

SLIPPING OUT OF THE OTHER AND INTO THE SELF:
THE DISPLACEMENT OF DESIRE IN MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S
A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN

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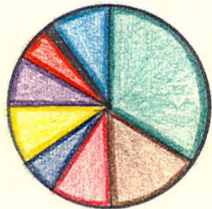
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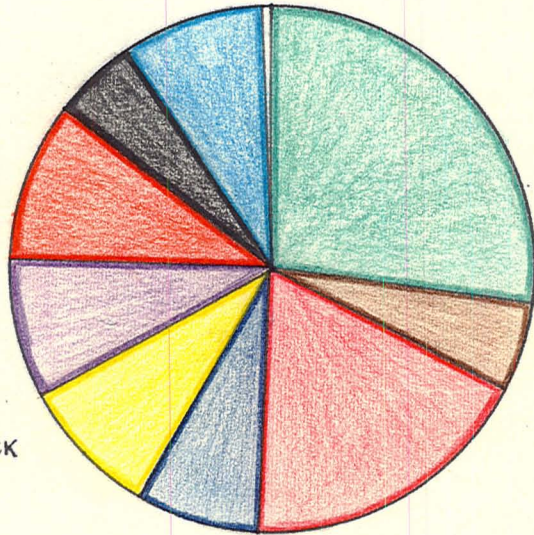


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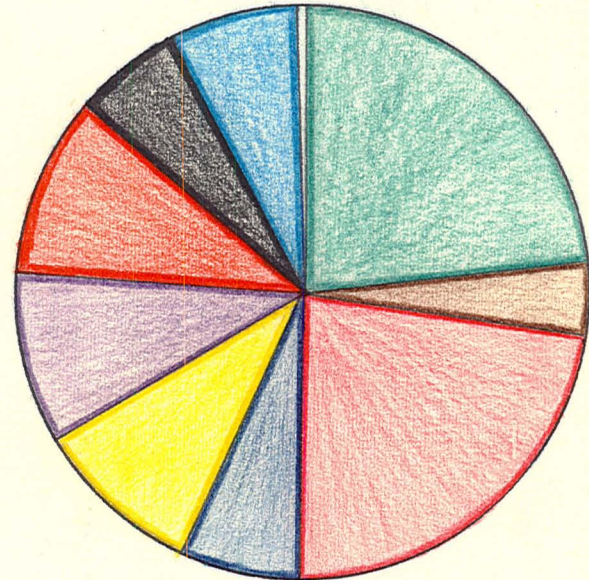


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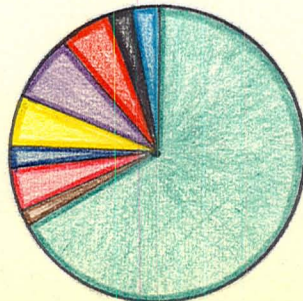
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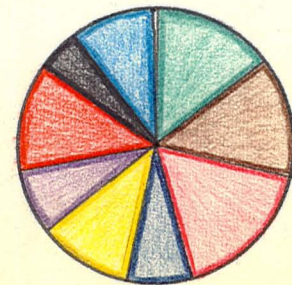
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TITLE: Slipping Out of the Other and Into the Self: The Displacement of Desire
in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

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Abstract

As a paradigmatic text in the trajectory of Western liberal feminism, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is routinely analysed primarily for its gendered implications. In a departure from conventional analyses, this reading of Wollstonecraft's feminist polemic attends to the heterogeneity that is constitutive of identity by focusing on how issues of gender, as well as race, class, nation, and sexuality collude and overlap to complicate constructions of femininity. Central to this treatment of the text is an awareness of how Wollstonecraft's identity as an English, middle-class woman impinges on both how and where she situates other identities in relation to her own. Racialized and classed Others, it is argued, provide Wollstonecraft with convenient sites for the displacement of the female desire that she views as dangerous and regressive. The act of displacement itself takes place again and again, revealing an anxiety about possible similarity between the bourgeois wife and her Others. While the fluctuation in the text between a rhetoric of identification and a rhetoric of differentiation is in part a manifestation of the contradictions and ambivalences that arise out of the process of stereotyping, it is also a persuasive device that allows Wollstonecraft to insist that English bourgeois women's essential superiority from her Others is violated by a shared oppression. The tension between an avowal and disavowal of difference is thus a rhetorical strategy: by comparing the bourgeois Englishwoman to her Others abroad and at home, Wollstonecraft is able to represent her feminist demands not as radical, but as a reasonable attempt to maintain the moral superiority of her race and class.

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Introduction

Until relatively recently Mary Wollstonecraft's *oeuvre*, especially *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, was generally shunned: she herself was viewed as a female monstrosity – Horace Walpole's description of her as a “hyiena in petticoats” has had a tremendous resonating power – and her works were considered by most as the embellishments of a dangerous, if deluded, mind. The burgeoning of the feminist movement in the West has, however, prompted a revival of interest in Wollstonecraft's life and literary productions and a veritable explosion of criticism has been produced on *A Vindication*, now the most well-read and well-known of her works. What confounded me as I approached this by now-canonized polemic for the first time was the neglect on the part of scholars to attend to and account for its impulse to appropriate a plurality of Others in its articulation of an emancipationist argument bounded by a demand for the rights of English bourgeois women. Laden with slippages between the white middle-class self and its Others, the condition of the English domestic woman in *A Vindication* is associated, by turns, with that of the African slave, the female inhabitant of the Eastern harem, and the prostitute of England's metropolis. However, even as these Others are incorporated into Wollstonecraft's text as rhetorical and explanatory devices, they are implicitly barred entry to the egalitarian society that she envisions. As a paradigmatic text in the historical trajectory of Western women's struggles against gender oppression, *A Vindication* is symptomatic of the omissions that continue to plague Western liberal

feminism. A prescient narrative, it reflects the blindspots of much contemporary feminist thought; that is, it mirrors the inattentiveness to, and complicity in, racial and class oppressions that characterize some Western feminisms. The failure on the part of academic, feminist criticism to engage with the dynamics of Othering in Wollstonecraft's work is particularly troubling because it replicates the aporia in Wollstonecraft's feminist politics. Mine is an effort toward the process of rectifying this situation; moving beyond the confines of a strictly gendered analysis of her treatise, my reading is concerned to reveal how gender, as well as racial, national, sexual and class differences collude and overlap in *A Vindication* to interrupt and complicate the text. By no means an attempt to undermine Wollstonecraft's status as a significant political thinker, my interrogation is invested in the larger project of developing an awareness as to how Western liberal feminism, even as it contests oppression when it takes the form of white bourgeois women's victimization under Western patriarchy, is implicated in the oppression of others. The celebration of Wollstonecraft's text for its unequivocal demands for women's political, social, and legal equality with men – which reflects the often uncritical assessment of Western feminism as emphatically liberatory – makes my discussion that much more necessary. *A Vindication* provides a way into examining the mechanisms of power in which all productions of knowledge, feminisms included, are immersed. Rather than proclaiming Western feminism as merely triumphalist, which only belies its less laudable achievements, we need to requestion its theoretical foundation; here, I remind my readers of Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid's caveat that, "If feminism is to be different, it must acknowledge the ideological and problematical significance

of its own past” (18). Part of acknowledging this past is to delineate how the image of the Other functioned to advance Western feminists’ cause.

The manipulation of an Other in feminist rhetoric is, as I discuss in my first chapter, intimately connected to enlightenment and revolutionary discourses that invoked a ‘savage’ society as a means of discussing and assessing Western development. While Wollstonecraft, in her rereading of Rousseau, expressly rejects as “unsound” (78) his concept of a state of nature – civilization, the apex of which has not yet been achieved, is preferable because it includes the possibility of women’s equality – she takes from him a comparative method dependent on a hierarchical conception of the universe. This stratified world view, together with a valorization of rational individualism, of “progress” and “nature” – which also formed the terms for the debate about the French Revolution in which she was such an active participant – is her inheritance from the enlightenment. The tradition of the enlightenment bequeaths to Wollstonecraft a spectrum of being with civilization at one end, savagery at the other – a spectrum on which she inserts the colonial slave at the opposite end of the descending scale from the English bourgeois woman. It is not always in Wollstonecraft’s interests, however, to maintain this distance and so we discover occasional moments when the white middle-class woman merges with the black slave. To shame opponents of female emancipation into conceding that the treatment of women attests to the barbarity of British civilization, Wollstonecraft strategically conflates the condition of the colonial slave and the English bourgeois female.

The trope of Other woman – the female ‘caged’ in the harem – is likewise deployed by Wollstonecraft to persuade her male audience to undertake the project of English women’s liberation. The devalued Other woman is thus the foil against which Wollstonecraft can develop her argument that English women are indeed the agents of British civilization. My second chapter is an exploration of how the female inhabitant of the harem is the means through which Wollstonecraft can assert her commitment to racial motherhood, and, perhaps more importantly, her commitment to a fundamentally English ideal; as Antoinette Burton also discovers in her excavation of the Other woman in nineteenth-century literature, “At the same time that the varieties of the female Other worked to solidify the image of British feminists as the embodiment of civilization and saviours of their race, they helped to signify the essential Englishness of their cause” (87).¹ Yet only through imagining the Other woman as a mirror-image of the English woman can Wollstonecraft insist on the need for differentiation; only then can she define the English woman as the highest and most civilized national female type. The cleansing of the English woman – in short, her desexualization – requires the eroticized Other woman. By the same token, the purification of the English home is dependent on the discursive sexualization of the space of the Eastern harem. The negotiation of English identity

¹ Antoinette Burton provides an excellent and much-needed discussion about the interconnections between British imperialism and organized British feminism in the context of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. I would only take issue with Burton’s claim that “British feminists exhibited an imperial worldview from the 1860s onward” (62). An examination of the axioms of imperialism in *A Vindication* reveals that Burton’s time frame can be pushed back several years. Other scholars of feminist imperialist attitudes, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, also begin with the misassumption that the nineteenth century can be taken as a starting point for the close relationship between imperialism and feminism. Indeed, further study is clearly needed on the reproduction of imperialist ideology among feminists of the eighteenth century.

– male as well as female, I contend – needs the existence of the Other in order to displace all that is viewed as “out of place” in the English landscape. Thus the invocation of the Other woman is not motivated by some ambition to improve the condition of women everywhere. The intended subjects of Wollstonecraft’s emancipationist polemic are clearly English middle-class women themselves, who because of their mistreatment at the hands of English men are in danger of approximating their uncivilized counterparts abroad.

In its concern with how imperialism functioned to provide an avenue for new female subjectivities, my reading of Wollstonecraft’s text clearly follows the path paved by the scholarship of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Both Mohanty and Spivak are highly conscious of how some forms of feminist thought, even as they show an interest in the Third World and in women of the Third World, unintentionally reproduce imperialist assumptions. Mohanty, in her influential article of 1984, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,” puts forth a powerful critique of “the production of the ‘third world woman’ as a singular monolithic subject” (51) in the social sciences. The assumption in first world feminist texts that women of the third world constitute a homogeneous category is underwritten, Mohanty argues, by a hegemonic ideological practice. Elaborating, Mohanty distinguishes between “woman” – an abstraction constituted by representational discourse – and “women” – actual, material subjects. The representation in Western feminist scholarship of a composite, singular “third world woman” is used as a category of analysis on the basis of certain sociological and anthropological universals that limit the identity of third world women to their

gender. The privileging of Western feminist values in this truncated representation of the non-Western woman amounts to a sort of discursive colonization.

