

# MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND HER WORLD

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## Literal and Metaphorical Female Confinement in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mary and Maria*

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Two centuries have elapsed since Mary Wollstonecraft's death, caused by one of the most common female maladies of the eighteenth century, childbirth. She was a pioneer of women rights and a revolutionary who believed in societal reform. Throughout her writings she preached sexual, social, political and moral equality, and her ideas were wrongly associated with emancipation and free love. For a long time, her name was omitted from anthologies and she was labelled an "unsex'd female, whose books aimed at the propagation of whores" (qtd. in Todd 729); "an extreme neurotic of a compulsive type" (Lundberg and Farnham 273-74); a "hyena in petticoats", a "philosophizing serpent", "a man-hater", and an "archetypal castrating female" (qtd. in Spender 260). Wollstonecraft's place in the history of feminist writing has been acknowledged only recently,<sup>1</sup> but she has also been recognised as "one of the mothers of the novel" whose exploration of the often interrelated themes of female confinement and madness has "made a significant contribution to the birth of women's literary traditions" (Spender 261).<sup>2</sup> In Wollstonecraft's discourse,

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<sup>1</sup> As Dale Spender points out, this was not the case in the eighteenth century when she was widely read, "highly praised by readers and reviewers alike", and "valued by some of the best educated and most distinguished persons – of both sexes" (139).

<sup>2</sup> Although female irrationality as opposed to male rationality runs along the history of literature from Greek tragedy, it has become a pervasive issue from the nineteenth century onwards. Examples of the representation of the stereotype of the madwoman in literature are numerous: Charlotte Brontë's

imprisonment of women, real or metaphorical, stands as a symbol of oppression in a society ruled by men. Women are confined to the restrictions of society and to the prejudiced education they receive, becoming victims as well as prisoners of their own misleading expectations about life. The purpose of this discussion, therefore, is to offer a brief consideration of the theme of female confinement in Wollstonecraft's first novel, *Mary, a Fiction* (1788) and her posthumous and unfinished work, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* (1798).

*Mary* is a sentimental novel which dramatises the awakening consciousness of a young woman, trapped in a marriage arranged by her parents, in her attempt to free herself from male oppression. Her struggle against conformity and silence involves a yearning for self-realisation and independence which can only be accomplished in the privacy of her own world and finally in death. Her meeting of Henry, a man with whom she can only share a platonic relationship, cannot fulfil her desire to free herself from the expectations that society has imposed on her as a married woman. Being Wollstonecraft's first novel, the portrayal of the female protagonist, a woman of sensibility, is nevertheless unconvincing in places.<sup>3</sup> Mary's alternative to her subjection to a male-dominated society is based on her resistance to intimacy with her husband and to her compliance with a handicapped man with whom sex does not represent a threat. Her radical and unsuccessful attempt to earn her own living as an independent woman who claims divorce clashes with the disapproval of society and eventually leads her to submit to her husband. The final lines of the

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*Jane Eyre* (1846), Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), and Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), among others. See Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, for a discussion of female insanity in the literature of the nineteenth century; and Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, for contemporary works.

<sup>3</sup> Figes, for instance, affirms that this novel "is a disastrous attempt at radical realism", because the plot "is unspeakably lame, in fact it confirms the warnings of conservative novelists that unconventional ideas and a romantic sensibility will do a heroine nothing but harm" (58)

novel leave Mary in a dying state: "She thought she was hastening to that world *where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage*" (53)

*Maria*, written after Wollstonecraft had published her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which is an unprecedented analysis of the status of women in society,<sup>4</sup> involves a step forward in the representation of female consciousness. The celibate Mary now becomes the mother, Maria, whose rebellion against male tyranny allows her to find refuge in the love of another man, Henry Danford. In the gothic atmosphere of the novel, Maria is literally imprisoned by her husband in a mental asylum, accused of a false madness, while he makes good use of her fortune. Having been deprived of her own baby-daughter and having only the female company of her guard, Jemima, Maria resists mental insanity through writing and reading. In the claustrophobic atmosphere of her prison-cell, suffering from the torments of her imagination, Maria's only occupation is to write her memoirs in order to provide her daughter with the experience and knowledge of life that she should acquire being born a woman. She finally manages to escape only to confirm that her baby has died, that the promises of Henry could not be fulfilled, and that she has now become an adulterous woman rejected by society. Maria has no better solution than committing suicide by swallowing laudanum.<sup>5</sup> Degradation of women in marriage and an emphasis on the social and oppressive conditions of society become the main focus of attention. As the writer clearly states in the preface, her main objective is to expose "the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society" (59).

