power among those that did not understand it enough to exercise it. At one point, he went as far as declaring that those radical ideals would eventually corrupt the once progressive government, ending their dreams of reform in a military dictatorship. This prediction – or "Burkean nightmare" (Franklin, 2004: 109), as many saw it – proved

⁸ All further quotations from this particular Wollstonecraft work are from this edition. For this reason, only page numbers will be indicated within parenthesis from now on.

true during the Reign of Terror, when many were massacred and executed for standing against the French Republic.

Wollstonecraft's was the first response to Burke's pamphlet – which William Godwin observed in his *Memoirs* about his wife: "Mary, full of sentiments of liberty, and impressed with a warm interest in the struggle that was now going on, seized her pen in the first burst of indignation, an emotion of which she was strongly susceptible" (2015: 27). Published only weeks after Burke's *Reflections, A Vindication of the Rights of Men* was Wollstonecraft's literary assault on Burke's arguments in his work, which she thought weak and full of logical inconsistencies. Grounded on Enlightened principles presented in a distinctive Dissent rhetoric, Wollstonecraft's aim was "to shew you [Burke] to yourself, stripped of the gorgeous drapery in which you have enwrapped your tyrannic principles" (2008: 37). Janet Todd further explains this idea:

Cleverly providing a close reading of Burke's text, for which her time working for the *Analytical Review* must have prepared her, she moved from Burke's arguments about the hereditary principle, the constitution, and the law, to attack the mental structure that supported them, assaulting the patriarchy message in his tropes (which made revolution into parricide) as much as the message in his arguments. (2008: xii)

Although many considered her attack on Burke to be "*ad hominem*" (*ibidem*), hurried, disorganized and even unreasoned at times, the reality is that *A Vindication of Rights of Men* soon became very successful, especially its second edition, which was edited to be a clearer and sharper criticism of Burke and his views. In fact, the most famous response to this pamphlet war paid homage to Wollstonecraft's work – Thomas Paine's *Rights of Men*, published in 1791.

Yet, one thing that most works of the Revolution Controversy have in common is the absence of arguments that concern women's involvement in this new political and social order. This was an obvious reflection of the approach conducted by the French

revolutionaries. Following the publication of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) – the celebrated civil rights treaty that set the core values of citizenship and freedom for the new Republican system – many did not hesitate to preach for the plenitude of rights the eighteenth-century man should enjoy at the fall of the *ancien régime*. However, the pioneering civil liberties in which they basked were forbidden to women, who were grossly ignored in their plans for their new world. The lack of concern for women’s participation in the groundbreaking political, social, and educational plans derived from the *Declaration* led to many critics questioning why women should not have the same rights. Some of the most important supporters of this were the Marquis de Condorcet, in his *Sur l’Admission des femmes au droit de Cité* (1790)⁹, and Olympe de Gouges in her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*¹⁰ (1791) (Furniss, 2002: 62).

In particular, the issue of education was one that is best understood through the example of Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord and his *Rapport sur l’instruction publique* (1791).¹¹ In his work delivered to the National Assembly, Talleyrand-Périgord constructed a national plan for coeducation, a unique prospect for the time. Nonetheless, what “his otherwise admirable proposal lacked was an overarching defence of women’s rights, beyond the limited right of orphan girls to the same government-sponsored education as boys” (Tomaselli 1995, 320 *apud* Botting, 2014: 264).

⁹ In English, it would be *On the Admission of Women to the Right of Citizenship* (1790).

¹⁰ *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (in English, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*) projected Olympe de Gouges into the very heart of the fiery political debate of the French Revolution. As a passionate advocate of human rights and female emancipation, Olympe de Gouges challenged the patriarchal imperative by questioning women’s male-created inferiority. Aware of de Gouges’s work, Wollstonecraft embraced much of the latter’s arguments for her own. For instance, both questioned the assimilation of the term “human” with male prerogatives, demanding at the same time a revision of political rights for women’s education. Still, the French political activist’s work went beyond and was more critical than Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman*, for she supported what was perceived at that time as extreme notions of female liberation. An example is de Gouges’s claim that “Woman is born free and lives equal to man in her rights” (*apud* Gordon, 2015: 217) – a statement that Wollstonecraft acknowledged, but never explicitly declared herself, only pleading for gender equality in certain areas. Olympe de Gouges especially contentious views made her a target for the Jacobins, who eventually ordered her arrest and execution by guillotine in 1793.

¹¹ In English, the work’s title would be *Report on public education* (1791).

It was, therefore, with this circumstance in mind that Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her most famous work. Consequently, one can affirm that *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* flows naturally into the *Rights of Woman*, the latter becoming an extension of the former. The backdrop for the first work orbits around the male republican inclinations of the emerging bourgeois ethos of eighteenth-century Britain. The second work, on the other hand, concerns itself with conceptual and universal issues about the entirety of the female sex.¹² Published in 1792, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* began with a dedication to Talleyrand-Périgord, in which her attempt to influence the French debate concerning female education is clear.

Sir, Having read with great pleasure a pamphlet which you have lately published. I dedicate this volume to you; to induce you to reconsider the subject, and maturely weigh what I have advanced respecting to rights of woman and national education.
(65)

Wollstonecraft's usual distinct rational discourse is obvious from the start, a trait that leads her to admit that she does not hope to convince him of her character for personal gain. "I plea for my sex – not for myself" (*ibidem*), she avows. Her textual persona, voiced in a sharp and witty first-person narrative, draws from her own self the ethos needed to defend the arguments for change. In a time when the Era of Enlightenment was giving in to the Romantic Age, the question of human rights – especially those of women and

¹² An author whose work and views on this matter also greatly influenced Wollstonecraft was Catherine Macaulay's with her *Letters on Education* (1790). Being a Whig republican historian, Macaulay's beliefs very much aligned with those of Mary Wollstonecraft, especially those surrounding the issues concerning women's education, for they both believed that there were no differences between the sexes, as they both have the potential to exercise their inherent intellectual power (Clarke, 2014: 50). Indeed, Wollstonecraft thought Catherine Macaulay was "the woman of the greatest abilities, undoubtedly, that this country has ever produced" (*apud* Todd 2000: 179 *apud ibidem*). While they had never met, the author of *Rights of Woman* sought Macaulay's acquaintance, recognition and approval on her work. For this reason, she sent to Macaulay a copy of her work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, as she wrote to her "you are the only female writer who I coincide in opinion with respecting the rank our sex ought to endeavour to attain in the world. I respect Mrs. Macaulay Graham because she contends for laurels whilst most of her sex only seek for flowers" (*apud ibidem*). Unfortunately, Catherine Macaulay passed away before they were able to meet.

slaves – continued to be discussed and fought for, to which Mary Wollstonecraft's treaty was a central piece. In truth, hers was one of the most ardent defences for female education. Furthermore, the author of *Rights of Woman* did not shy away from criticising both her peers and literary and philosophical forebears in order to make her point. To Talleyrand-Périgord, she complained:

But, if women are to be excluded, without having a voice, from a participation of the natural rights of mankind, prove first, to ward off the charge of injustice and inconsistency, that they want reaction – else this flaw in your never new constitution will ever shew that man must, in some shape, act like a tyrant, and tyranny, in whatever part of society it rears its brazen front, will ever undermine morality. (67)

However, the fervour of her criticism is mainly directed toward those whose academic influence perpetuates castrating notions of female existence. By critically exploring influential conduct books and mainstream views of the period, Wollstonecraft pans how prominent intellectual figures endorsed a dominant ideal of femininity. Let us take into account the ideas of the Enlightenment philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Although she initially professed a great admiration for Rousseau, Wollstonecraft exposed her concerns when she came across obvious gendered distinctions in *Émile's* proposal, as his stance on woman's rights and education greatly frustrate her (Gordon, 2015: 182). In the words of Janet Todd,

in the *Rights of Woman* she primarily took issue with a philosopher whose views were intimately bound up with the French Revolution: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Émile* had a profound effect on educational thinking and whose heady novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* she found both fascinating and dangerous. (2008: xviii)

As it happens, Rousseau's views on women are considered to be too patriarchal and limiting. While he advocated for women's instruction, this was to be restricted to render them submissive and decorous partners for their husbands. An example of such is his work, *Émile*, in which Rousseau's lead female character, Sophie, sees her education neglected in favour of her male counterpart, her future husband. The reason for that decision, as Wollstonecraft herself explains Rousseau's opinion, is that "if man did attain a degree of perfection of mind when his body arrived at maturity, it might be proper, in order to make a man and his wife one, the she should rely entirely in his understanding" (87). Hence Rousseau's justification of women's lack of instruction, since their dependence of men would be, according to him, their only need for existing: to make their husbands content, whole, strong, and even, I dare say, perfect in their unity. Thus, women's (artificial and diminishing) meekness – or in Wollstonecraft's ironic words "gentleness, docility, and spaniel-like affection" (100) – is exactly the type of subservient behaviour expected from eighteenth-century society, which does not expect, nor desires a wife to be an equal and rational partner in the relationship.

Moreover, Rousseau was not the only target of her criticism. Mary Wollstonecraft also criticizes John Gregory, the Scottish Enlightenment humanist "who fell into a similar error" (94) as Rousseau's, as well as John Milton. Author of *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1761), "Dr Gregory" (94) – as Wollstonecraft addresses him in *Rights of Woman* – wrote his most famous work after the death of his wife not only to honour her memory, but to have a written record for his daughters on female education, as well. His conduct book, however, did not fit well with Wollstonecraft's judgment, since his advice was channelled into teaching his daughters how to indulge in their "fondness of dress" (*ibidem*), which was, according to him, a natural interest adequate for their level of intellect. As for Milton, Wollstonecraft censures his idea of "Edenic domesticity" (Jones, 2002: 135), which conditions women to a life of passive, weak and indulgent manners, and whose (corporeal) existence was fashioned only to captivate the (sexual) desire of men – the same way Eve was shaped to be Adam's companion:

Milton describes our first frail mother; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designated by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify that senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation. (84)

Placing fault on the deficient education allowed to women until then, Wollstonecraft denounces false notions of womanhood, that were envisioned and legitimised by men and “civil governments” (124), and which were inadvertently passed on by incompetent mothers (84), themselves having been affected by such prejudices. Their responsibility was equally shared, given that they did not concern themselves with matters outside the constitutional laws and cultural dogmas of the time, and which were instilled in them since birth and always in accordance with their sex.

One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures [...]; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized woman of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition [...]. (71)

Wollstonecraft goes even further in her complaints when she voices the similarity between the senseless and oppressive male-dominated eighteenth-century societies with despotic regimes. She claims, therefore: “the divine right of husbands, like the divine right of kings, may [...] in this enlightened age, be contested without danger” (108). According to her, these are doomed to collapse, as previously witnessed in France, since the age of reason brings forth the dispelling of the illusory authoritarian claim that men have over women. After all, the author of *Rights of Woman* argues, “who made man the exclusive judge, if women partake with him the gift of reason?” (67).

Thus, women have a social – and even a national – obligation to educate themselves and their progeny for society's growth: "if she be not prepared by education [...], she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue" (66). Having been placed "on this earth to unfold their faculties" (72), women are guided by reason, for it is the most essential and God-given characteristic of the human genius that warrants women's "character as a human being" (73). In this manner, Wollstonecraft once again equates a rational education with a virtuous and moral exercise of women's intellect, which has been a constant in her work, proving once more that it is (or should be) their humanity, and not their sex, that renders respect, moral correctness and intelligence for women.

Correspondingly, one might argue that her discourse regarding female vices might be somewhat misogynistic, seeing as she highlights how some women rely on manipulative and sensual behaviours, which, in turn, might have given reason to male critics and philosophers who backed female learning restrictions – "On this sensual error, for I must call it so, has the false system of female manners been reared, which robs the whole sex of its dignity, and classes the brown and fair with the smiling flowers that only adorn the land" (122). However, I do not agree with this argument. While it is true that Wollstonecraft still presents here some traces of a certain religious conservatism, I believe that much of its rigid views of the world and sociability between sexes – as previously seen in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* – were starting to loosen their power on her. For this reason, even as such women were behaving in those terms, it was only because it was the way they were taught to exercise power in a society that limited and judged said faculty in women in the first place. As follows, even though Wollstonecraft condemns it, she is also supporting her claims to a much necessary formal and comprehensive education for eighteenth-century women.

Freedom to education, then, becomes Wollstonecraft's main purpose in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, for it was the only way of bringing a social and cultural reset in the manner women were judged. As the author clarifies, "It is time to effect a revolution in female manners – time to restore to them their lost dignity – and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world" (113).

Accordingly, Mary Wollstonecraft ends *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* with a proposal for a political and social project, based on educational reforms. In her plan, schools would exercise a free, public and coeducational system as part of a new modern republican society – “day schools, for particular ages, should be established by the government, in which boys and girls might be educated together. The school for the younger children, from five to nine years of age, ought to be absolutely free and open to all classes” (252). On the political and legal spectrum, Wollstonecraft sponsors egalitarian marital and civil principles for both men and women, for example, the legal right to possess and allocate property; admission of women to all professional areas with paid employment; and the right to vote. In other words, they must be conferred a “civil existence in the State, married or single” (230).

All in all, Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* couples both domains of social and political, private and public, thus becoming more of a courtesy book than a political tract (Todd, 2008: xix). In fact, Gary Kelly defends that *Rights of Woman* is, to his understanding, a “meta-conduct book – a commentary and critique on conduct books as instruments in the construction of woman”, meant, therefore, to revolutionize the eighteenth-century “professional middle-class”, as well as its cultural and social spheres of influence (1992: 112). An example of its applicability to the emerging middle-class ethos was the link between “female emancipation to the values of the mercantile middle class” (Todd, 2008: xxiv). By means of an explanation, Wollstonecraft praised the merchant whose self-reliance assured the success of his enterprise, even without (aristocratic) family connections or wealth. To this idea is connected the notion of a rational and virtuous woman who disposed of any endowed privileges in their control solely due to their gender, false dispositions of chivalry and hedonism.