In her extension of Mohanty's powerful analysis to literary history in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," Spivak insists that nineteenth-century British literature, "as cultural representation of the English to the English" (897), contributed to the success of the imperialist project. The feminist individualism that forms the basis of many Western feminisms – what Spivak defines as "precisely the making of human beings, the constitution and 'interpellation' of the subject not only as individual but as 'individualist'" (897) – operates to ensure the erasure of the native female once she has abetted the female protagonist in her pursuit of gender equality: "As the female individualist, not-quite/not-male, articulates herself in shifting relationship to what is at stake, the 'native female' as such (*within* discourse, *as* a signifier) is excluded from any share in this emerging norm" (897). What Spivak terms the "native female" is empty of content except in relation to the not-yet emancipated female subject; assigned no position of enunciation – prevented, indeed, from speaking altogether – she operates only as a signifier whose meaning is determined as she shifts close to, and alternatively away from, the female subject. If we became aware of this imperialist narrativization of history – if we wrested our focus away from the female individualist – we would, according to Spivak, "produce a narrative, in literary history of the "worlding" of what is now termed 'the Third World'" (897). We would, in other words, be able to recognize how not only through the act of mapping territory, but also through

various acts of symbolic cultural mapping, imperial discourse was inscribed onto the earth to bring the colonized space of 'the third world' into being.

Spivak's concept of worlding provides us with a way of thinking through Wollstonecraft's cartographic discursive inscriptions in *A Vindication*. In her calibration of the world, Wollstonecraft concentrically places the non-European world and its women on the very outside fringes; continental Europe, or what she terms "the most uncivilized European states" (172) in which "the women have confined themselves to domestic life [. . .] corrupting themselves and the men with whose passions they played" (261), she places somewhere in the middle; and England, although in danger of approximating lesser "worlds" because it insists on tenaciously clinging to patriarchal assumptions and practices, is the certain center. Useful as Spivak's concept of worlding is, where we encounter its limits, as I argue in my epilogue, is in its failure to account for how the lower-class female Other situated within England's own boundaries contests its claim to moral preeminence. Indeed, while Spivak's work makes us well aware of the heterogeneity of third world women that imperialist representations elide, through her reductive category of the "female individualist" she paradoxically homogenizes first world women in the process.

As valuable as the scholarship of Spivak and Mohanty is, and as much as it informs my reading of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*, my concern is that their understanding of a homogeneous female subject as a phenomenon enacted by Western feminist discourse *only* in direct relation to a 'third world' Other is far too much of an oversimplification. Their work, I believe, risks an effacement of how Western feminist discourse and political practice is constituted as monolithic via a

middle-class norm. Mohanty, it can rightly be argued, is explicit in maintaining that the discourse and practice of Western feminism “is neither singular nor homogeneous in its goals, interests, or analyses” (52). Still, her claim that the category “woman” is put into circulation by Western feminist discourse *about* ‘third world’ women, posits this transaction as a unidirectional one, thus ignoring how some forms of Western feminism, though arguably not to the same extent, produce an “average” first world woman who is not just white, but also middle class. The representation of a ‘third world woman,’ I suggest, exists side by side with that a ‘first world woman’ – a Western feminist self-presentation that produces and privileges as norm a middle-class subject position.

The failure of post-colonial interpretations of gender to adequately take into account how class formation plays into the consolidation of bourgeois female subjectivity constitutes a serious omission in textual criticism. The relatively overlooked scholarship of Joyce Zonana, while it has provided much of the stimulation for my own thinking about Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication*, also suffers from a neglect of how class, in collaboration with race, shapes Western liberal feminist discourse. In her article, “The Slave and the Sultan: Feminist Texts and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*,” Zonana undertakes an analysis of how *A Vindication*, among several other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, and particularly Brontë’s novel, participates in what she terms “feminist orientalism” – “a rhetorical strategy (and a form of thought),” as she defines it, “by which a speaker or writer neutralizes the threat inherent in feminist demands and makes them palatable to an audience that wishes to affirm its occidental superiority” (594). By mitigating the perceived

menace of feminist “impositions,” such a comparative strategy functions thus: “If the lives of women in England or France or the United States can be compared to the lives of women in ‘Arabia,’ then the Western feminist’s desire to change the status quo can be represented not as a radical attempt to restructure the West but as a conservative effort to make to make the West more like itself ” (594). While my own reading, particularly in Chapter Two, is very much an extension and elaboration of Zonana’s own, what serves as a point of departure for my analysis is my concern with how class location contributes to and complicates representations of gender and race. For we cannot, for instance, make sense of how the trope of the harem in *A Vindication* functions as metaphor for the English domestic home without an awareness of how Wollstonecraft’s middleclassness shapes her world view, and consequently, her textual representations.

The Others in Wollstonecraft’s text, moreover, are multiple and not always so far away, neither spatially nor geographically. For if, as Zonana argues, a racialized female Other allows Wollstonecraft to insist that her feminist demands be met, a classed female Other functions in precisely the same way. Wollstonecraft’s heuristic appropriation of a sexualized lower-class female Other, embodied most potently in the form of the prostitute at home, is the focus of my concern in Chapter Three. Inhabiting the space of England’s streets, the prostitute disrupts notions of an ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ of an ‘us’ and ‘them,’ or a ‘self’ and ‘other.’ The prostitute, a requisite to Wollstonecraft’s argument, must be viewed as *essentially* different; she must also, however, for argument’s sake, be seen to inhabit a condition that is not far off from, even at times identical to, the one occupied by the bourgeois female.

While in part deployed as rhetorical ruse, the prostitute does induce a real, severe anxiety in the bourgeois female: as simultaneously a “seller” of sex, a commodity in a masculinist marketplace and a worker whose labour is deemed “non-productive,” the prostitute uncannily mirrors the position of the bourgeois female. At the same time, there is a strong motivation on the part of the middle-class woman to disavow the prostitute that she recognizes in herself. Here, as elsewhere in the context of this project, Homi Bhabha’s concept of fetishization, dehistoricized as it may be, provides a useful way into thinking about the effects of the Other on the psyche. As fetish object, the prostitute produces conflictual responses, particularly in the female subject. Strange and yet familiar, the prostitute destabilizes the middle-class woman’s sense of herself as respectable and sufficiently chaste. In turning in this final section to Wollstonecraft’s last work, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Women* and in continuing my analysis of *A Vindication*, I maintain that the prostitute is indeed a threatening, although necessary presence, as she functions to displace the bourgeois woman’s anxieties about her own sexuality.

It is necessary to keep in mind that as much as (and perhaps because) Wollstonecraft transgressed in her own life social limitations on the expression of female desire, she is highly self-conscious of how patriarchy gains its *raison d’être* by constructing women as paradoxically inert and at the same time particularly prone to the dangers of uncontrollable gusts of passion. The eighteenth century, as Michel Foucault, in his *A History of Sexuality* observes, saw the beginnings of a discourse that invested the bourgeois wife with technologies of sexuality: “one of the first to be sexualized,” he writes, “was the ‘idle’ woman” (121). Yet while Foucault claims that

the working class resisted and refused to accept the excessive preoccupation with sexuality that characterized the middle class and that the bourgeoisie “tried it on themselves first” (122), it seems that for the bourgeois female, whose sexuality is used against her, it is indeed worthwhile to try it on her Others. The compulsive need to disavow female desire that erupts into *A Vindication* is an extraordinary and an understandable one – especially when we consider how female sexuality became, through hegemonic discourse, white women’s burden. It is unfortunate nonetheless that in succumbing to the urge to deny the sexuality of the bourgeois female, Wollstonecraft displaces it onto her various Others. Malleable precisely because they are inaccessible, these Others, as we shall see, are easily manipulated to fit Wollstonecraft’s feminist philosophy and readily available to imbibe the sexuality that maligns the status of the English bourgeois woman. I turn now to a discussion of how the configuration of an Other in Wollstonecraft’s feminist discourse is intimately connected to enlightenment and revolutionary epistemologies.

Chapter 1

“Would Men But Generously Snap Our Chains”:

Negotiations of the Self through the Slave

“he, forsooth, was her master; no slave in the West Indies had one more despotic” ~ *Maria*, 126

The French Revolution and the abolitionist movement of the late eighteenth century, as well as the Enlightenment writings (e.g. of John Locke) of midcentury, fashioned a discourse of slavery versus emancipation through which Wollstonecraft articulates the oppression of middle-class Englishwomen. Revolutionary, abolitionist, and enlightenment discourses – however different their philosophies and motivations – all articulated, although each in their own way, the claim that “civilization” was antithetical to the system of slavery upon which European governments were predicated. To varying extents, each of these discourses percolate through Wollstonecraft’s text of nascent Western liberal feminism. The comparisons she makes between white women and black slaves represent an extension of the suggestion that England permits and promotes a system of slavery within the space of its own boundaries. However, an implicit belief in the need to maintain cultural difference precedes the construction of an explicit identification between English women and their colonized Others: the act of comparison itself suggests that English cultural norms have been undermined. The tension in Wollstonecraft’s text between endorsing and discrediting English civilization has the intended effect of

disclosing the specifically gendered oppression that she represents as entirely “unnatural” to “enlightened” England.

In analogizing the conditions of the bourgeois woman and the black slave, *A Vindication* participates in a tradition in which feminists in the West have sought to persuade their male counterparts that their agendas constituted a “respectable moral cause, not a revolutionary demand that threatened the whole of society” (Ware 108). Wollstonecraft is well aware of -- and discursively manipulates to her advantage -- England’s incentive to define itself in opposition to those “savage” lands outside of itself. While I turn first to a discussion of where Wollstonecraft is situated in terms of enlightenment and revolutionary discourses of slavery, towards the end of the chapter I engage in an analysis of how the black slave is troped as the “self-centred,” “superficial,” “idle” European middle-class woman. Situated in the margins of the text, the black slave functions only to displace the rebuffed self of the middle-class female; the slave’s actual plight, never Wollstonecraft’s chief concern, is employed only for the purpose of furthering an argument about Englishwomen’s rights.