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<sup>4</sup> As the writer clearly states in her letter to M. Talleyrand-Périgord to whom she dedicates her text: "Independence I have long considered as the grand blessing of life, the basis of every virtue – and independence I will ever secure by contracting my wants, though I were to live on a barren heath" (*Vindication* 3).

<sup>5</sup> This novel also dramatizes the brutalizing circumstances of male oppression as experienced by Jemima, a member of the lower class who is raped by her master, expelled from his house, and finally prostituted. As De la Concha points out, in this society, the universality of women's condition transcends social classes, something which does not apply to the position of men (427).

In these two novels, the reader witnesses a world which grows into a vast prison where women are slaves from birth and are condemned to a life of ignorance and subjection to men. Parallelisms between the two works start with the names of the protagonists. Mary Wollstonecraft chooses her own name – as well as the name of her daughter, the future Mary Shelley – for her protagonists, Mary and Maria, making them two variations of the same emblematic symbol of the mother of us all. Moreover, the two men with whom they fall in love carry the same name of Henry. Comparisons between these two works and the author's *Vindication* suggest an attempt to rewrite her first novel into a more detailed account of the causes of women's misfortunes from the point of view of a mother.<sup>6</sup> Motherhood, in fact, plays an important role along Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* because the reform of society is based on a change in the education of both men and women. She suggests that to deprive people of education makes them weak and vulnerable and condemns them to a life of ignorance, which was precisely the status of women at the time (Spender 253).<sup>7</sup> For this reason, mothers should be aware of the education that they instil in their daughters:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the examples of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of

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<sup>6</sup> Spender maintains that “*The Wrongs of Woman* is an unapologetic attempt to present the fictionalized version – the more personalized construction – of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*” (257).

<sup>7</sup> Wollstonecraft developed her ideas concerning education in four other works: in her collection of essays, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787); in *The Female Reader, or, Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Verse* (1789), an anthology of readings for girls; in *Elements of Morality, for the Use of Children* (1790-91); and in *Original Stories from Real Life: With Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (1788). As Ferguson explains, in these works “Wollstonecraft’s plan was to provide a pragmatic guide which would enable women to function as intellectual adults ... Moreover, this new “type” of literature, the carefully ordered anthology-textbook, served as a powerful weapon in the protracted fight for educational reform” (945-46).

temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives. (*l'indication* 19)

Wollstonecraft was radical in her criticism of society because women did not have rights at that time. They were considered nonpersons or *commodities*, who belonged first to their parents and then to their husbands, as any other kind of property or transaction. As Ralph M. Wardle explains, women lost their properties and their legal identities when they married. This law was claimed to have been approved for their protection and benefit; nevertheless, most women “accepted their inferior status without complaint” (215). In these two novels, Mary and Maria rebel against this inevitable rule. Mary determines to leave her husband and work or “do any thing rather than be a slave” (40). Similarly, Maria, who had actually been sold into marriage, manages to abandon her husband and secure herself in a hidden place living by her own means. Neither of them are allowed to carry out their own plans as independent women and, in the end, they have to submit to patriarchal authority.

In Wollstonecraft's *l'indication*, which has been regarded as her feminist declaration of independence, she starts her discussion by claiming that the only difference between men and women is that of physical strength, one which belongs to “the law of nature” (8), although, in terms of their abilities they are equal. Because they are equal, they should receive the same kind of education, equal treatment, and they should be governed by the same moral standards. With these claims, she does not mean to reverse the order of society, but quite the opposite, let human beings perform what nature has given them, which is the capacity to reason (36). As she clearly declares later: “I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves” (62). Society, nevertheless, relegates women to a position even inferior to that of human beings, which “render[s] them insignificant objects of desire” (10-1). The education of women, she claims, is also based on disorder whereas men are taught with method, discipline and a proper



use of reason.<sup>8</sup> The consequence is that women are praised as well as oppressed for their own weaknesses and vulnerabilities (22-3). For this reason, she emphasises the need for women to be educated properly:<sup>9</sup>

... the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and ... women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, ... strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty. ... One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education. (7)

Her criticism is, to a large extent, directed towards men as well as women because both inherit their stagnant roles in this hierarchical society. If men use their power to oppress women, the latter do nothing to challenge their condition as an oppressed class.

The wrongs of women are based on the fact that through education and experience, women are oriented towards marriage. They are educated to be dependent on men in their coquetry and arts of seduction through the encouragement they receive from male

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<sup>8</sup> In her own words: "In the present state of society, a little learning is required to support the character of a gentleman: and boys are obliged to submit to a few years of discipline. But in the education of women, the cultivation of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment" (23).