Yet, in the words of Charlotte Gordon, “like her male contemporaries, Mary had dedicated herself to creating a new political vision. Both jeremiad and prophecy, *Rights of Woman* reveals her as a teacher, a hellfire preacher, a satirist, and a utopian dreamer” (2015: 183). And although she seemed displeased with her work at first – “I am dissatisfied with myself for not having done justice to the subject” (Wollstonecraft *apud* Franklin, 2004: 101), the truth is that – despite having been written in a passionate

frenzy and only having sold a few thousand copies when it first came out – *Rights of Woman* soon became known throughout Europe.

To many, as Janet Todd points out, “she became Horace Walpole’s ‘hyena in petticoats’, for others Mary Hays’s champion of the female sex” (2008: xix). This polarising reaction to *Rights of Woman* came from several segments of Britain’s academic and cultural fields. William Blake, for instance, would be inspired to compose his *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). On the other hand, Hannah More, one of the most influential women from Wollstonecraft’s time, and who also associated with the Bluestocking Society – refused to read her work, in part due to its “Paineite title” (Franklin, 2004: 102). The latter, according to Norma Clarke, “were not generally sympathetic to the radical ideas canvassed amongst Wollstonecraft’s circle of writers and thinkers, being, for the most part, keen upholders of church and state and the established order” (Clarke, 2014: 247). Wollstonecraft’s newfound radicalism was not understood by More, since her conservative belief in the division of social roles led her to procure a more subdued reformation within the already established order. There were other similar reactions to the author’s work. Wollstonecraft’s old acquaintance Thomas Taylor coupled her with Paine in his mean-spirited parody, *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes* (1792). William Godwin, too, had not enjoyed *Rights of Woman*. He thought it was careless and incoherent – an opinion proclaimed mostly due to his antipathy for its author, a fact that time would soon change, seeing that they would initiate a relationship not long after.

The revolution in education and women’s rights, as Wollstonecraft envisioned it, was not as widespread as many perhaps would think. In fact, the author herself only started truly living as the controversial figure that she was known for after she came back from France as an unmarried mother. In a way, the polemic surrounding her life extended to her work, as well. The radical aspects of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* were not only infamously disseminated to the general public until much later after Wollstonecraft had passed away and Godwin’s scandalous remarks tarnished his wife’s reputation. If not for Godwin, Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* would not be deemed as dangerous and unsuitable for the time, a fact that hid her potential and the impact it would have

in its author's campaign for women's rights to a meaningful education during her lifetime.

4. Chapter IV - *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*

Mary Wollstonecraft's recognition as a revolutionary proto-feminist philosopher and writer predominantly comes from her political and philosophical treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Her contentious arguments on female education and women's rights marked the public's perception of her throughout Europe as a female writer of intriguing but demanding principles. Yet, the literary creation that truly advanced and celebrated her name and career among her contemporaries was the one that followed *Rights of Woman*.

Published in 1796, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* is Wollstonecraft's last completed work and the most successful during her lifetime. Certainly, this work is a blend of different literary genres – combining the qualities of travelogue, autobiographical narrative and epistolary novel.

The context in which this book came to exist is rather significant, considering its author's controversial life. After the publication of *Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft travelled to France in the hopes of personally experiencing and recording the exciting revolutionary changes brought by the French Revolution. What she encountered for the most part, though, was the violence and political and ideological persecutions so terribly associated with the Reign of Terror of the recently established First French Republic. There, she met Gilbert Imlay, an American adventurer and speculator who soon became her lover. To protect her and their unborn child during that particularly brutal period of France's history, Imlay had registered Wollstonecraft as his wife in the United States Embassy – and even though they were never actually married, she adopted the title and signature of "Mrs. Mary Imlay" in some circles. Disappointed with what once was a pioneer and visionary reform, the "horrors [she] had witnessed in France, which had cast a gloom all over nature" (Wollstonecraft, 2019a:

10)¹³ compelled Wollstonecraft to return to England and to Imlay's side. However, his continuous absence and infidelity left her to deal with the darkest consequences of her depressive mental state. Following a failed suicide attempt, Wollstonecraft wished to regain her lover's affection, thus she "accept[ed] Imlay's commission to go to Scandinavia in pursuit of a dubious business adventure that had gone awry" (Brekke & Mee, 2009: xiii). In the event, Mary Wollstonecraft's journey through Scandinavia proved to be a true "voyage of escape, money and love" (Favret, 2002: 212), an experience of (self-)discovery that culminated in her *Short Residence*.

Despite presenting a personal account of her travels, Wollstonecraft compiled her work in a critical tone, as she did not shy away from commenting on political, economic and social issues witnessed in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. After all, she always made an earnest defence of "the most essential service [...] that authors could render to society, [that is] to promote inquiry and discussion" (33). From staple observations on the daily routines to more ethically and politically charged opinions, the author of *Short Residence* did not "pretend to sketch a national character; but merely to note the present state of morals and manners, as [she] trace[d] the progress of the world's improvement" (108), for the political and social climates of Europe are one of her "favourite subject[s] of contemplation" (122).

Still, the novelty of her work did not rest on the fact that it was the first of its kind, since, obviously, other renowned travel narratives already existed – two examples of such works are *The Travels of Marco Polo* (c. 1300), by Marco Polo and Samuel Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775). *Short Residence*, however, was considered unprecedented because its author was female. As Caroline Franklin clarifies:

The book's greatest novelty, of course, lay in its being written by a woman. Originally, travel writing had been the preserve of the aristocrat on his Grand Tour, a diplomat or colonizer; the objectivity of whose observations was guaranteed by a

¹³ All further quotations from this particular Wollstonecraft work are from this edition. For this reason, only page numbers will be indicated within parenthesis from now on.

distanced prose style and securely grounded in male British ruling-class identity. However, travelogue had been interbreeding with the novel form since the days of Defoe. (2004: 105)

This particular episode in Europe's history observed great demographic migrations, from refugees escaping oppressive and dangerous regimes (as the one in place during the Terror), to simple but desperate families in search of a better life. However, the word "travel" hardly denotes these descriptions, for it is a label that is inherent to the privileges afforded in accordance with birth and wealth. The "dawn of modern travel" – as the eighteenth-century is often called – is, in reality, a symbolical "freedom of movement" that characterizes "both advanced societies and high rank" (Favret, 2002: 213). Travels were supposed to be lived and documented by individuals of elevated social standing (in other words, the sons of aristocracy), not by the lowly masses, and certainly not by an unmarried woman travelling alone with her illegitimate child.