The possibility of rights for English women was implicitly invoked by eighteenth-century discourse on the rights of man, expounded by such figures as Montesquieu and Locke. Yet, while male thinkers articulated and advanced the concept of natural rights for all men, they concomitantly excluded women from rights discourse and instead said that women were, as Janet Todd and Moira

Ferguson put it, “weaker vessels and adjuncts of men” (62).¹ To say that Wollstonecraft is taking the arguments of these Enlightenment thinkers and grafting them onto a discourse in favour of women’s rights is clearly an oversimplified view of a work that is influenced, in complicated ways, by a plethora of particular philosophies, events and processes. All the same, *A Vindication* is in part a response to Rousseau’s conception of female education as a training period in the arts of arousing male desire and satisfying male needs. Sizable sections of the text are devoted to a critique of the Rousseauian conceptualization of a female ideal. To Wollstonecraft, male fantasies of female perfection turn real women into “slave[s] of sensibility” (202), “slaves of love” (165) and “slaves of prejudices [sic]” (188). Thus, crucial to Wollstonecraft’s condemnation of masculinist definitions of middle-class femininity is an anti-slavery rhetoric that had its beginnings in the enlightenment critique of patriarchalism – a critique that inevitably raised the possibility of women’s role in society, but focussed on male relationships (Fox-Genovese 264). Slavery, for male Enlightenment thinkers – Locke in particular – came to include “unfree labor, feudal dues and services, *lettres de cachet*, arranged marriages, abuses of paternal power,

¹ While I use Ferguson’s and Todd’s statement here because it effectively captures the limitedness of Enlightenment thought in proposing amelioration for women’s condition, I recognize that such a statement, as a result of its reductiveness, denies the complex relationship between Enlightenment discourse of natural rights and emerging eighteenth-century Western feminist discourse. For a detailed analysis of the intersections between the Enlightenment and Western feminism, see Jane Rendall, in *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860* (London: Macmillan, 1985). While Enlightenment thinkers posited a secular and contractual model of the family relationship that fortuitously disputed the assumption of a divinely ordered patriarchy and while John Locke, Voltaire, and Montesquieu alluded to and condemned the position of women and their situation, either in the legal or social realms, Enlightenment thinkers ultimately posited a view of ‘woman’ that saw her as a creature prone to gusts of passion and subject not to reason but imagination, although possessed of moral qualities which could benefit men. The consensus was that improvement of women and their situation was attainable through their fulfillment of their domestic

artificial forms of deference, and more” (Fox-Genovese 264). Appropriating the anti-slavery rhetoric of enlightenment thinkers, Wollstonecraft uses it to incorporate an analysis of female relationships and to expose Rousseauian misogyny.

Rejecting Rousseau’s “state of nature” as regressive and claiming a preference for the advantages of civilization, Wollstonecraft constructs the crux of her argument for female equality on an appeal to England’s need to cultivate itself. The entire European world, because it has not yet sloughed off the systems of hereditary and female slavery which belong to dark ages and dark continents, has not yet crossed over that boundary from uncivilized to civilized: “The civilization of the bulk of people of Europe is very partial; nay, it may be made a question, whether they have any virtues in exchange for innocence, and the freedom which has been bartered for splendid slavery” (77). If the European world is to progress to the pinnacle of civilization, it must abolish the twin systems of monarchy and patriarchy together since both constitute forms of slavery. Thus, for Wollstonecraft, Western women’s emancipation requires the annihilation of hereditary government: for the day when patriarchy ceases to exist “we must wait, perhaps, till kings and nobles, enlightened by reason, and preferring the real dignity of man to the childish state, throw off her hereditary trappings” (87). Central to the rhetorical urgency that her polemic assumes is an emphatic insistence that gendered and monarchical hierarchies, so long as they are left intact, will thwart England’s attainment of civilization.

role; Mary Wollstonecraft assents to this belief and uses it as the basis of much of her argument in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Civilized versus uncivilized, enslaved versus emancipated, despotic versus democratic – these binaries that constitute the terms of Wollstonecraft’s feminist analysis also constituted the terms of the debates that emerged out of the French Revolution. In the rhetoric of Edmund Burke, Wollstonecraft’s political foe, and Thomas Paine, her ally, savage and colonized Others are the site on which the struggle over English identity is fought. In his rejoinder to a lecture given by the Dissenting minister Richard Price, Burke retaliated with a staunch defense of the French monarchy and claimed that the Jacobins had created a nation of “barbarism” that was responsible for the destruction of “all the other manners and principles which have hitherto civilized Europe” (269). In his response to Burke in *The Rights of Man* Thomas Paine replied thus: “There is *one* general principle that distinguishes freedom from slavery, which is, that all *hereditary government over a people is to them a species of slavery, and representative government is freedom*” (Paine’s emphasis, 162). A contest emerges, then, between Burke and two of his better-known adversaries in which both sides seek to capitalize on their audience’s aversion to “uncivilized” society and the images of slavery that it conjures. By constructing an England that is either averse to the Revolution, as in Burke’s assessment, as ‘civilized’ or ‘cultivated’, or conversely, by naming England as a barbarous nation, as a nation that sanctions and advocates slavery even within its own borders, as in the evaluations of Paine and Wollstonecraft, both parties fight their battles on and over the discursive ground of slavery. Wollstonecraft’s unique contribution is to modify and expand the limits of this rhetorical debate concerning the rights of men, pushing them outward to encompass rather than preclude the question of women’s rights. She thus mediates

the specific oppression of middle-class Englishwomen through the contemporaneous discourse of the French Revolution. A close inspection of *A Vindication* reveals that the views she articulates are a direct challenge to Burkean logic which reasoned that the danger of the French Revolution lies not only in the rampant chaos, the uncontrolled, ‘uncivilized’ passions to which it gave rise, but also in its provision for women’s participation in that same “uncivilized” moral system.² While the inference of the political ideology and language of the Revolution, which espoused the ideals of universal rights, citizenship and suffrage, was the inclusion of women in a resurrected political and legal system, women were categorically refused their rights as citizens of the revamped state, although there were significant revisions to their status.³ The impulse to curtail the potential for female power was not only an anti-revolutionary sentiment, then, but also one that was shared by revolutionaries. It is this concerted effort to thwart women’s achievement of political and social rights that cathects Wollstonecraft’s polemic. Female oppression, she asserts, leads to the breakdown of all of society – as long as women are slaves “slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent”

² In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke remonstrated against the ‘filthy equity’ of a system that ‘gives women the right to be as licentious as we are’ and that system’s relaxation of the sexual division of labour and marriage laws. For a more detailed commentary on Burke’s antagonism to the greater roles that the Revolution allowed women, see Elizabeth G. Sledziewski, “The French Revolution as Turning Point,” *A History of Women in the West*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, eds. Genevieve Fraise and Michelle Perrot (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) 32-47.

³ The abolishment of the right of primogeniture, the creation of divorce legislation that treated both spouses in symmetrical terms, and the allowance that women could serve as witnesses to public documents and to contract obligations constituted a set of changes that, however radical for that period, only ostensibly conferred on women the rights of citizenship (Sledziewski, 36). While women were bequeathed civic rights, the denial of their political rights rendered what limited power they had non-threatening to the masculine authority of the state; women were still the objects, rather than subjects, of the governing machinery (Sledziewski, 37).

(67). If France is to experience a genuinely equal society, its deprivation of women's political rights will have to end, insists Wollstonecraft; if England is to unfetter itself, it will need to abolish its hereditary system and its corollary – a patriarchal system.

In intimating that the whole of England has been defiled by its internal practice of slavery, Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, goes beyond Paine to link not merely to slavery in the vaguest sense of that term, but more specifically, the British slave trade, with the Burkean antirevolutionary stance. In countering Burke's representation of England as the essence of virtue and morality, Wollstonecraft confronts England with its less savoury representation of itself: invoking images of the physical degradation of slaves, she reminds her readers that in England, slavery is "authorized by law to fasten her fangs on human flesh" (31). When she comes to write a *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft's anti-slavery rhetoric is complicated by the new meanings and associations that she arrogates to that rhetoric, which so thoroughly permeates her text. The appellation of 'slave' is not just loosely applied to women; Wollstonecraft's representation of the white middle-class woman is dependent on a depiction of the black slave whose plight she envisions as essentially her own.

Wollstonecraft's use of the black slave to advance her feminist demands for the middle-class Englishwoman coincides with a period in English history during which abolitionist and anti-abolitionist debates seeped through English society. In 1792, the same year in which Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication*, Denmark was the first European power to abolish the slave trade. Discontent among the slaves in the French colony of Saint-Domingue led the Paris Assembly to exclude all its

colonies from the constitution framed by the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and a bitter revolt of Saint-Domingue's slave population in 1791 ensued. In England, the burgeoning opposition to the slave trade, on religious and humanitarian grounds, led to the first official appeal against it in 1776 and another parliamentary appeal in 1791, though legislation abolishing the British slave trade would not be put in effect until 1807. Even as early as 1772, however, before Wollstonecraft's treatise on women's rights, connections had been made between the plight of Englishwomen and the plight of the black slaves of England's colonial system. In his defense of a black slave, James Somerset, who had been brought to England, in a court case against his master, an English lawyer had analogized – as Wollstonecraft later would – colonial slavery and English marriages: the relationships of slave owners to their slaves was, he contended, analogous to relationships between English husbands and wives in that neither were natural, but rather municipal relationships (Mellor 311).

Wollstonecraft's most consistent articulation throughout *A Vindication* is that “the ✓ slavery of marriage” (237), as a power dynamic that restricts women's movement and encloses them in the domestic realm, subjects Englishwomen to an unnatural form of servitude. As an arrangement that is “arbitrarily imposed” on Englishwomen, marriage effaces female subjectivity and denies female agency; the mind “is left to rust” (148), resulting in the bodily objectification of women. The marital relationship is one then that forces Englishwomen into a position of dependency, and in this sense, very literally enslaves them.

The persuasive power of Wollstonecraft's heuristic appropriation of slavery is readily recognized against the backdrop of the Somerset case. The ruling, which

legally abolished slavery within England, is significant for what it reveals about English attitudes towards itself in relation to its colonial Others. The justification for condemning the internal practice of colonial slavery while allowing it to continue elsewhere in the British empire was, in the words of Lord Mansfield, who presided over the proceedings, that England had “a soil whose air was deemed too pure for slaves to breathe in” (Mellor 345). The equation of Englishwomen’s slavery with colonial slavery in *A Vindication* functions to suggest that English purity has indeed been tainted by the slavery of English women.

