

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797)

'To render mankind more virtuous, and happier of course, both sexes must act from the same principle; but how can that be expected when only one is allowed to see the reasonableness of it? To render also the social compact truly equitable, and in order to spread those enlightening principles, which alone can meliorate the fate of man, women must be allowed to found their virtue on knowledge, which is scarcely possible unless they be educated by the same pursuits as men.'

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, (1792).

by Janet Todd

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman established Wollstonecraft as the major feminist thinker of her generation. Attacking the sentimental construction of femininity, *Rights of Woman* identified male erotic desire at the root of women's sexualised identity and social oppression:

Confined then in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch. It is true that they are provided with food and raiment, for which they neither toil nor spin; but health, liberty, and virtue, are given in exchange.

Wollstonecraft argued that, in order to become virtuous and fulfil their duties to themselves and God, women had to lead active, useful lives to combat the emotional self-indulgence instilled by a culture of sensibility. Dedicated to the French politician Talleyrand, *Rights of Woman* also aimed to influence the National Assembly's plans to reform state education: girls, Wollstonecraft stressed, were entitled to a serious education combining information with rational skills. Her suggested national syllabus for state schools, in which girls would be taught together with boys, included the study of anatomy and medicine to allow women to become 'rational nurses', the science of morality and political history as well as physical exercise to strengthen both their bodies and minds.

Wollstonecraft's vigorous campaign for women's equality was fired by her own unhappy experiences. Growing up a miserable child in a volatile and violent family frequently threatened with financial ruin, young Mary left home at the age of nineteen to earn her own livelihood. Constrained by the limited career options eighteenth-century notions of propriety offered educated gentlewomen, Wollstonecraft initially attempted to support herself as a companion, a school mistress, and governess. In 1787, when she won the friendship of the influential liberal bookseller Joseph Johnson, she set out to become 'the first of a new genus'. Gradually she established herself as a translator, reviewer, conduct-book writer and author of children's books.

Then, following the storming of the Bastille in 1789, Wollstonecraft swiftly rose to fame and notoriety as one of the leading British contenders in the Revolution controversy: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) offered her vision of an egalitarian society based on personal merit. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) extended to women the notion of natural rights to determine one's destiny.

Around this time sexual desire, which she had mocked in *Rights of Woman*, began to affect her life. First she became infatuated with the married painter Henry Fuseli and, when her proposal to form a *ménage à trois* was rebuffed, she fled to Paris to report on the course of the French Republic. There, isolated in a dangerous and hostile city, Wollstonecraft fell deeply in love with Gilbert Imlay, a charming but fickle American speculator. In May 1794 she gave birth to an illegitimate daughter Fanny; soon after their affair began to disintegrate. Wollstonecraft succumbed to depression and attempted suicide twice; it was only when she returned to London and formed a romantic attachment with William Godwin, now the celebrated radical theorist of *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) and author of *Caleb Williams* (1794), that she regained her emotional equilibrium.

At this time Wollstonecraft began work on a fictional sequel to *Rights of Woman*, the polemical novel *The Wrongs of Woman*, which highlighted the manifold physical, sexual, economic and legal abuses suffered by women of all classes in the late eighteenth century. The tragic story of Maria, committed to a madhouse by a husband who pilfers her inheritance, is a condemnation of traditional marriage, couched in revolutionary discourse: 'Marriage had bastilled [her] for life'.

In March 1797, when Wollstonecraft found herself pregnant again, she and Godwin married despite their earlier condemnations of the institution as a form of tyranny; however they continued to live apart in separate lodgings exchanging a flurry of letters on a daily basis. On 30 August Wollstonecraft gave birth to a girl, Mary, who went on to author *Frankenstein* and marry the Romantic poet P. B. Shelley. Medical complications arose and eleven days later Wollstonecraft died of septicaemia.

The following January Godwin edited her *Posthumous Works*, in which he included his dead wife's last unfinished novel, *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*, alongside her passionate correspondence with Imlay. He also published his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a candid biography intended as a memorial of his love but which scandalised the nation with its account of Wollstonecraft's suicide attempts and sexual infatuations. Her reputation did not recover until the twentieth century.

In 1929 Virginia Woolf paid tribute to her as one of the most influential feminists when she observed that the two *Vindications* 'are so true that they seem now to contain nothing new in them—their originality has become our commonplace.'