Therefore, the prevalent idea present in *Short Residence* is one of cultural and social change, for it now depicted the transformation of the middle-class ethos whose force was gaining momentum and moving away from its previous social restraints. These circumstances would facilitate the middle-class access to the various mediums of education only previously available to the higher classes. In the words of Wollstonecraft:

If travelling, as the completion of a liberal education, were to be adopted on rational grounds, the northern states ought to be visited before the more polished part of Europe, to serve as the elements even of the knowledge of manners, only to be acquired by tracing the various shades in different countries. (109)

Aware of this reality, the author combines the genre of travel literature with an informal epistolary style,¹⁴ which she employs to create a connection between reader and storyteller within the intimate scope of her mind, thus allowing her thoughts and confessions to become a “cultural anthropology” (Carlson, 2007: 11) and, consequently, an inspiration to women writers to enter this field.¹⁵

Moreover, the book also represents how the Era of Enlightenment was yielding to the Romantic Age. As Virginia Sapiro explains:

As literary critics and historians who study Wollstonecraft know well, her *Letters* was a signal text in the history of Romanticism, highly influential along with the likes of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and his wife, Wollstonecraft’s daughter, Mary Godwin Shelley. (2014: 287)

The trait that perhaps best represents this significant shift in Wollstonecraft’s work is the language. In her previous works, predominantly in her *Vindications*, Wollstonecraft set a direct and logical tone in which she advocated for female education and the elevation of women’s regard in eighteenth-century society. Yet, what the reader now witnesses in *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* is a change from Wollstonecraft’s distinctive assertive rationality to gripping and instinctive descriptions in which her emotions dictate the power of her discourse. She herself admitted its influence on her character’s nature and disposition:

¹⁴ Wollstonecraft addresses the unnamed recipient of her *Letters Written During a Short Residence* in an informal but intimate tone. In truth, *Short Residence* is essentially a polished compilation extracted from journal entries and correspondence she kept with Imlay during her travels through Scandinavia.

¹⁵ Although there had been female works published before Wollstonecraft’s, the author of *Short Residence* thought them for the most part silly and shallow, for they lacked substance to go beyond the entertainment they provided. An example of such works is Hester Lynch Piozzi’s *Observations and Reflections, Made in the Course of a Journey Through France, Italy and Germany* (1789), which Wollstonecraft studied for the *Analytical Review*. While she saw Piozzi’s work as full of “frivolous, superficial remarks” (*apud* Franklin, 2004: 155), in contrast, she admired Helen Maria Williams’s *Letters written in France* (1790), because of its crusading purpose and “true femininity” (*apud ibidem*).

You have sometimes wondered, my dear friend, at the extreme affection of my nature – But such is the temperature of my soul – It is not the vivacity of youth, the hey-day of existence. For years have I endeavoured to calm an impetuous tide-labouring to make my feelings take an orderly course. (50)

This “language of sentiment” (Brekke & Mee, 2009: xvii) reflects the emotional rule that her first-person narrative voice had in the course of this work. Her “desultory style” (3), as Wollstonecraft herself described it, allowed her to “cultivate sensibility, and cherish delicacy of sentiment” (36), which, in turn, emphasised the “effect different objects had produced on [her] mind and feelings” (3). This would become a principal element of Romantic language.

Furthermore, a motif commonly associated with Romanticism is the adoration of nature as a place for introspection, rest, and communion between the self and the natural world. As previously addressed, *Original Stories from Real Life* is the only piece among her major works that had its story staged in the countryside, a setting that promoted the children’s (intellectual and moral) growth through empathy and benevolence for the weaker creatures and the exercise of critical reasoning that they would form not only about themselves, but also about a collective understanding of the tragedies, achievements and evolutions of their society. Nonetheless, what the reader now witnesses in *Short Residence* is the revisitation of this idea, but on a different level. In this work, Wollstonecraft still views nature as a liberating environment for sagacious contemplation. However, she introduces the weight of emotional response to the already influential power of nature over her mind.

When a warm heart has received strong impressions, they are not to be effaced. Emotions become sentiments; and the imagination renders even transient sensations permanent, by fondly retracing them. I cannot, without a thrill of delight, recollect views I have seen, which are not to be forgotten, – nor looks I have felt in every nerve which I shall never more meet. (39)

Rooted in sensibility – a construct “that Wollstonecraft spent her entire career resisting” (Brekke & Mee, 2009: xxiii) – the author’s powerful reaction to Scandinavia’s natural scenery details the exceptional interaction of the senses with the rational mind, thus revealing a concern for the “nature of human psychology” (*ibidem*: xviii). Hence, it is through this kind of discourse that Wollstonecraft approaches aesthetic theories of the sublime and picturesque while referring to nature and art. As described below:

the Romantic sublime drew upon the aesthetic theories of Burke and Gilpin; and on a literary equivalent of putting the figure of the artist in the corner of the picture in eighteenth-century topographical poetry. (Franklin, 2004: 153)

In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke famously classified beauty as a concept inherently associated with aesthetic appeal and polite sociability which itself is attached to notions of gentle and sensitive femininity (Brekke & Mee, 2009: xix). In contrast, the sublime is associated with “what inspires awe and towers over us” (*ibidem*); or, in other words, the masculine power to compel and ruin one’s soul. This was Wollstonecraft’s case, for when she reached the cascade near Fredericstadt in Norway she experienced a torrent of pleasing but also intimidating and overwhelming emotions, ranging from existential self-doubt to wonder:

my soul was hurried by the falls into a new train of reflections. The impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cavities which mocked the exploring eye, produced an equal activity in my mind: my thoughts darted from earth to heaven, and I asked myself why I was chained to life and its misery? Still the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited, were pleasurable; and, viewing it, my soul rose, with renewed dignity, above its cares – grasping at immortality – it seemed as impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me – I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come. (89)

However, Wollstonecraft resists Burke's theory, for she did not agree with his gendering of aesthetic concepts since she defended women to be perfectly capable of grasping male-centred notions such as sublimity. In fact, the author merges these two concepts into one: the picturesque. The blurred boundaries of those two pillars of the picturesque ideal are what grant Wollstonecraft creativity in redefining Burke's initial aesthetic theory. In the example that follows, Wollstonecraft merges the physical world with the self's inner subjectivity: "This anxiety increased when, turning into the most picturesque bay I ever saw, my eyes sought in vain for the vestige of a human habitation" (7). Oftentimes linked with ideas of delight, amazement and serenity, the picturesque imagery here described is oddly introduced by a sense of uneasiness:

There was a solemn silence in this scene, which made itself be felt. The sun-beams that played on the ocean, scarcely ruffled by the lightest breeze, contrasted with the huge, dark rocks, that looked like the rude materials of creation forming the barrier of unwrought space, forcibly struck me [...]. I did not immediately recollect that men who remain so near the brute creation, as only to exert themselves to find the food necessary to sustain life, have little or no imagination to call forth the curiosity necessary to fructify the faint glimmerings of mind which entitles them to rank as lords of the creation. – Had they either, they could not contentedly remain rooted in the clods they so indolently cultivate. (*ibidem*)

This curious and critical note on Wollstonecraft's surroundings proves how the physical, exterior world attends the private and personal realms of the self, demonstrating how one's understanding and sense of (intellectual and emotional) agency is deeply influenced by the immediate atmosphere. Providing an explanation, Labbe argues that:

Such a narrative strategy portrays the picturesque as not only powerful, not only fused, but creative in a way not before encountered. [...] Given the cultural significance of the prospect, one would expect to see it associated with the sublime, were it occupying its usual eminent position in the aesthetic hierarchy; Wollstonecraft upsets these expectations, however, endowing the picturesque with a personal and universal power that destabilizes that very hierarchy. (1998: 62 *apud* Franklin, 2004: 128)

I believe Labbe is here possibly referring to Wollstonecraft's personal take on religion. Earlier in life, Mary Wollstonecraft was a strict disciple of the Church of England's teachings. Yet, through William Godwin's *Memoirs*, we know that she was deeply influenced by religious dissenters, which ultimately shaped her personal perception of religion, seeing as it was "almost entirely of her own creation [...] the growth of her own moral taste" (2015: 14). Coupling this indication to Wollstonecraft's idea of nature, one can perhaps declare that the author of *Short Residence* was now beginning to demonstrate deistic concerns – which amounted to a challenge that alienated some of her readers.

The book was perceived as more dangerous than *Rights of Woman* because it wasn't a polemic. It was entertaining; the reviewers all agreed on its high literary quality. Through subjective evocations of sublime scenery, it would dazzle unsuspecting readers. Wollstonecraft's landscape painting wasn't harmless: it undermined orthodox belief in revealed religion by implying one could communicate with God through nature. The Anglican *British Critic* conceded that not until now had Wollstonecraft demonstrated she could join 'a masculine understanding [with] the finer sensibilities of a female' evident in an improved though 'bombastic' prose style. But the reviewer would not be doing his duty if he permitted her 'to pursue triumphantly her Phaeton-like career' without castigating the Deism or natural religion he detects underlying her book. 'Has she maturely weighed the analogy which subsists between the book of nature and the word of God?'. (Franklin, 2004: 164)

Thus, when reflecting on all of the aspects previously mentioned, I dare say that my understanding leads to me consider Wollstonecraft as one of the (unofficial) precursors of Romanticism in this Pre-Romantic period in Britain.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the author of *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* did not forget her campaign for the plight of women, for this work follows her previous publications' course of subject – and which is particularly focused in "Letter XIX". During her travels through Scandinavia, Wollstonecraft retained the notion that motherhood was the most important role that a woman could have, for society could never progress without mothers' guidance. This was supported by the knowledge that, by this time, Wollstonecraft was already a mother herself.¹⁷ Being forced to frequently depart from her child left the author feeling dejected,¹⁸ an emotion soon followed by a solemn realization concerning the future of her (and her child's) sex:

I feel more than a mother's fondness and anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex. I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. With trembling hand I shall cultivate sensibility, and cherish delicacy of sentiment, lest, whilst I lend fresh blushes to the rose, I sharpen the thorns that will wound the breast I would fain guard - I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit - Hapless woman! what a fate is thine! (36)

¹⁶ The artistic movement identified as Romanticism is believed to have begun with the publication of the famous *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) – a collection of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and which is notably understood as the first Romantic publication in England.

¹⁷ There are several references throughout *Short Residence* to Fanny, Mary Wollstonecraft's baby whose name was a meaningful tribute to the author's dear friend. "My *Fannikin*" (73), "my little cherub" (66), "my babe, who may never experience a father's care or tenderness" (95) – are all expressions used by the author to mention her child, thus denoting the great affection she had for her daughter, as well as the change in mannerisms from a certain austerity to a nurturing love.

¹⁸ "[...] affected me more than it would have done, had not my spirits been harassed by various causes – by much thinking – musing almost to madness – and even by a sort of weak melancholy that hung about my heart at parting with my daughter for the first time" (36).

This (self-)recognition made her, once again, argue in favour of a rational education, built on moral and virtuous practices, as the key to women's social and – eventually – political emancipation. Moreover, Wollstonecraft advances her critiques on the wrong habits that women adopted and that endangered their children's health and future – “Indeed the children appear to be nipt in the bud, having neither the graces nor charms of their age. And this, I am persuaded, is much more owing to the ignorance of the mothers than to the rudeness of climate” (22). Additionally, the author did not fail to point out the unfortunate case of Queen Caroline of Denmark in “Letter XVIII”. “Poor Matilda” (102), as the author addressed her, is considered a victim of the “counter-revolution”, a notable woman who was

Vilified for her supposed sexual conduct primarily because she supported political reforms, but typically Wollstonecraft also pays attention to the Queen's attempt to introduce refinement in Danish manners, a process that she implicitly suggests creates a wider orbit for female freedom. (Brekke & Mee, 2009: xxi)

Not only did Wollstonecraft pity the late Queen, but she also indicated the need for a certain level of refinement and economic development, since it would encourage societal change. In other words, the Queen's case allowed to argue for “women to be treated as more than drudges” (*ibidem*).

Furthermore, I understand Mary Wollstonecraft herself as an example of women's emancipation in *Short Residence*. Both narrator and protagonist of her own work, Wollstonecraft demonstrates through her person an influential proof of the benefits of female education. She is a mother and (deserted) lover, but she is also an intellectual, a critic, a philosopher and a writer whose rationality is now broadened by her acceptance of sensibility, by the power that emotions have given to her writings. “I must love or admire with warmth, or I sink into sadness” (50) and “we reason deeply, when we forcibly feel” (107), are optimal examples of Wollstonecraft's acceptance of the sentimental condition – the latter passage written after admitting the oppressive

constraints placed upon her sex. Yet, I argue that the simple reason why Wollstonecraft is now remembered in history is that she did not let social limitations restrain her potential, otherwise she would never have written a self-portrait of a fiercely independent woman,¹⁹ travelling alone with her child while conducting business for her estranged lover, whose ability to “[ask] men’s questions” (11) was never lost amidst her newfound sentimental inclinations, as she had feared in the past.

All in all, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* achieved remarkable success. Translated into several languages (Franklin, 2004: 164), *Short Residence* proved Wollstonecraft’s literary versatility and its author’s ability to conjure compelling descriptions of the Scandinavian scenery, whose effect rendered her many positive reviews. William Godwin, for instance, famously declared: “If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book” (2015: 44). Ultimately, this work upheld contrasting but never mutually exclusive concepts, such as emotion, rationality, subjectivity, intellect and psychological complexity – which, in turn, “showed the Romantics a new writing world” (Gordon, 2015, 344), but never at the expense of one’s critical reasoning. In the words of Deborah Weiss in her work *The Female Philosopher and Her Afterlives: Mary Wollstonecraft, the British Novel, and the Transformations of Feminism, 1796-1811*:

Letters Written During a Short Residence [is] a text that blends sensibility with political and economic observations, and in which Wollstonecraft fictionalizes and feminizes herself as the letter writer. It seems that at the end of her career, Wollstonecraft came to believe that philosophy, a form relatively devoid of emotion and imagination, could not adequately convey her ideas, and that fiction, a form built on the interplay between feeling and fancy, would have a greater impact than an argument that relied primarily on reason. (2017: 69)