Wollstonecraft’s pervasive use of the term “slave” as a descriptor for the imprisoned domestic Englishwoman insinuates itself into the text to identify the Englishwoman with the slave incarcerated in the colonial system; occasionally overt analogies between the English middle-class woman and the black slave function to formulate an Other whose self is negated to reflect the social, political, and cultural position of the bourgeois Englishwoman. The black slave is, in almost every way, represented as a mirror for the white woman. Specifically, slippages are produced in the text wherein the black slave is represented as emblematic of the character defects of the bourgeoisie woman. These slippages take place at intervals when Wollstonecraft is initially speaking of the immodesty, the narcissism, and the immoderate love of material objects that she conceives as integral to, and evidence of, the middle-class Englishwoman’s fettered self. The maneuvers take place as part of Wollstonecraft’s response to Rousseau’s assertion that women should ornament their bodies to render themselves pleasing – a declaration that leads her to pronounce that “attention to dress” is “natural to mankind . . . when the mind has

not sufficiently opened to take pleasure in reflection” (275). Englishwomen, she reasons, are vain because they have been placed in a savage or enslaved position that is antithetical to the equality upon which, she argues, civilization is based: “where women,” she protests, “are allowed to be so far on a level with men, society has advanced, at least, one step in civilization” (275). It is at this moment that the black slave is brought into the text as a manifestation of how uncivilized societies produce superficial, frivolous beings:

even the hellish yoke of slavery cannot stifle the savage desire of admiration which the black heroes inherit from both their parents, for all the hardly earned savings of a slave are commonly expended in a little tawdry finery. And I have seldom known a good male or female servant that was not particularly fond of dress. Their clothes were their riches; and, I argue from analogy, that the fondness of dress, so extravagant in females, arises from the same cause – want of cultivation of mind. (275)

Wollstonecraft participates then in an imperialist, middle-class, and even patriarchal discourse that reads the material indulgences as well as the corporeality of women, slaves, and the lower classes against them. The line between an anxiety about vanity and an anxiety about sexuality becomes quite blurry, even barely distinguishable. A Cartesian logic informs Wollstonecraft’s thinking, so that the body itself and attention to the body is automatically associated with undue attention to, even neglect of, the mind:

An immoderate fondness for dress, for pleasure, and for sway, are [sic] the passions of savages; the passions that occupy those uncivilized beings who have not yet extended the dominion of the mind, or even learned to think with the energy necessary to conatenate that abstract train of though which produces principles. And that women from their education and the present state of civilized life, are in the same condition, cannot, I think, be controverted. (276)

There is a tension here between affirming that middle-class English women are savage-like in their “immoderate fondness for dress, for pleasure, and for sway,” on the one hand, and asserting that such narcissistic tendencies belong to savages and slaves, on the other. What is ironic is that while Wollstonecraft recognizes that the human body has been used as a means of excluding groups from political discourse, her own discourse is predicated on a view that can only see the subaltern as a sexualized being, who merely primps and preens itself. The conventional, misogynist representation of the bodily-obsessed female is, however, eventually discarded and displaced onto the slave; the patriarchal reading of the female body is inverted, so that Wollstonecraft elevates the biological interpretation of women’s role as maternal-centred. In short, Wollstonecraft mimes the black slave as the white woman and then enacts the slave’s erasure once she has reinscribed Englishwomen’s selves and bodies.

The slave merely exists as an undercurrent – both in the sense of being a perilous presence and hardly present – who is only there as a problem; the act of comparison itself suggests that there has been a subversion of English values. The fetishization of the black body against the white body of the Englishwoman indicates a sameness that is dangerous, foreign and misplaced, that is, a contaminant of the English body politic. In her representation of the colonial and “savage” Other, Wollstonecraft does what so many colonialist texts have invariably done before and after her; while she purports to ‘know’ the savage Other – the black slave entrapped in the colonial system – her sight is occluded by her ideology as a bourgeois

intellectual woman, and the text simply reproduces, codifies, and consolidates that ideology and mentality. Hence, as much as she cannot shake her fears about the African, she imagines the black slave as the Englishwoman.

The categorical structures of Abdul R. JanMohamed are, I think, useful for understanding this reproduction. JanMohamed has posited that colonialist literature is divisible into two categories: the “symbolic” and the “imaginary.” Symbolic texts consciously and intentionally attempt an examination of the specific cultural differences between Europeans and natives so as to reflect and reconsider, through a mediation of the racial Other, the cultural values of the metropolis. In contrast to the symbolic text, the imaginary text reveals far less of an awareness of its employment of the racial Other. It is the category of the imaginary that concerns me here, because I see *A Vindication* as clearly inhabiting it. In the “imaginary” text, an image of the imperialist self is projected onto the Other in a way that reveals the European’s self-alienation and thus functions to chart her/his “internal rivalry” (19). Hence, signified and signifier coalesce – they merge into each, becoming one and the same; the black slave *becomes one*, in Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication*, with the Englishwoman. What we thus end up with is a non-dialectical, fixed relationship between the self and Other; but, as JanMohamed explains, that alterity frightens the European and “he [she] quickly retreats to the homogeneity of his [her] own group” (13). While Wollstonecraft constructs a point for identification, she closes it soon enough by appending the qualifier that Englishwomen belong to “civilized life” – hence the aberrance of their situation. While the slave stands for the white woman, that the slave *is* “savage”, and that the Englishwoman has been wrongly placed into a

situation that renders her savage underpins Wollstonecraft's analogy. The message delivered is that the existence of uncivilized elements in civilized society violates the dualistic conception of the universe.

That English society is capable of executing a "revolution of manners," while slaves must resort to forms of violence to effect change, imports a significant difference between the Englishwoman and the black slave. Contrary to Moira Ferguson – the sole critic to deal extensively with the trope of slavery in *A Vindication* – I read Wollstonecraft's allusions to slave uprisings as intentionally posited against the bourgeois revolution she advocates for England. Ferguson's analysis takes as its centre Wollstonecraft's representation of conventionally feminine behaviour; invoking the concept of *mimicry*, which she appears to use in Lucé Irigaray's sense of that term, Ferguson claims that at some level, Wollstonecraft appears to recognize that "self-trivializing behaviours" are "tropes of insurrection" (101). Such a reading encounters severe limitations, however, especially against Irigaray's claim that *mimicry* entails an intentional assumption of the feminine role -- that is, a deliberate attempt to behave in conventionally feminine ways in order "to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation" (Irigaray 78) and thereby disrupt the phallogocentric order. There is no evidence, not even of the latent or covert sort, that Wollstonecraft conceives of conventionally feminine behaviour as having a positive value; nor does she advise women to perform the feminine role with the aim of subverting it. An assertion that she repeatedly makes is that by "obtaining power by unjust means, by practicing or fostering vice, [women] evidently lose the rank which reason would assign them, and they become either abject slaves

or capricious tyrants” (113). To gain power by just means necessitates, Wollstonecraft maintains, the individual exercise of reason, order, and prudence – in short, the implementation of “masculine” values.

That Wollstonecraft vouches to speak in a specifically ‘masculine’ voice also confirms her contestation of the power of, to speak in Irigaray’s terms, *parler femme* [speaking (as) woman]. To constitute “a direct feminine challenge” to the condition of mimicry, according to Irigaray, “means demanding to speak as a (masculine) ‘subject,’ that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual indifference” (78). Defining her voice against the feminine, against its purported multivocality and plurality, Wollstonecraft, by her own admission, does not fabricate “the turgid bombast of artificial feelings” (74), but rather seeks “to avoid that flowery diction” (74). Rather than playing with mimesis so as to make “‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible feminine in language” (Irigaray 78), Wollstonecraft, in a strange reversal of that game exposes the linearity, the excessive univocality of masculine language and logic through her use of repetition.

What most concerns me here, however, is Ferguson’s claim that Wollstonecraft latently believes that women effect meaningful resistance to the patriarchal order, and that Wollstonecraft even encourages resistance through mimicry. Ferguson then reads the oblique references to the Saint-Domingue revolution as functioning to suggest “that women should politically resist” (96) and as expressions of “a buried sense of identification and solidarity” (99). The warning that Wollstonecraft directs at her male reader – that

Slaves and mobs have always indulged themselves in the same excesses, when once they broke loose from authority. – The bent bow recoils with violence, when the hand is suddenly relaxed that forcibly held it; and sensibility, the play-thing of outward circumstances, must be subjected to authority, or moderated by reason (156)

– is read by Ferguson as an inconspicuous directive, meant for Englishwomen, to collectively overthrow their male tyrannizers and establish a truly democratic society. Yet her conflation of “slaves and mobs” in this passage signifies her contempt of the former. A reading that sees Wollstonecraft as endorsing, and even encouraging, excess rather than moderation fails to recognize the extent to which Wollstonecraft is averse to, even repulsed by, impulse and uproar, especially of the violent sort. A distrustful attitude toward rampant, unrestrained insurrection infuses her writing and is almost certainly informed by the slave revolution that had exploded in Saint-Domingue – which raised the specter of black passions and thrust into motion a set of discourses around the *corps sauvage* (Colwill 199) – the year before *A Vindication* was written. The repugnance to bloody revolutions which is detectable in *A Vindication* is most adamantly expressed in her rethinking of the French Revolution in *A Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, in which, speaking of the march to Versailles, she chronicles her antipathy towards that “mob,” and “all the odium” which that “appellation [of ‘mob’] can possibly import” (343). Differentiation from, rather than identification with the slave, creeps into her analogy between the black slave and the Englishwoman at this juncture. While Wollstonecraft accepts the idea, found in enlightenment theory, that an excessive “libidinal economy is brought to bear on subordinated groups” (Kaplan 43) and that

severe repression leads to mass social violence – and while this leads her to imply that Englishwomen’s oppression may lead to their rebellion – she certainly never throws her support behind any collective female revolution. Instead, she urges Englishwomen to attain individual autonomy, which will distinguish them from black slaves, who effect resistance through collective tyranny.

There is thus a difficult slipperiness between identification with, and difference from, oppressed black slaves. While there is an ever-present awareness of cultural difference, and a sense of cultural superiority, there is an overwhelming desire to recuperate the black Other, to turn the Other into the self. The intense desire to absorb the Other has of course certain inevitable consequences; specifically, it glosses over and inadvertently denies the particularities of the black slave’s experiences because, after all, it is not the particular experience of the black slave that preoccupies Wollstonecraft in this instance. The experience of the slave is eclipsed because the desire to establish, for the purposes of argumentation, similarities to the Englishwoman overrides the question of difference. The equation of the commodification of the bodies and labour of black slaves, for the gain of Englishmen, with the commodification of Englishwomen problematically neglects to acknowledge that women of the middle and upper classes were complicit in, as well as victimized by, imperial discourse and activities:

Why subject her [the Englishwoman] to propriety – blind propriety, if she be capable of acting from a nobler spring, if she be an heir to immortality? Is sugar to be produced by vital blood? Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them, when principles would be a surer guard, only to sweeten the cup of man? (225-226)

A strange reversal is effected here: sugar, in the eighteenth century, carried specifically gendered connotations and was specifically associated with the “feminine” pastime of tea drinking (Coleman 344). Eighteenth-century representations of women typically caricatured a luxurious, ornamented female figure whose desire for commodities was the incentive promoting the colonial system of slavery; women, because of their avid desire for the accumulation of commodities, were turned into metonyms of the imperial system and onto them the entire responsibility for the colonialism was displaced (Brown 429). Yet Wollstonecraft’s interrogations isolate the Englishman, against whom she aligns both the sugar-producing black slaves whom he exploits and the Englishwomen whom he seduces. Rather than acknowledge that middle-class Englishwomen, while victimized by the corresponding systems of patriarchy and colonialism, are also beneficiaries of the capital produced by those systems, Wollstonecraft easily aligns the colonized black slaves and domestic white woman to suggest that both are victimized in precisely the same way. ✓ Thus, while Wollstonecraft’s depiction of Englishwomen coincides with current cultural constructions of them as obsessed with adornment and dress, it also departs from contemporary representations by forging an alignment rather than an animosity between black slaves and middle-class white women. Yet colonization had been directly connected, in an earlier polemic, to English ladies who ostensibly performed the role of the sensible female while brutalizing slaves:

Where is the dignity, the infallibility of sensibility, in the fair ladies, whom, if the voice of rumour is to be credited, the captive Negroes curse in all the agony of bodily pain, for the unheard of tortures they invent? It is probable that some of them, after the sight of a flagellation, compose their ruffled spirits and exercise their tender

feelings by the perusal of the last imported novel. (*A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 45)

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, however, the purported sameness of Englishwomen and black slaves is foregrounded; the differences are consigned to the background and, for the most part, have to do with Wollstonecraft's plea that England rid itself of its system of male hegemony. The emphasis on the existence of sameness allows her, in short, to more persuasively insist on the need for difference – on the need, that is, for female equality that would verify England's claim to civilization. Yet emphasis on sameness is deeply problematic; as bell hooks has said in her virulent critique of the appropriation of abolitionist discourse by white American feminist reformers, it disavows the significant material differences that constituted the lived realities of black slaves, and rather than “revealing an awareness or sensitivity to the slave's lot,” instead exploits “the horror of the slave experience to enhance their own cause” (126).