<sup>9</sup> Wollstonecraft's ideas about the education of women were partly based on Catherine Macaulay's work, *Letters on Education* (1790), a book that she had reviewed for the *Analytical Review* (Wardle 219). There is also an explicit reference in chapter V of her *Vindication* where she claims that Macaulay was a "woman of the greatest abilities, undoubtedly, that this country has produced. – And yet this woman has been suffered to die without sufficient respect being paid to her memory.... Macaulay was an example of intellectual acquirements supposed to be incompatible with the weakness of her sex.... her judgement, the matured fruit of profound thinking, was a proof that a woman can acquire judgement, in the full extent of the word" (105).

compliments, which only makes them inferior. Wollstonecraft concludes that by learning to become objects of desire, they become prey in the hands of men and then victims of their own virtues. Her solution is the following:

Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the former only wants slaves, and the latter a play-thing. (24)

Wollstonecraft engages in a whole discussion of the interplay of reason and emotion, that of sense and sensibility.<sup>10</sup> She urges women to use reason, to engage in mental activity, and to adopt a new role in society because only by the mere exercise of reason will they also attain virtue and dignity (21 and 33).<sup>11</sup> Wollstonecraft resumes her intentions: "I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness" (9).

Her position about the reform of society also unfolds a moral discourse placing too much emphasis on reason and the control of emotion while leaving no possibility for acceptance of sexual freedom,

<sup>10</sup> She even describes her own style as rational, opposing it to the "flowery diction" that characterizes the essays, novels and familiar letters of her contemporaries. Her main aim, therefore, is to be didactic: "I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style: - I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected" (10).

<sup>11</sup> The consequence of associating reason with men and emotion with women had reduced women "al estado de naturaleza, el de la sensualidad y la sexualidad reproductora, la mujer se convierte en una criatura cuyo instinto hay que orientar y encauzar, como se hace con la naturaleza para que no se convierta en destructiva. La educación llevará a cabo esa función encargándose de reprimir cuanto se oponga al fin femenino específico" (De la Concha 420).

or even any kind of passion. Wollstonecraft insists that reason should be the only motive that governs the life of human beings: "I love man as my fellow; but his sceptre, real or usurped, extends not to me unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the submission is to reason and not to man" (37). This argument leads her, nevertheless, to claim that the perfect union between man and woman should be based on friendship and not passion, since the latter will only "disturb the order of society" (30).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, she suggests that unhappy marriages are more successful in bringing up their children because "the neglected wife is, in general, the best mother" having more time to spend with them than with her husband (31).

This set of ideas is clearly demonstrated in the plots of her two novels although this fact does not free the protagonists from the same dramatic ends. Mary's fifteen-year old husband travels abroad on the same day of his wedding to finish his studies, letting her free to go to Lisbon and nurse her dying close friend, Ann. When Ann dies and she has to face her marital "duties", Mary uses all the excuses she can find, claiming bad health and a necessity of being on her own, supposedly prescribed by a doctor. Moreover, her relationship with Henry is based on a false friendship in which sex is unthinkable because of his physical state. Wollstonecraft has claimed that women had to make themselves respectable and independent from their husbands (*l'indication* 28); but Mary's resistance to intimacy with a man makes her profoundly dependent on her own inner conflict, that between heart and mind. On the other hand, *Maria*, which explores the taboo theme of seduction and adultery, does not lead the protagonist to a better end. Maria, who marries for love, learns to despise her husband due to his mistreatment, and this fact does not make her a better mother. She is not able to perform the role of a mother since her baby dies before she can utter her first words.

<sup>12</sup> Her whole argument starts with the affirmation that: "Love, from its very nature, must be transitory." And from here, she concludes that: "In order to fulfil the duties of life, and to be able to pursue with vigour the various employments which form the moral character, a master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion" (30).