¹⁹ “But now I am writing for independence – I wish I had no other evil to complain of than the necessity of providing for myself and child.” (Wardle, 1979: 328 *apud* Tauchert, 2002: 120)

5. Chapter V - *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria*

It is almost imperative to begin this section of the present dissertation mentioning the previous chapter which ended on a noteworthy comment that hinted at the growing influence the genre of fiction attained in the eighteenth-century, for it alluded to its power in conveying the author's ideological agenda in the most subliminal ways (Weiss, 2017: 69). However, the novel was then considered a "sub-literary" (Kelly, 2007: xv) genre, its definition often interchangeable with the term "romance" – classified as a long fictional prose or, as Samuel Johnson described it, "a smooth tale, generally of love" (*apud* Robertson, 1999: 287). In his *Essay on Romance*, published in 1824, Sir Walter Scott questioned Johnson's proposal, contributing instead the following definition: a novel is "a fictitious narrative, differing from the Romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society" (*apud ibidem*). Providing an explanation, Scott draws on the prospect of the novel as a channel for social and political commentary.

Yet, this was not a common expectation. In truth, because it was seen as the "lowest form of literature" (*ibidem*),²⁰ the novel was presumed not to perform beyond its whimsical purpose, which was to entertain the masses whose majority was composed of young and impressionable women. As for the novels produced by women, they were regarded at even worst level. As Caroline Franklin explains: "the eighteenth-century female-authored novel was primarily comedic: the plot driven by obstacles to courtship, and the conclusion a celebration of marriage embodying social harmony" (2004: 178).

Consequently, it was in these circumstances that Wollstonecraft's novel *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* came to exist. Following her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, Wollstonecraft was compelled to revisit once more the "reformist discontent" (Kelly, 2007: xxiii) that the now receding potential

²⁰ Fiona Robertson adds further information to this claim. She argues that the novel was not at first highly regarded as a formal and serious genre by literary critics of the period due to being "loose in structure, quotidian in its settings and references, epistolary and journalistic in its origins and compositional impetus, female in its readership and (often) authorship" (1999: 287).

of the Revolution accustomed her contemporaries. Thus, she began planning a novel in which she would “examine the social injustices of unreformed and unmodernized society as these injustices afflicted women in particular” (*ibidem*). Like many in her circle, Wollstonecraft viewed the novel not only as a metaphorical arena for debating the social and political conundrums of the time,²¹ but as well as an opportunity to reach a larger audience who would not read polemical pamphlets or philosophical and political treatises. In particular, she hoped to record her critique of the institution of marriage, seeing that in her opinion it was an especially constrictive and cruel to women, if the relationship was not initiated on friendship and mutual respect.

Yet, her criticism on marriage was not done from a place of personal experience. Although Wollstonecraft was against marriage in her early adulthood, she did not show any aversion to it now, for she was living by all accounts a happy life with William Godwin. Since coming back from her trip to Scandinavia, Wollstonecraft cut ties with Gilbert Imlay, reconnected with Godwin and initiated their affair not long after. If not for her pregnancy, I believe she would not entertain the thought of marriage, but Wollstonecraft wanted her second child to be born without the stigma of being illegitimate – a label that her first daughter never quite got rid of. As Deborah Weiss remarks:

The fact that Godwin and Wollstonecraft married to legitimize her pregnancy represents an example of the conflict between the philosophers’ theories and their immediate emotional and practical needs as human beings living in a social setting. (2017: 140)

Furthermore, hers and Godwin’s understanding on marriage was matched, since they both enjoyed the (intellectual and sexual) companionship that the situation provided, while still enjoying the independence of their separate daily lives. Even if Wollstonecraft

²¹ A prospect aligned with Sir Walter Scott’s future vision that would only be formalised decades later, after Wollstonecraft’s passing.

was content in her marriage, she was painfully aware that it was not the norm.²² Hence, the author of *The Wrongs of Woman* wished to show the injustices, immorality and cruelty presumed in marriage life. Having this intention in mind, Wollstonecraft fictionalized this premise in the story of Maria, a young and naïve upper-class woman who is tricked into marrying a deceitful, greedy and vindictive man, adopting for this purpose a writing form that was called at the time “philosophical romance” and later “novel of ideas” (Kelly, 2007: xxiii). Her desire to do justice to this project²³ preoccupied Wollstonecraft for more than twelve months (*apud* Kelly 1992: 204), to such an extent that she took charge of “the fiction section of the *Analytical Review* [increasing] the length and quality of reviews, getting friends such as Hays and Godwin to review novels. She herself reviewed almost nothing but fiction, in order to help herself to become a better novelist” (*ibidem*), defends the critic Gary Kelly in his work *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft*.

Usually considered the novelized but unfinished continuation to Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* was published posthumously in 1798. Having died in childbirth, Wollstonecraft never finished this work, which explains Godwin’s editorial additions to the fragments his wife had left behind, as he himself reports in the book’s Preface: “In revising these sheets for the press, it was necessary for the editor, in some places to connect the more finished parts with pages of an older copy, and a line or two in addition sometimes” (Wollstonecraft, 2009b: 65).²⁴

Opening *in media res*, the main narrative that frames this work is soon understood as one of malice, injustice and oppression but also of reflexion, friendship and freedom. Maria first appears to the reader in “a private mad-house” (174), victim of a “matrimonial despotism of heart and conduct” (68), as Wollstonecraft defines it. George

²² Eliza, Mary Wollstonecraft’s sister, had lived an unhappy marriage from which Wollstonecraft had helped her escape.

²³ It is known that Wollstonecraft even visited an asylum – Bedlam Hospital – with William Godwin and Joseph Johson for research purposes (*apud* Kelly, 2007: xviii).

²⁴ All further quotations from this particular Wollstonecraft work are from this edition. For this reason, only page numbers will be indicated within parenthesis from now on.

Vanables, “her tyrant – her husband” (70), trapped the protagonist in loveless and, I dare say it, sadistic marriage. Aware of the powerful potential of the Gothicized image of the asylum, Wollstonecraft explores Maria’s confinement in a “mansion of despair” (69) as, in fact, a physical and devastating extension of the latter’s imprisonment by marriage – “Marriage had bastilled me for life. [...] fettered by the partial laws of society, this fair globe was to me an universal blank” (137). Maria’s story embodies the victimization and political and social repression suffered by the female sex in the eighteenth century. As recognized in the character of Maria, women’s existence is entirely dependent on their male relatives’ needs and desires. In Maria’s case, she was always helpless for she had to endure the whims of the men around her – a negligent father, a despotic eldest brother “termed the idol of his parent” (112), a naïve but still patriarchal uncle, and an abusive husband are the dominant forces that pin her tragic fate. After her the death of her mother, Maria’s father took a mistress “who makes long to escape home” (Tauchert, 2002: 104). Her only other living relative, a wealthy uncle – who held the role of a surrogate “good” father (*ibidem*)– played an important part in the arrangement of her wedding. Failing to see Vanables’ greed, the uncle gave his niece a considerable dowry, which will be used by Vanables to control his young wife. Witnessing first-hand her husband’s debauchery, volatility, corruptness and frivolity, Maria shelters herself in the cultivation of literature and arts. Following a particular frightening episode with one of her husband’s friends, in which he was paid by Vanables to seduce her, Maria tries to flee with her child. However, her attempt is unsuccessful, for she is caught, her daughter is taken from her and Maria imprisoned in an asylum.