Although an abolitionist discourse is interspersed throughout all of Wollstonecraft's writings, it is never her focal point for discussion. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a discourse of abolitionist tones enters her language and is appropriated as a hermeneutic tool to investigate and to illuminate the oppression of Englishwomen. The result is that the black slave falls into the cracks, in between the lines of her discourse, and her/his own narrative is absented and misrepresented; that it is the Englishwoman who has access to discourse, to the written and ‘valued’ word, is perhaps the most glaring evidence of the latter's different and, at least in relation to the black slave of the British colonial system, privileged position.

Chapter 2

Harem as Home:

Metaphoric and Metonymic Representations of English Domesticity

At its broadest level, this chapter concerns itself with the strategy of comparing the Western woman to a racialized female Other. Such a strategy, which presents a narrative of the world in which the West is ensconced as the enlightened center, was most explicitly first employed by French Enlightenment thinkers, and in particular by Montesquieu. The intention of these thinkers was not to emancipate European women but rather to employ them as metonymical signifiers of the political and cultural freedom of the Western world. It is not, for instance, the condition of European women that concerns Montesquieu in his *Persian Letters*; while their status is consistently compared to that of Eastern women confined in harems, the latter function metaphorically to represent the political enslavement of European men. The image of the Oriental woman, in conjunction with the Oriental institution of the harem, serves as a device that sheds light on male practices and institutions.

Montesquieu's text marks the beginnings of a discourse, instrumental to Europe's self-definition, that took the body and space of the Other as its locus. The discourse of the Other, through which Europe has discursively mapped the world, has typically infused the body and space of the Other with lavish sexuality. Through

a cache of fictional devices, the West, as Irvin Cemil Schick alleges, has manufactured sexually-infused, imaginary Oriental people and spaces:

Gender and sexuality are fundamental (imputed) attributes of socially constructed space. Sexualized images of women *and* men were used, in Europe's discourses of the other, as key markers of place, and hence as determinants of identity and alterity. In other words, these images were among the building blocks with which a political discourse of spatiality was constructed and the world discursively territorialized. (87)

As a key Oriental space in Western imperialist discourse, the harem transcends physical/geographical place and is invested with strata of symbolic, sexually imbued meaning. The harem and the women within it, as conventionally conceived in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment narratives, are used to signify a tyrannical, sensual, and indolent Eastern world.

In *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft takes the trope of the Oriental woman in the harem and extends it to consolidate Western female subjectivity. It is through the Other woman that Wollstonecraft can assert that the treatment of Western women is "out of place" in the space of the English home and nation. Her attempt to promote Englishwomen to an equal position involves a disavowal of male depictions of feminine difference and the projection of such difference onto the racialized female. In writing against the Rousseauian contention that the European woman should imitate her feminized, foreign Other, Wollstonecraft insists that the cultural superiority of the English woman lies in her greater potential to assume a subject position that is both productive and rational and thus "masculine."

While sexualization and racialization are contingent upon one another in Rousseau's representation of the harem, he departs somewhat from Montesquieu's

use of that trope. Rather than positing the superiority of the supposedly more modest Englishwoman, Rousseau – whose misogynist imaginings, as Wollstonecraft so vehemently points out, lead him to dream up a woman with stores of sexual charm – instead recommends that “an English maiden cultivate the talents which will delight her husband as zealously as the Circassian cultivates the talents of an Eastern harem” (337). The significant inclusion and denouncement of this same passage from *Emile* in *A Vindication* (159) points us toward Wollstonecraft’s motive for recasting the harem as a sexually corrupt and morally vacuous space. Her response to Rousseau is to pose a rhetorical question: why is it, she asks, that an “[English] girl should be educated for her husband with the same care as for an eastern haram?” (164). She answers that Englishwomen are encultured in the same oppressive system as are women “trapped” in harems. In line with Rousseau, she seeks to pass critical judgment on English culture by using the *topos* of the Orient as Other; yet unlike her male predecessors, in underscoring the need for the emancipation of Englishwomen, Wollstonecraft constructs an identification between Englishwomen and Oriental women so as to persuade her readership of the need for differentiation. The image of the Oriental woman enables Wollstonecraft to identify the scope of the oppression that faces middle-class Englishwomen and in turn to accentuate their essential, unalterable cultural superiority. In circumscribing the harem with erotic meaning and in defining it as a zone that contains the unproductive female body, Wollstonecraft envisions it as a mirror-image of the English domestic realms of the middle-class home and nation. As a space that had come to embody erotic alterity in Western narratives, the harem provides a fertile site on which Wollstonecraft can

negotiate an identity for middle-class Englishwomen. Incorporated into Wollstonecraft's feminist, middle-class, and colonial discourse, the harem functions to displace onto that imaginary space and its female Others the gender norms and sexual mores that work to disempower the domestic Englishwoman in the English home. Thus the rejection of patriarchally constructed female identity – premised on the sexualized female body – and the formation of a differently constructed identity as (re)productive and desexed requires the Other woman; the redefined wife of the English middle classes can only emerge through and out of the feminized and racialized occupant of the harem to whom her sexual, unproductive former self is given. The maternal embodiment of her nation, the resurrected Englishwoman – in contrast to her female Others abroad – is invested in the education of her children and is thus vicariously involved in the larger project of nation- and empire-building.

Yet before Wollstonecraft can implicitly sanction the process of empire formation, she must first disparage the internal gendered domination that proliferates inside England's own boundaries. In censuring the tyranny that abounds in heterosexual relationships, she metaphorizes English patriarchy and empire. Like "slavery," "empire" furnishes Wollstonecraft with a commodious metaphor with which to articulate not only the exploitation of women by men but also of men by women: Englishwomen are "like Turkish bashaws" (107) whose "empire" (163), which is restricted to the domestic home, provides them with an illusive sense of power, while Englishmen are "tyrants and sensualists" who demand "blind obedience" (90) from their female counterparts. Through this domestication of empire, Wollstonecraft inconspicuously reflects back to England an image of itself –

as despotic and decadent – that it has sought to disown and displace onto Other spaces. Yet *A Vindication* contains neither an adamant nor a straightforward assertion that England and East are akin. Rather, a tension between avowing and disavowing a shared identity – of imperiousness and indolence – structures Wollstonecraft’s polemic. At one moment, Wollstonecraft emphatically rejects any similitude, as when she maintains that “the despotism that kills virtue in the bud, [does not] hover over Europe with that destructive blast that desolates Turkey, and renders the men, as well as the soil, unfruitful” (111). The rhetorical force, however, of her plea that England reform its treatment of its female populace is dependent on a consistent and implicit articulation of an equivalence between Self and Other. The contradictory impulses of denial and affirmation function to suggest a resemblance – however objectionable and undesirable – between England and its outsiders.

The friction between a rhetoric of identification and a rhetoric of differentiation permeates Wollstonecraft’s portrayal of the harem. Here, the competing representations of the East as willful and yet apathetic fuse; the harem is microcosmically associated with an “empire of love” – with men’s incontestable dominion over women – and macrocosmically associated with an aggressive yet degenerate ‘Eastern’ empire. Thus, in appropriating the harem as trope, Wollstonecraft catachrestically applies it to the English home and nation – co-opting it as metaphor for the patriarchal English home and as metonym for a patriarchal English nation. Slippage between home and harem occurs sporadically; Wollstonecraft’s attack of women’s confinement in the domestic realm occasionally

gives way to a conflation of the two spaces. Maintaining then that gender equality will morally enhance English society, Wollstonecraft insists that

If women are to be made virtuous by authority, which is a contradiction in terms, let them be immured in seraglios and watched with a jealous eye. – Fear not that the iron will enter into their souls – for the souls that can bear such treatment are made of yielding materials, just animated enough to give life to the body. (276)

The substitution of the term “home” with that of “seraglio” is intromitted into the text to suggest an insidious similitude, even sameness, between the two. Instead of a plurality, only one signification is attached to the harem – which is, as one might expect, the same as that which Wollstonecraft attaches to the (English middleclass) home: a space of female confinement, the harem *is* home. Western liberal-feminism’s complicity in a construction of the harem that, as Leila Ahmed has charged, is “always so negatively perceived in the West as a place of confinement” (56), has to be understood as an inability to think outside of the parameters of one’s own experience.¹ Since the middle-class home is, in Wollstonecraft’s determination, a claustrophobic space that places women under the thumb of a patriarchal figure, so too is the harem. Thus, the harem can only be periscopically understood through the lens of the home: in both, women stagnate; denied the pleasures and disciplines of activity, they are forced to gain power by using their femininity as a means of subverting masculine authority. The middle-class home and the upper-class harem, associated as they are with an enervating aristocratic luxuriousness, sap women of

¹ Lady Mary Montagu’s *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1716-1717) provide an interesting exception to the conventionally negative construction of the harem in Western discourse. Montagu’s claim that Turkish women are actually freer than English women ironically works in much the same way as Wollstonecraft’s claim that ‘Eastern’ women are the epitome of oppressed femininity – that is, to implicitly critique the condition of Englishwomen.

their physical and intellectual strength and thus prompt women's moral deterioration. What is left less resolved is the question of whether English women "immured in their families groping in the dark" (67) are as resigned to their victimized status as those Other women "immured in seraglios" – whether they too "are made of yielding materials" and hence "can bear such treatment" (276).

Wollstonecraft fluctuates between lamenting that Englishwomen so readily perform and rarely dispute their feminized role, on the one hand, and affirming their potential for individual resistance, on the other. Here, we encounter an anxiety between two possibilities: the Englishwoman is, *but cannot possibly be*, complicit in her own degradation. This anxiety is mediated through and against the female Other 'incarcerated' in the harem. At one moment, Wollstonecraft emphatically maintains that those Englishwomen who conform to their prescribed feminine role – who "dress; . . . paint, and nickname God's creatures" – docilely consent to their position and are hence "only fit for a seraglio" (74). Later on, however, Wollstonecraft attempts a step back from the mirror-image that she has constructed through her acquiescent female Other and moves instead toward differentiation:

In a seraglio, I grant that all these arts are necessary; the epicure must have his palate tickled or he will sink into apathy; but have women so little ambition as to be satisfied with such a condition? Can they supinely dream life away in the lap of pleasure, or the languor of weariness, rather than assert their claim to pursue reasonable pleasures and render themselves conspicuous by practicing the virtues which dignify mankind? Surely she has not an immortal soul who can loiter life away merely employed to adorn her person? (95)

Again, a transitionless slippage occurs as the woman of the seraglio is conflated with the Englishwoman, so that the generic "women" who are the subject of

Wollstonecraft's questions are of course Englishwomen. The repetitious act of interrogation that we witness here is not only a manifestation of Wollstonecraft's desire for difference from her female Other but also a strategy that exploits her (English) readership's longing to define itself in opposition to its Others, which Wollstonecraft counts on in her call for female emancipation. Englishwomen, asserts Wollstonecraft, "surely" have more will power, more reason and virtue, to resist such treatment; and most importantly, perhaps, they have a religion that grants them a soul.