Both Mary and Maria are the daughters of unhappy marriages which are described in terms of female submission and passivity, and male violence and authority. The lack of a mother's affection and a proper education leads the two protagonists to repeat a different version of the same miserable life of their own mothers. At seventeen, Mary is weak and full of fears about her marital status because she is ignorant about the facts of life. This leads her to find comfort in silence, retirement, and a voluntary confinement in a place where she can have her own space and is able to escape from her own misfortunes while reading. Although Maria is outspoken and strong in her decision to leave her husband, in her appraisal of emotion, she is bound to make the same mistake twice – that of idealising men – due to her same lack of experience. Both protagonists are rebellious in their search for autonomy and independence away from subordination, but the two of them stay imprisoned in a society that cannot accept their subversive roles and, finally, remain in the prison of their own isolation. As the writer clearly states in her *Vindication*, the few women who have escaped from the subjection of their conditions have followed “eccentric directions”, and have been considered “*male spirits*, confined by mistake in female frames” (35). For this reason, Maria describes existence as “sailing on the vast ocean of life, without seeing a land-mark to indicate the progress of time” (65). Both end unsuccessfully because they represent women, in Wollstonecraft's words, “only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect” (*Vindication* 7).

These two novels fall into the categories of sentimental romances, a type of writing that Wollstonecraft had dismissed in her *Vindication* because they induced women to delusions of unattainable happiness with men, excessive sensual expectations, and unrealistic notions of love. In their readings of novels, Mary's mother as well as Maria become the paradigms of women “who have fostered a romantic unnatural delicacy of feeling, wasting their lives in *imagining* how happy they should have been with a husband who could love them with a fervid increasing affection every day, and all day” (33). Both Mary and Maria need to write and to read in order to establish their own identities and also to come to terms with their own lives. Through

writing, Maria preserves her own identity as a mother and as a mentally healthy woman being able to contribute to the education of her daughter.<sup>13</sup>

Following this line of argument, it should be noticed that a substantial part of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is devoted to criticise male writers who have contributed through their writings to create a misleading construction of the nature of femininity. She attacks Rousseau's ideas on the position of women in society as they were expressed in his treatise *Émile* (1762) and in his creation of the character of Sophie, a feminine ideal who served as an instrument to support the foundations of patriarchal order.<sup>14</sup> Rousseau maintained that women had to submit to the authority of men, learn to obey their husbands, and restrain their uncontrollable passions in order to become "a more alluring object of desire, a *sweeter companion to man*, whenever he chooses to relax himself" (qtd. in *Vindication* 25). For this reason, he claimed that both should have a different education. In a time when femininity meant submission, silence, passivity, and subjection, Wollstonecraft states that women become "degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence" and that "this artificial weakness produces a propensity to tyrannise" (*Vindication* 11). However, in her description of the virtues that women should acquire she contradicts herself. By claiming the need of women to attain male

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Homans, on the other hand, judges Maria's writing as "an error" since "it distracts her from her purpose – to get out of the madhouse-prison and find and rescue her baby daughter" (3). Homans fails to see that Maria is unable to escape and rather than adopting a passive role lamenting her own state, she makes a positive and active turn writing the story of her life, one which could have changed the course of her daughter's fate as a woman.

<sup>14</sup> In the "Advertisement" to *Mary*, Wollstonecraft announces that her heroine will be "a character different from those generally portrayed. This woman is neither a Clarissa, a Lady G—, nor a Sophie" (3). Rousseau has a pervasive appearance throughout her whole discussion although it is in chapter V, entitled "Writers Who have Rendered Women Objects of Pity, Bordering on Contempt", where she comments on several others such as: Dr. James Fordyce's, *Sermons to Young Women* (1765), Dr. John Gregory's, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), Lord Chesterfield's *Letters*, and a few other texts which had been published with the purpose of educating women.

values, she is trapped in male thought; and her ideas, rather than enriching women, help to reinforce and perpetuate patriarchal order.

Maria's mind, filled with romantic books, finds pleasure in the reading of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). She becomes a victim of her sentimental readings idealising the man with whom she falls in love only to find disappointment, and also exemplifying something that Virginia Woolf expressed much later in *A Room of One's Own*:

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle ... Supermen and Fingers of Destiny would never have existed whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. (37)

The idealisation of men, together with the imitation of male virtues, has the effect of strengthening power and oppression, which is the result of defining femininity in terms of the acquisition of male values. Wollstonecraft's appraisal of the roles of women as mothers, through the education of their daughters, as wives, performing their duties, and at the same time, as independent selves, reinforces the author's flaws expressed in her *Vindication* and not carried out in the portrayal of her two protagonists.<sup>15</sup> Having affirmed that if a woman is not "prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or

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<sup>15</sup> Wollstonecraft also finds similarities between the weaknesses of military men and women because both praise gallantry and coquetry, drawing the conclusion that differences in sex do not lead to differences in behaviour. She, nevertheless, recognizes that these men "are still reckoned superior to women" (23-4).

it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice” (*Vindication* 4),<sup>16</sup> she contradicts her argument justifying Maria’s failure to learn from experience, and claiming that: “We see what we wish, and make a world of our own – and, though reality may sometimes open a door to misery, yet the moments of happiness procured by the imagination, may, without a paradox, be reckoned among the solid comforts of life. Maria now, imagining that she has found a being of celestial mould – was happy” (138).