Imprisoned, Maria begins to write her memoirs (included in Chapter Seven), an autobiographical confession in which she addressed to her daughter; she does not know if the daughter is alive. She begins by “addressing these memoirs to you, my child” (110), ensuing her “many observations [that] will probably flow from [her] heart, which only a mother – a mother schooled in misery, could make” (*ibidem*). She recounts her story to her absent child, for she is “uncertain whether I shall ever have an opportunity of instructing” (*ibidem*), yet she wishes her child to study her “counsel, which is meant

rather to exercise than influence the mind” (111). These memoirs, as Ashley Taucher elucidates, are

written by Maria for her daughter are embedded in the narrative of *Wrongs of Woman*. This female meta-narrative serves the conditions [...] for a ‘universal’ narrative that would offer the female reader a bridge between her individual autobiography and a community of women; it quite literally dramatises the dialogue between mother and daughter initiated by - and taking account of - the estrangement of the daughter from the mother. (2002: 113)

Furthermore, it is arguable that Maria’s love for her child – the only constant reprieve that Maria found while in the asylum – grants a way for her to symbolically free herself and thus become her own entity, seeing that motherhood was the only solace that she ever selfishly desired for herself:

Her infant’s image was continually floating on Maria’s sight, and the first smile of intelligence remembered, as none but a mother, an unhappy mother, can conceive. She heard her half speaking half cooing, and felt the little twinkling fingers on her burning bosom — a bosom bursting with the nutriment for which this cherished child might now be pining in vain. From a stranger she could indeed receive the maternal aliment, Maria was grieved at the thought — but who would watch her with a mother’s tenderness, a mother’s self-denial? (69)

The act of writing her narrative allows Maria a self-recognition of the evils done to her which consequently unlocks her understanding of the wrongs of other women – not of any particular shortcoming but of all women’s fault for not recognizing and fighting sooner for the sins committed against and by their sex.

However, Maria’s personal story is not only meant for herself and her child. In the hopes of being heard and freed, Maria uses her memoirs to expose her case to court.

Since women were hardly allowed to participate in court cases, especially due to the fact that “her legal existence was suspended during marriage” (Franklin, 2004: 183), the author cleverly lets the reader know about it by having Maria’s written testimony being read out in court. Yet, her appeal is denied, for the male judges condemn her sensibility which misguided her into thinking she could refuse her husband, for it is a woman’s role to defer to their husbands. The novel thus explores the problem of “the fallacy of letting women plead their feelings, as an excuse for the violation of the marriage vow”:

For his part, he had always determined to oppose all innovation, and the newfangled notions which incroached on the good old rules of conduct. We did not want French principles in public or private life — and, if women were allowed to plead their feelings, as an excuse or palliation of infidelity, it was opening a flood-gate for immorality. What virtuous woman thought of her feelings? (174)

However, *The Wrongs of Woman* do not allude to a particular woman’s mistake – in this case to any mistake that Maria might have committed – but to society’s “systemic unreformed state” (Kelly, 2007: xxiv) that constantly relegates women to the condition of being regarded as commodities, a fault that affects women of all social classes. That is inference that one must take from Jemima’s story in Chapter Five. Born “an insulted being, from the misfortune of her birth”, Jemima “despised and preyed on the society by which she had been oppressed” (75). Living in extreme poverty after the death of her mother, Maria’s wardress in the asylum had no choice but to become a servant to survive, an unlucky fate, for she was repeatedly beaten, starved and, ultimately, raped by her master.

Poverty, she says, “and the habit of seeing children die off her hands, had so hardened her heart, that the office of a mother did not awaken the tenderness of a woman; nor were the feminine caresses which seem a part of the rendering of a child, ever bestowed to me. (92)

Once again destitute, this time for unwillingly becoming pregnant with her master's child, Jemima has no choice but to abort the baby and resort to prostitution for survival. She was able to eventually become a maid for a man of some standing and wealth, and upon the latter's death, Jemima found employment in the asylum. Caroline Franklin asserts that

Jemima's story took a similar form to the popular eighteenth-century genre of memoirs (sometimes fictionalized) of criminals [...] traditionally subscribed to one of two myths: a reforming point of view, seeking to reintegrate the criminal into the social and moral order; or an ambivalent and often frankly fictional celebration of the outlaw's subversiveness. (2004: 190)

Wollstonecraft seems to adhere to the first myth, since she confirms Jemima's moral rehabilitation through an employment that grants her self-sufficiency: "The wages she received, the greater part of which she hoarded, as her only chance for independence" (73). As further explained by one commentator:

Wollstonecraft's story is remarkably non-judgemental. She resists the paternalistic stance usually implicit in the first myth, for adversity has made Jemima stronger than either of the middle-class inmates whom her story enlightens, and she has saved enough money to obtain independence on her own terms, not through charity and certainly not through repentance. Wollstonecraft had written in 1792: 'Asylums and Magdalens are not the proper remedies for these abuses. It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world!' (Franklin, 2004: 190)

Consequently, Wollstonecraft graphically illustrates "the fate of the unprotected illegitimate female offspring in an unenlightened society" (ibidem: 179). By focusing on prestatation not as an immoral activity done for pleasure, but rather as a social issue

(especially of the working and impoverished classes), the author exposes the economic exploitation of women's labour and bodies that condition female population to suffer in a civil state that does not offer a meaningful revision of the laws that constrict women's lives, from the poor vendor on the street to the upper-class mother. Hence, *Wrongs of Woman* alludes to and reinforces Wollstonecraft's claims in her philosophical treatise *Rights of Woman*, for she "related the legal condition of woman to such larger issues as corrupt electoral politics, parliamentary representation, and government" (Kelly, 2007: xviii).