In subscribing to the false notion that Islamic culture denies the existence of a female soul, Wollstonecraft reproduces what is a common Western misperception. Wollstonecraft's representation of "Mahometanism" is more interesting, however, for the contradictions and ambivalences it exposes within her own discourse of the Other. For while Wollstonecraft describes "the true style of Mahometanism" as one that considers women "as a kind of subordinate beings" (71), the premise that undergirds her text is that the entire Western tradition is one that has divested women of rights. And by her own admission, the Christian creation myth is a narrative that functions to maintain patriarchal privilege. Wollstonecraft's contradiction is captured in her claim that Milton, a Christian and the canonized forefather of the Western literary tradition, writes in the "true Mahometan strain" when he writes of Eve as "our first frail mother": "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 designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile obedience, to gratify the sense of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of

contemplation” (84). This double but fractured gesture of repudiating as patriarchal the Islamic and Christian traditions has to be understood in terms of the larger fluctuation between identity and difference that reverberates throughout *A Vindication*.

A way into thinking about the contradictory modalities toward identification and difference that constitute Wollstonecraft’s representation of the Other, and particularly the female Other, is through Homi Bhabha’s concept of the stereotype as fetish. In borrowing the formula of fetishism from psychoanalytic discourse and adapting it to the discourse of colonialism, Bhabha argues that fetishism’s irreconcilable logic reveals itself in a fantasmatic unity and sameness that is maintained in the face of contradiction and difference: “fetishism is always a ‘play’ or vacillation between the archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity . . . and the anxiety associated with lack or difference” (Bhabha, 74). The result of this vacillation, which operates in Wollstonecraft’s discourse, is an ambiguity that arises out of a simultaneous recognition and refusal of difference. This splitting or ambivalence manifests itself, for instance, in Wollstonecraft’s production of an English female subject who is both *like* and *not like* the frivolous harem woman – who is both capable and not capable of effecting individual resistance to patriarchal system that constructs her as sexual object. This displacement is not a simple transference between the Englishwoman and her Other; a negation of the Englishwoman’s identity is never entirely possible and hence the repetitious scene of recognition and rejection of the Other.

This conflicted response of detection and denial of difference is again evident in Wollstonecraft's representation of the polygamous marriage that the harem embodies. While an explicit analogy between polygamy and monogamy is absent from *A Vindication*, that the perversions that Wollstonecraft locates in polygamy are also those she locates in the English monogamous marriage tells us that she interprets the Other through the self and vice versa. The invective that polygamy, "a physical degradation . . . that blasts every domestic virtue," is an institution in which "woman must be inferior to man, and made for him" (141), resounds throughout Wollstonecraft's critique of the bourgeois English marriage. Her attempt to rupture the latent parallelism between monogamy and polygamy takes place through an expressed biological determinism. Citing Forster's *Account of The Isles of the South-Sea*, Wollstonecraft surmises that while polygamy is "a law of nature" (141) in torrid zones, in England's more temperate clime "the necessity of polygamy . . . does not appear" (140).

Yet throughout her text, Wollstonecraft hints that a sanctioned form of polygamy does prevail within the precincts of England's boundaries. A disparagement of the polygamous racial Other eases into an attack of adultery in England, revealing that in spite of her attempt to distance England from its wanton polygamous Other, Wollstonecraft sees England as engaging in polygamous practices of its own:

The necessity of polygamy, therefore, does not appear; yet when a man seduces a woman, it should, I think be termed a *left-handed* marriage, and the man should be legally obliged to maintain the woman and her children, unless adultery, a natural divorcement, abrogated the law. And this law should remain in force as long as the

weakness of women caused the word seduction to be used as an excuse for their frailty and want of principle; nay, while they depend on man for a subsistence, instead of earning it by the exertion of their own hands or heads. (142)

Here as elsewhere in *A Vindication*, the difference between the polygamous Other and the licentious English self is indiscernible: in both far-away Other places and in England itself “the hot-bed of luxurious indolence” (140) impedes the attainment of Wollstonecraft’s ideals of modesty and chastity. That the polygamous Other is simultaneously perceived as both alien and familiar makes a lot of sense in light of Felicity Nussbaum’s claim that throughout most of the eighteenth century, England entertained the possibility of polygamy, which it “defined variously as a husband’s taking more than one wife, marrying after the death of his first wife, or even seducing a woman while married to another and therefore being held responsible for her ruin” (76). Though by the end of the century, England rejected the possibility of polygamy and erected monogamy as a means of asserting national difference (Nussbaum, 77), an anxiety about England’s maintenance of sufficient cultural distance strains *A Vindication*. The excluded, negative and polygamous other of the English self resurfaces in the hyperfeminized, hypersexual Englishwoman. That the polygamous Other woman is the repressed self of the monogamous Englishwoman is manifest when Wollstonecraft expostulates that

those women [who are “seduced”] should not, in the fullest meaning of the relationship, be termed wives, or the very purpose of marriage would be subverted, and all those endearing charities that flow from personal fidelity, and give a sanctity to the tie, when neither love nor friendship unites the hearts, would melt into selfishness. The woman who is faithful to the father of her children deserves respect, and should not be treated like a prostitute; though I grant that it be

necessary for a man and woman to live together, nature never intended that a man have more than one wife. (142)

The accusation lurking within these lines is that Englishwomen, because of the misdemeanours of Englishmen who desire “more than one wife,” have been wrongfully placed in the same situation as their female Others abroad.

Wollstonecraft’s assertion that the English wife and mother “deserves respect” places the onus on Englishmen to reform their habits; casting aspersions on men, Wollstonecraft singles out their libidinal urges and insatiable appetites as responsible for the moral destruction of the English home and nation.

Wollstonecraft’s incessant act of othering, of projection and displacement, is complicated by its replication: the compulsion to disavow feminine sexuality results in a sexualization not only of a racial Other but also, one might argue, a male other. Men, she claims, are naturally more licentious than women; “their appetites are more depraved by unbridled indulgence and the fastidious contrivances of society” (216) and indeed all “want of modesty . . . arises from the state of warfare so strenuously supported by voluptuous men” (203). In censuring the exorbitant lust of men and the tyranny that it provokes over women, Wollstonecraft substitutes the English husband for the Turkish bashaw who possesses a seraglio:

A love of pleasure or sway seems to divide mankind, and the husband who lords it in his little harem thinks only of his pleasure or his convenience. To such lengths, indeed, does an intemperate love of pleasure carry some prudent men, or worn out libertines, who marry to have a safe bedfellow, they seduce their own wives. (144)

It is not necessary to recapitulate that this rhetorical ruse of comparison functions as a persuasive device that exploits a desire for difference from an ‘Eastern’ Other: in

this case, Englishmen's wish to see themselves as the moral superiors to the "Mahometan." Nor, I think, is it necessary to point out what should by now be obvious: that as a fetishized object, the "lord" of the "little harem" *is* and *is not* the Englishman. What I do want to momentarily explore is that the dangerous "Easternness" of Englishmen is implicated in the larger deterioration of the English nation.

The cruelty and sloth of Englishmen is indirectly associated with the "Easternization" of England as a whole. The dissipation of English husbands, writes Wollstonecraft, "seems perfectly to harmonize with the system of government which prevails in the moral world" (96). The despotic nature of Englishmen has spread throughout and infested all of English society and has ultimately resulted in a despotic English government. The system of aristocratic privilege is thus, in Wollstonecraft's representation, simply a macrocosmic manifestation of Englishmen's moral turpitude in the microcosmic space of the domestic home. The English home, the harem, and the aristocracy: all merge and become virtually indistinguishable from one another as they are integrated into Wollstonecraft's discursive assault against all forms of power as patriarchally invested and morally degenerative. What is never stated, yet certainly implied is that – in the words of her friend and contemporary, Thomas Paine – the aristocracy is "a seraglio of males" (*The Rights of Man*, 185). The despotic Eastern Other is thus the yardstick against which Wollstonecraft ascertains and advocates liberal democracy. The grievance that Englishmen are "educated in slavish dependence" and "enervated by luxury and sloth" and that therefore "men who will stand forth to assert the rights of man"

(112) are nowhere to be found is impelled by a belief that it is only through a movement away from an imaginary despotic East that Englishwomen will achieve a position of equality.

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* provides a concrete way into thinking about the rather abstract claim that not only British nationalism, but also British feminism, has emerged out of a sustained act of asserting difference against a racialized Other; indeed, Wollstonecraft's feminism works alongside as well as within a nationalist discourse that relies on an imaginary Other for its existence. Her polemic allows us to recognize that for a long time Western feminism has been complicitous in, and a beneficiary of, imperialist discourses such as Orientalism. For her impassioned plea that England become "an enlightened nation" by permitting women "to share the advantages of education and government with man" (252) only articulates itself through the Other woman who functions as a hermeneutic device that allows Wollstonecraft to define what constitutes an unenlightened woman in an unenlightened nation. The "enlightened" Englishwoman's right to citizenship is premised on her maternity, which Wollstonecraft suggests grants her (so long as she responsibly fulfills her role as mother) membership, even of an elevated sort, in the English nation. Thus, a discourse of maternity, which was employed in the context of a nationalist/imperialist discourse that sought to commodify women's bodies and

labour for the benefit of the English nation (Colley, 240), is in turn appropriated by Wollstonecraft to vindicate the Englishwomen's claim to national citizenship.²

In contradistinction to the profligate Other woman, the redeeming trait of the ideal, maternal Englishwoman firmly situated at the center of *A Vindication* is her chastity; in contrast to the female inhabitant of the harem who engages in sexual activities to please or be pleased, the Englishwoman, it seems, preserves her body for the sole sake of procreation. Here, it needs reminding that the Englishwoman is herself an Other, whose 'misplaced' corporeality Wollstonecraft displaces onto a racialized female Other. The corollary of Wollstonecraft's valorization of chastity is a fear of, and aggression toward, (especially same-sex) sexuality, which prompts her to advocate a national system of education in which boys and girls are educated together. Female intimacy in particular falls in her line of attack; she remonstrates against "the gross degree of familiarity" (205) between "woman and woman" (206) and advocates that female bodies are kept hidden from each other so as to prevent hypersexuality and – although she never directly says so, she certainly implies it – homosexuality. The potential benefits of female friendship and uninhibited sexuality – perceived by Lady Mary Montagu in her travel letters – that the harem might offer to women cannot be recognized by Wollstonecraft; for the harem, like "nurseries and boarding schools" is a female space and hence a "nasty" or contaminated site where women or girls "sleep in the same room and wash together" (204-205). The

² For a contextual overview of how Wollstonecraft's works – fictional and non-fictional – partake in the ideologies of maternity and nationalism that proliferated during the 1790s, see Rajani Sudan, "Mothering and National Identity in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft," *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780-1830*, eds. Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996) 72-89.

homophobic attitude that percolates through Wollstonecraft's text has been explored by Claudia Johnson, who has aptly pointed out that "the pervasiveness of nonproductive sexuality, which Wollstonecraft finds both debasing and positively overwhelming, is the given that makes heterosexuality morally compulsory" (42-43). What I suggest is that this nonproductive sexuality that Wollstonecraft clearly loathes is cast upon the Other woman to allow for the emergence of a reformed and, of course, (re)productive Englishwoman. The reproductive maternal figure provides the antithesis to the unproductive "languish[ing] . . . exotics" (103) that ostensibly belong to "Other" places.