Wollstonecraft’s defence of an equal education for men and women and her fight against oppression cannot be separated from her own life as a writer and as a woman because, as Spender points out, she “was well aware of the tenet that the personal is political and she quite deliberately turned some of the experiences of her own life to fictional account” (247). She was the victim of violent paternal authority and passive maternal weakness and, like both heroines in her novels, she lacked maternal affection witnessing how the older brother became the favourite one. She identified marriage with oppression in both her parent’s relationship and her sister’s Eliza – curiously, the name of the heroine’s mother in *Mary*. It was Wollstonecraft herself who urged the depressive Eliza to abandon her tyrannical husband and her new-born child in order to start a new life in confinement. The sentimental novel *Mary*, written shortly after witnessing the death of her close friend, Fanny Blood, and her sister’s unhappy marriage is mostly autobiographical with regard to the effect of deficient education on women. According to Spender, this novel constitutes “an attempt by the author to make sense of her own life, to find a meaningful framework for her own emotional experiences” (249).<sup>17</sup> Wollstonecraft, like her protagonist, had moved to Lisbon to assist her dying friend just before giving birth. Also, like Mary, she witnesses the death of her mother and friend. It is a sad irony that she left *Maria* unfinished because she died in childbirth, a novel as much about motherhood as the liberation of women. Moreover, again like the

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<sup>16</sup> Kaplan states that Wollstonecraft’s ideology in *Vindication* is “strongly linked to the optimistic, speculative construction of a virtuous citizen subject for a new egalitarian world” (150).

<sup>17</sup> She named her first daughter, by Gilbert Imlay, after her dead friend Fanny.

protagonist of *Maria*, she was the victim of her own sensibility and her own inner conflict, between reason and emotion, with the American adventurer Gilbert Imlay. Her desolation led her to attempt suicide twice. She finally seemed to have achieved friendship as a unifying force between man and woman in her relationship with the rationalist philosopher William Godwin, with whom she agreed to keep a separate social life.

Although a pioneer of women's rights, Wollstonecraft's fervent feminism as expressed in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is not evident in the portrayal of the heroines of these two novels. Wollstonecraft tried to earn her living through writing as an independent woman, working as a reviewer and editorial assistant on the journal *Analytical Review*, and becoming a member of philosophical, literary and political circles. She, nonetheless, offers the portraits of two female characters who are trapped in conventional morality and in their own sensibilities which are at odds with society. In the two novels of this discussion, the writer departs from the decent moral standards and decorum of the eighteenth-century discourse by making public the private area of the everyday reality of women's lives.<sup>18</sup> Introducing herself in an unknown and silenced territory, the rebellious disconformity of her protagonists confines them to the rules of a patriarchal order and to their own inner contradictions. Oppression functions, then, as a metaphor for personal imprisonment between the rules of society and a free emotional self, which brings mere suffering and a yearning for death as the only liberating force. The lives of women in the eighteenth century could not have offered a different alternative. Paraphrasing her own last words in *Mary*, Wollstonecraft states in her *Vindication*: "How women are to exist in that state where there is to be neither marrying nor giving in marriage, we are not told" (34).

Among the branches in which feminist theory has split: "feminist critique", "feminist extensions", "feminist deconstructions", and "feminists explorations", among others (Blain, Clements and

<sup>18</sup> Although motherhood is a significant aspect of her writing, she does not discuss the fears and pains of childbirth – the final cause of her death – which is, in fact, the main source of difference between men and women.



Grundy 362-64),<sup>19</sup> critics have classified her work into “rational feminism” (Todd 729), “socialist feminism” (Kaplan 154), and moral feminism (Blain, Clements and Grundy 118) And although, for Cora Kaplan, Wollstonecraft’s “writing is central for socialist feminism today, because she based her interest in the emancipation of women as individuals in revolutionary politics” (154), she has not been widely read till recently due to the scandals that her husband William Godwin had made public in his *Memoirs of the Author of “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”* (1798). Her bearing of an illegitimate child, her infatuation with the painter Henry Fuseli, her liaison with Imlay, and her two suicidal attempts were episodes that Victorian morality could not forgive. As Patricia Stubbs points out: “She was an embarrassment. Not only had she preached sexual equality, but she had tried to practise it too. In Victorian terms, her life was a scandal” (127).

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