Additionally, Wollstonecraft responds to the interconnected controversies of the period by addressing the economics and politics of sexuality. Wollstonecraft expands the complexity of Maria's character in *Wrongs of Woman*. Her story is not merely marked by the tragic plights of women, but also by the discovery of love in an unlawful and horrific situation. In the asylum, she met the fellow prisoner, Darnford²⁵ with whom she fell in love and initiated an affair. Through this particular element of Maria's story, Wollstonecraft proposes that the pleasure of human sexuality – here represented by the emotional and intimate contours of Maria and Darnford's "friendship" – is something equally experienced and enjoyed by women as well as men. Providing an explanation:

Although the second *Vindication* is highly critical of sexuality—it condemns male erotic desires and the sexualized behavior of women—*The Wrongs of Woman* is sensual, sexual, and shocking in a late eighteenth century context. Not only does the protagonist, Maria, discuss her aversion to marital sexual relations in some detail, she also engages in an extramarital affair that Wollstonecraft represents as justified by the character's feelings and by the legalized oppression of married

²⁵ It is worthy of note to point out Gary Kelly's thoughts on the characters' (2007: xxvi). Maria's name could allude to three possible theories – the first being a natural reference to Wollstonecraft's name, the second could signify "every woman", for it was a common name, and the third being a reference to the Virgin Mary, the pious redeemer of humanity and the sin of Eve, the first woman. Jamima is a biblical name, alluding to one of Job's daughters. George Venables could refer to the Prince of Wales, who was generally known to be morally decadent and in constant conflict with his wife. Finally, Darnford suggests a link with the historical figure of Darnley, the husband of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots – yet another example of a female in power victimized by her political role in history.

women. The idea that the “rights of woman” is an excuse for transgressive sexuality, then, as articulated by Wollstonecraft’s critics, comes from putting her *Vindication* into the immediate vicinity of *The Wrongs of Woman*, as well as from selecting certain details of Wollstonecraft’s own life, as described by Godwin. (Weiss, 2017: 30)

Moreover, if there is any reproval from Mary Wollstonecraft regarding women’s sexuality, it lies in the fact that she disapproves of how naively some women permit themselves to be carried away by their fantasies – or, in other words, how such love imprisons them to ephemeral and carnal feelings. In *Wrongs of Woman*, this idea is explicit in one of the (unfinished) endings that Wollstonecraft envisioned for the novel, since she would have Maria irrationally romanticising her life with Darnford and Jemima outside the prison, a perspective that eventually destructs her, for this particular ending has her lover betraying and abandoning her, resulting in her committing suicide: “Divorced by her husband – Her Lover unfaithful – Pregnancy – Miscarriage – Suicide” (176).

All in all, Wollstonecraft hoped to instruct the reader how to recognize the wrongs done to and by women, for she recognizes that many women are complacent with the oppressing social and political rules that stomp their rightful growth. In the characters of Maria and Jemima, both of very different social stations, the author alluded to their friendship as one of the factors that allowed both women to help each other recognise how society suppressed their rights and exploited them for the benefit of the men in their lives.

Conclusion

Reaching the end of this dissertation, I must ark back to this work's Introduction, which provided a summary account of Mary Wollstonecraft's life. Dying mere ten days after the birth of her second child, Wollstonecraft left her two infant daughters without a loving and protective mother-figure, a prospect that undoubtedly would have filled her with dread. Without her, Fanny Imlay and Mary Shelley grew in the shadow of their mother's absence, ever craving her absent maternal affection and her intellectual strength that could still be felt through her works. Her husband's frankness of love for Wollstonecraft did not stop him from leaving her notoriously bare to her contemporaries in his famous *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a book meant to be a suitable testimonial to her character and life, but that ended up belittling the accomplishments of her literary genius in favour of a depiction of her as a heroine of sensibility and unrestrained passions. In my understanding, this portrayal was not only deficient, for it failed to capture the true essence of her defiant and relentless character, but it also greatly damaged the perception that the world had of her talent. Unfortunately, its publication meant she would be tragically left out of the literary canons and of the awareness of the grand public for far too long.

My goal in writing this dissertation was the study of five major works of Mary Wollstonecraft – *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787); *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788); *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792); *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796); and *Wrongs of Woman; or Maria* (1798). From a conduct book, to a children's story, to a philosophical and political treatise, to a travel narrative imbued with autobiographical and epistolary elements, and finally to a novel, Wollstonecraft proved her literary versatility. Her gift for adapting her distinctive views through different literary genres grants her a wide and interesting influence over the academic and artistic circles of her period, for she knew how to skilfully shape her discourse on education and women's rights into diverse moulds.

As I have hopefully demonstrated, the common theme that unites these works is their author's concern for women's rights and female education, which rendered her

work a dangerous source of revolutionary ideas, as many of her peers understood. Yet, the particular way she defended her views changed throughout the years. As first seen in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, Wollstonecraft began by endorsing stern religious principles strongly rooted in conventional Protestant ideals of female conduct, such as the adoption of virtuous and moral sociability. This notion would soon evolve in her later works to a more relaxed take on religion, but it was still a constant presence of what the author deemed as women's polite respect for cultural and social codes between the sexes. In the words of Eillen Botting:

In Barbara Taylor's landmark work of intellectual history, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (2003), Wollstonecraft emerges as a British radical whose Platonic Christian religiosity was never lost, but always animated her quest for social justice for women, chattel slaves, and the poor. (2014: 8)

No matter the literary genre, nor the target public – the reader of a political pamphlet, or a child listening to a bedtime tale – Wollstonecraft always places her works in captivating settings capable of eliciting from its readers and characters the most introspective state. Nature grows from a place of reflection and mental and moral growth (as seen in *Original Stories*) to the domain of sublime, beautiful and picturesque (observed in *Letters Written During a Short Residence*) – whose aesthetic ideals are witnessed by educated individuals aware of its power in their inner selves.

Beheld in all her works, but most predominately in her philosophical and fictional publications – that is, in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria*, respectively – Wollstonecraft fiercely advocated for women's right to a complete and inclusive education. Through political commentary and moral philosophy disguised by the fictional appeal of the novel, the author advocates her revolutionary principles by contemplating women as achieving didactic and eventual legal emancipation in order to firmly stand as social and political beings in a civilization

that, hopefully, would appreciate and show its gratitude to their wise and nurturing and motherly teachings – a role of the utmost importance for the author.

The discovery of Mary Wollstonecraft in each generation provides an ample selection of critical theories concerning her work. Her feminism – an anachronistic, but rightfully deserved label – is what draws so many modern readers.

In 2020, a memorial statue in honour of Mary Wollstonecraft was unveiled in Newington Green, North London. Polarising reactions immediately followed its debut. The work of art – which, in reality, is no more than a tiny, naked figure of Wollstonecraft on top a disproportionally large pedestal – soon became a tourist attraction. In truth, I dare say Wollstonecraft would have loved the stir her name caused once more. While the statue's nakedness caused many to criticise its artist, I believe it symbolizes the true spirit of Wollstonecraft and her writings. For her sexuality and intimate life never truly mattered, but the genuine manner in which she conducted herself and wrote her views was what led her to be so fervently discussed.

I conclude this dissertation with a quote from *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, in which Wollstonecraft solemnly wonders about her passing, for death seems such an ominous and absolute concept that she cannot even reflect on her own mortality:

I cannot bear to think of being no more – of losing myself – though existence is often but a painful consciousness of misery; nay, it appears to me impossible that I should cease to exist, or that this active restless spirit, equally alive to joy and sorrow, should only be organized dust. (2009a: 51)

For one thing we, her readers, can guarantee: although Wollstonecraft died prematurely leaving much of her potential to explore, “we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living” (1967; n.p.), as Virginia Woolf puts it, for her presence is still very much alive and capable of inspiring the most ordinary individual to pick a pencil, a pen, or even a computer in defence of women's (educational) rights.

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