The transformed Englishwoman imagined and recommended by Wollstonecraft is vastly different from the Other woman shut up in the harem/home; instead of an ignorant brute, she is an enlightened citizen who manages the household and, less directly, the nation. The republican mother, while involved in the maternal care that Rousseau endorsed, is – through the education of its children – actively engaged in the formation of the nation, and by extension empire, and is amply rewarded for her efforts:

I think I see her surrounded by her children, reaping the reward of her care. The intelligent eye meets hers, whilst health and innocence smile on their chubby cheeks, and as they grow up the cares of life are lessened by their grateful attention. She lives to see the virtues which she endeavoured to plant on principles, fixed into habit, to see her children attain a strength of character sufficient to enable them to endure adversity without forgetting their mother's example. (119)

While at first sight it might appear that Wollstonecraft is purely antagonistic to every Rousseauian tenet, she nonetheless accepts his belief that women's proper location is in the home. Her radical revision of Rousseau is to give maternity a set of

significances that transcend the private. In her case for female emancipation, Wollstonecraft strategically elevates motherhood to the level of national and racial duty. In seeking to reveal a national incentive for according Englishwomen rights, Wollstonecraft poses and then answers her own question:

how can woman be expected to cooperate unless she know why she ought to be virtuous? Unless freedom strengthen her reason till she comprehend her duty and see in what manner it is to be connected with her real good? If children are to be educated to understand the principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind.

As potential instiller of the “principle of patriotism,” and guardian of her nation and race, the mother in the home is implicitly the “mother” of the English nation; as the maternal essence of Englishness, she deserves the respect that citizenship would accord her. Wollstonecraft’s vindication of the rights of Englishwomen thus ultimately reduces itself to a plea: confer on women rights and they will enhance not only the family home, but even more importantly, the English nation.

The coming-into-being of a discourse of Western feminism quite clearly hinges on a racialized female Other for its emergence and existence. The process of envisioning as well as advocating a woman born into an equal society is abetted by the employment of the Other woman. Her image is invoked to emblemize all that Wollstonecraft sees as contemptible about the Englishwoman’s situation. The production in Western discourse of the “average third world woman [who] leads an essentially truncated life” has been critiqued as a phenomenon “in some recent (Western) feminist texts” (Mohanty 51). This tradition of appropriating an Other woman extends far beyond the present, however, and reaches back to the genesis – if

Chapter 3

“The Harlot’s *Rouge*,” the Housewife’s Rights:

Erasing and Erecting Boundaries Between the Prostitute and the Bourgeois Woman

“But, with respect to propriety of behaviour, excepting one class of females, women evidently have
the advantage”

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 202

The preoccupation with the polygamous Other, onto whom anxieties about eighteenth-century sexuality are projected, clearly saturates Mary Wollstonecraft’s polemical feminist treatise, providing her with a means through which to negotiate the identity of middle-class Englishwomen. Because she violates bourgeois notions of middle-class femininity (i.e. as chaste and virtuous), the prostitute, like the female inhabitant of the harem, provides a convenient site for the displacement of transgressive desire. Yet the prostitute is a particular disturbance in a way the woman of the harem is not, upsetting as she does an imaginary global schematic that reads England as non-sexual, cultivated, immaculate and its Other as tainted by its own sexual excess. Thus the need to reform the prostitute was articulated as the need to reform the nation; as Felicity Nussbaum has maintained, prostitution was represented as “a *national* disgrace” (96) – as a phenomenon that while natural elsewhere, was an aberration in England itself.¹ There is not surprisingly, then, a

¹ The extent to which prostitution was paradoxically exoticized as an occurrence strangely foreign to England at the same time that it proliferated in its streets is perceptible even in the names assigned to eighteenth-century brothels: those catering to upper-class tastes were known as *bagnios* and *serials*. For further discussion, see Roy Porter, “Mixed Feelings: The Enlightenment and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Paul-Gabriel Boucé (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1982) 1-27.

shunning of the prostitute in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; to eschew the prostitute in this case is not merely to distance oneself from the “public” woman who flaunts her sexuality, but also to accrue moral authority *vis-à-vis* a class of lower social standing. The creation of an insuperable barrier between the prostitute and the proper lady would, however, jeopardize the rhetorical urgency of Wollstonecraft’s own argument, and hence certain commonalities between the woman of the home and the woman of the streets are discreetly managed. In order to position the middle-class woman as an object of desire and from there to argue for her de commodification and repositioning as maternal figure of virtue, Wollstonecraft analogizes the position of the married woman and the prostitute, thereby capitalizing on a response of visceral revulsion from her readers to a figure who potently embodies bodily objectification and defilement. The constructed commonalities between bourgeois woman and her lower-class Other, while inconspicuously embedded in the text, nonetheless overdetermine Wollstonecraft’s representation of the prostitute, figuring her plight not as economically based, but as merely a matter of insufficient or absent virtue.

The representation of the prostitute as morally, rather than economically endangered, is troubling not only because of the contradictions it reveals in Wollstonecraft’s own ostensibly republican ideology, but also in light of her fictional depiction of the prostitute’s condition as economically determined. It is to explore the possibilities for this difference of representation that I turn in the latter part of this chapter to *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*. Wollstonecraft’s novella provides us with an interesting text for analysis because its use of the prostitute – again for

reflection on and rejection of the subordinated status of the bourgeois female – is, as an actual plot device, more available to the reader, providing an explicit example of what remains implicit in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: the dislocation of the prostitute for the sake of the relocation of her more materially privileged “sister.” My concern is also to reveal the ways in which both texts, despite their different representations of the prostitute, produce similar responses when confronted with that figure of feminine excess. The image of the prostitute elicits in Wollstonecraft’s fiction and non-fiction a range of doubled, contradictory responses: a reaction that is at once one of fear and fascination, condemnation and compassion, and of course identification and difference.

This conflicted attitude toward the prostitute can be understood in terms of the contradictions that arise out of the process of stereotyping – here, discursively constituting class identities from a middle-class perspective that places the working class in the position of the other. The constitution of working-class identities in bourgeois discourse in mostly moralistic, rather than economic or political terms, results in a bifurcation of the imagined working-class woman: as either the sexually provocative and dangerous wanton or as nurturing mother and stalwart worker, her body – as the marker of her social class – is effectively reduced to its sexualized status and evaluated by its accordance with moral criteria.² These oppositional models of working-class femininity would seem to parody each other and yet the two

² The discursive constitution of the working class into the two categories of the respectable and the non-respectable has been discussed by Lynette Finch as a nineteenth-century phenomenon linked to the bourgeois obsession with the discourse of sexuality. Certainly, the embryonic manifestations of this bourgeois discourse of the working-class are evident in Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication*.

co-exist, at least in Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*, each providing either a positive or negative identity that is either recommended or rejected for the middle-class woman. It is of course the impoverished mother who gives her body and her labour over for the benefit of her family who exemplifies the bourgeois values of industriousness and familial devotion and whom Wollstonecraft thus promotes:

Many poor women maintain their children by the sweat of their brow, and keep together families that the vices of the fathers would have scattered abroad; but gentlewomen are too indolent to be actively virtuous, and are softened rather than refined by civilization. Indeed, the good sense which I have met with among the poor women who have had few advantages of education and yet have acted heroically, strongly confirmed me in the opinion that trifling employments have rendered woman a trifler. (148)

Although “poor women” are in this instance idealized as paragons of virtue, Wollstonecraft hedges any direct comparison between the working-class woman and the women of the middle classes who are essentially the subjects of her diatribe. Through this act of circumvention, Wollstonecraft successfully evades undermining her endorsement of “the middle rank [as the class that] contains the most virtues” (127). In one of a seemingly endless series of displacements, Wollstonecraft positions her prototype of respectable working-class femininity opposite “indolent” gentlewomen, who share the burden of incorporating all that is viewed as regressive about bourgeois femininity. Sufficient distance is thus maintained between middle-class women and women of the lower classes. Nowhere is the desire to maintain this distance more evident than in Wollstonecraft's acceptance and propagation of not only a gendered, but also a classed division of labour.

To render the poor virtuous they must be employed, and women in the middle rank of life, did they not ape the fashions of the nobility,

without catching their ease, might employ them, whilst they themselves managed their families, instructed their children, and exercised their own minds. Gardening, experimental philosophy, and literature, would afford them subjects to think of and matter for conversation, that is some degree would exercise their understandings. (147)

The facilitation of the middle-class woman's discursive movement away from the frivolous preoccupations associated with a debilitated aristocracy again takes place via the virtuous working-class woman. That the virtue of the working-class woman hinges on her labouriousness legitimizes Wollstonecraft's act of relegating her to the position of handmaid to a morally improved middle-class woman. In what is one of the most glaring blind spots in her thinking, Wollstonecraft reprimands the aristocracy for its victimization of the lower classes at the same time that she herself builds her argument for middle-class women's rights on the backs of their class inferiors.³ The mainstay of a system that allows the middle-class female to meet her destiny as moral and intellectual superior is the working-class female, whose exclusion from Wollstonecraft's envisioned society does not subvert its claim to social and economic equality. The radicalness of Wollstonecraft's critique of a Cartesian mind/body split along gendered lines is thus limited by its reinforcement of such a split along class lines. The association of the common woman with the

³ The contradictory tensions between a liberal-humanism and socialist approach to equality in Mary Wollstonecraft's dialectic are the subject of Kate Soper's scholarship on *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Although Wollstonecraft appears to anticipate Marx a half-century later in her attack against private property, the post-revolution society that she envisages is nonetheless divided along class lines. This split complicates our reading of *A Vindication* as much as it reminds us of its continued existence in contemporary feminism. For further discussion, see Kate Soper, "Naked Human Nature and the Draperies of Custom," *Mary Wollstonecraft and 200 Years of Feminism*, ed. Eileen Janes Yeo (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997) 207-221.

performance of bodily-related activities is, after all, the textual thread that connects her bipolar representations of working-class femininity.

What terrifies Wollstonecraft about the prostitute is the clear centrality of her body to her actions and, more specifically, the unbridled performance of her sexuality. In a text punctuated by an inordinate, obsessive fear of sexuality and the sexual body, the prostitute is a target for an attack of the sensuality that Wollstonecraft interprets as leading to women's subordinate position.

Wollstonecraft's acceptance, indeed exaggeration, of the Rousseauian view of female desire as regressive and as an impediment to the achievement of a socially reformed state, as Cora Kaplan's incisive analysis makes clear, suffuses *A Vindication*. The sublimation of female sexual pleasure, an almost fanatical conviction in the necessity of a libidinal self-denial, and the positing in its stead of a rational, passionless ideal, are possibly the text's most salient features. In making sexual repression the provision for social reform, Wollstonecraft, as Kaplan notes, "sets up heartbreaking conditions for women's liberation – a little death, the death of desire, the death of female pleasure" (39). For all the attempts to stifle female desire, its linguistic presence is of course never obliterated and instead crops up continually in every corner and crevice of *A Vindication* – in, for example, the form of the prostitute. The prostitute, imagined as purely passionate, appears to contradict Wollstonecraft's

insistence that female sexual passion is a put-on.⁴ Although represented as alien to her, the prostitute is thus the bourgeois woman's uncanny double who takes her meaning only in reference to all that Wollstonecraft sees as contemptible about the domestic woman's condition. As sanctioned receptacle, the prostitute contains the perversions that Wollstonecraft sees as endemic to middle-class femininity. Rather than a victim in an economic marketplace then, the prostitute is held hostage by her own self-consuming desire; the dangers of sexual rapacity from which Wollstonecraft is so eager to extricate the bourgeois woman find shape, in other words, in the prostitute's gorged body. The stereotype of the prostitute is thus characterized by ambivalence and contradiction. Here, I posit the extension of Homi Bhabha's concept of the fetish to the constitution of working-class identities, and specifically, the constitution of the stereotype of the prostitute. If, as Bhabha says, fetishism is "a 'play' or vacillation between archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity," which he explicates in colonial discourse as the anxiety produced by the contradictory belief that "all men have the same skin/race/culture" (74), certainly we can observe a similar kind of anxiety prevailing in Wollstonecraft's text – an anxiety that arises out of the instability of her assertion that all female desire is pretense. While the belief that female desire is patriarchally inscribed and therefore a sham is retained, it is also denied and subverted through the fetish object of the prostitute. Thus the presence of the prostitute produces a tension that is the

⁴ Kaplan reminds us of Wollstonecraft's valorization of female desire in *Maria* and explains the refusal of this desire in *A Vindication* as a persuasive tactic that seeks to undermine Rousseau by adopting, then refuting, his own logic. Women's excessive lust and narcissism is thus a manifestation of the ideological force of patriarchy: "only by imagining them *all* or almost all, crippled and twisted

result, if we follow Bhabha's logic, of the simultaneous recognition and refusal of difference that is produced in the discourse of the stereotype. The ambivalence and splitting that is the reflection of the fetishistic mode of representation, is illustrated in the conflictual feelings of strangeness and familiarity that the prostitute inspires: as an "object of desire" (115) who is "sacrificed to passion" (199) – as the disguised self of the middle-class woman that Wollstonecraft reviles – the prostitute induces severe discomfort.

The prostitute is only understood then as operating within the same libidinal economy that Wollstonecraft understands the bourgeois woman as inhabiting; correspondingly, Wollstonecraft's middle-class frame of reference determines her view of prostitution as one of "the evils of life [that] arise from a desire of present enjoyment that outruns itself" (143). This dangerous desire that is registered as insatiable – as lack – materializes itself in the "defiled body" (131) that bourgeois woman and prostitute share. The body is thus experienced as a polluting presence – as, in St. Augustine's terms, the site of the "slimy desires of the flesh" (qtd. in Bordo, 93). And in an attempt to disavow the flesh, and thus to free the essential mind, the prostitute's body is inscribed with "metricious [sic] airs and the whole science of wantonness" (143) – with, in short, the marks of the bourgeois woman's degradation. This act of bodily inscription, read in terms of the middle-class discourse of commerce, projects onto the prostitute, as feminine figure of excess, bourgeois amorality. The vices of commerce, from which Wollstonecraft clearly

into sexual monsters by society as it is can she hope to persuade her readers to abandon a gender specific and deforming education for femininity" (44).

wants to immunize her ideal domestic woman, find a repository in the prostitute. Put differently, in order for the bourgeois woman to arrive at a state of virtuousness, an “exchange” must first take place: her contaminated body must be transferred onto the profligate body of the prostitute.

Demonized then as lewd, as immoral, as devoid of modesty, the prostitute becomes the antithesis of the reformed bourgeois woman – she becomes, that is, everything that the bourgeois woman *should not* be. In Wollstonecraft’s own articulation, “modesty” and “bashfulness” are the defining terms of an opposition that allow us to sort out the virtuous from the non-virtuous; it is of course prostitutes who exemplify the latter typology:

[who] trample on virgin bashfulness with a sort of bravado, and glorying in their shame, become more audaciously lewd than men, however depraved, to whom this sexual quality has not been granted, ever appear to be. But these poor ignorant wretches never had any modesty to lose, when they consigned themselves to infamy; for modesty is a virtue, not a quality. No, they were only bashful, shame-faced innocents; and losing their innocence, their shame-facedness was rudely brushed off; a virtue would have left some vestiges in the mind. (199)

The “alternate emotions of pity and disgust” (199) to which the image of “these poor ignorant wretches” gives rise can be read as part of the conflictual response to the fetish object of the prostitute and by implication, to the negative self of the middle-class female subject. Indeed, the preoccupation with the prostitute’s (lack of) chastity reflects Wollstonecraft’s – and larger bourgeois society’s – intimate obsession with the virtue of the middle-class female. The product of this obsession, Wollstonecraft’s prostitute is cast as a figure that precipitates her own downfall through a momentary failure at self-regulating desire:

a woman who has lost her honour imagines that she cannot fall lower, and as for recovering her former station, it is impossible; no exertion can wash this stain away. Losing thus every spur, and having no other means of support, prostitution becomes her only refuge, and the character is quickly depraved by circumstances over which the poor wretch has little power. (142)

Thus prostitution is represented not as a condition of class, but rather as a descension from virtue to infamy. Conceived as fallen woman, the prostitute is assumed to have a position from which to fall. The economic determinants of her experience are occluded since she functions only to negotiate a preoccupation with the moral determinants of bourgeois social and cultural experience. Understood only as a gender phenomenon, and only from a middle-class vantage point, prostitution is attributed to “the state of idleness in which women are educated, who are always taught to look up to man for a maintenance, and to consider their persons as the proper return for his exertions to support them” (143). Paradoxically, it is in these moments when Wollstonecraft attempts to define the middle-class woman against the difference of the prostitute that we can recognize how closely the two shadow each other.

At other moments in the text, the resemblance between prostitute and proper lady is, however, the result of a self-conscious and deliberate act of comparison on Wollstonecraft’s part. Compelled to “sell” their sex at the same time that they are, as sexual objects of exchange, commodities in a masculinist marketplace, bourgeois women, according to Wollstonecraft, occupy the position of the prostitute: “To rise in the world, and have the liberty of running from pleasure to pleasure, they must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is

sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted” (130). That the material reality of the “actual” prostitute does not provide her with the pursuit of pleasure is not a consideration here. The rhetoric of prostitution is invoked only to impugn middle-class women’s condition and thereby shake – without ever actually subverting – the middle classes’ sense of moral ascendancy. By besmirching bourgeois women and men with the squalor of urban sewers and slums, Wollstonecraft is able to further her claim that only by improving the condition of its women will the middle classes’ entitlement to moral preeminence be secure – and only then will its women be truly virtuous: “till more understanding preponderates in society, there will ever be a want of heart and taste, and the harlot’s *rouge* will supply the place of that celestial suffusion which only virtuous affections can give to the face” (250). That the bourgeois woman is, Wollstonecraft suggests, incited to perform the same role as the prostitute – to assume her affected mannerisms and adopt an exterior that is pure artifice – is an indication of her prostituted position. Her approximation to the polygamous woman abroad – in the form of the woman of the harem – and at home – in the form of the prostitute – compromise her ‘right,’ by virtue of her social class, to respectability:

The woman who is faithful to the father of her children demands respect, and should not be treated like a prostitute; though I grant that it be necessary for a man and woman to live together in order to bring up their offspring, nature never intended that a man should have more than one wife. (142)

While the reproductive function of the maternal woman of the middle classes should accord her a sacred spot in England’s social order – one away from her non-productive Others – through her sexualization the mother is inappropriately

rendered indistinct from the prostitute. Her eroticisation in a masculinist libidinal economy compromises the maternal function through which, as I laid out in detail in my previous chapter, the bourgeois woman gains her claim, as caregiver to England's future citizens, to membership in the nation. Although accusatory towards the bourgeois woman for her complicity in her own sexual degradation, Wollstonecraft holds the English husband and father responsible for the pathetic position to which his wife and the mother of his children is reduced.

Never, it seems, quite sure who to blame, Wollstonecraft is not very consistent in her articulation of who exactly is culpable for the oppressed condition of middle-class women. Yet while she shuffles back and forth and seems often even to castigate middle-class women themselves, she ultimately attributes their affliction both to the misconduct of less virtuous (read: lower class) women and, first and foremost, to the infidelities of middle-class men:

the moral character, and pace of mind, of the chaster part of the sex, is undermined by the conduct of the very women to whom they allow no refuge from guilt: whom they inexorably consign to the exercise of arts that lure their husbands from them, debauch their sons, and force them, let not modest women start, to assume the same character themselves. For I will venture to assert, that all the causes of female weakness, as well as depravity, which I have already enlarged on, branch out of one grand cause – the want of chastity in men. (218)

Together, both wanton woman and wayward husband threaten the chastity of the bourgeois wife: the former by tempting men susceptible to her enticements – and in the process undermining women's claim to virtue – and the latter by consorting with her. Through their association with prostitutes, morally deviant middle-class men destabilize the bourgeois family by decentering as all-important its reproductive

function through which its women gain their claim to moral rectitude: “the father of a family . . . weaken[s] his constitution and debase[s] his sentiments by visiting the harlot . . . [and] forget[s], in obeying the call of appetite, the purpose for which it was implanted” (68). If we follow Wollstonecraft’s meaning to its logical conclusion, middle-class men, in “obeying the call of appetite,” neglect the call of duty – namely, to propagate and provide for their offspring within the confines of a monogamous environment. As a (non-productive) body to be exploited, the prostitute is a potential source of bodily pleasure, and thus endangers the middle-class husband and, indirectly, his wife. The prostitute not only vicariously pollutes the bourgeois woman’s body, but also pushes her toward engaging in another form of prostitution by compelling her to commodify herself in order to retain her husband’s affection. In a bid to keep their concupiscent husbands who “fly for amusement to the wanton, from the unsophisticated charms of virtue, and the grave respectability of sense” (274), bourgeois women must make sexual objects of themselves by “assum[ing] the same character [of promiscuous women (i.e. prostitutes)] themselves” (218). In a reversal of the edenic myth that makes women responsible for the fall of mankind, Wollstonecraft implies that it is women who are led off the garden path by the “vitiating tastes” (68) of their husbands. For all its preoccupation with female virtue, *A Vindication* fundamentally concerns itself with the chastity of men and Wollstonecraft considers a revolution in female manners anterior to and dependent on a revolution in male manners. For if bourgeois women are prostituted, then bourgeois men, by implication, are their pimps; thus, “till men are more chaste women will be immodest” (204).

That bourgeois men's adulterous affairs with women of questionable character – and, by extension, class – threaten to taint bourgeois women, who are in turn prostituted by their husbands, is literalized as plot development in Wollstonecraft's *Maria*. In this, Wollstonecraft's posthumously published fictional work, the eponymous heroine has a husband out of every wife's worst nightmare: aside from his countless infidelities, he pilfers from her to support his drinking and gambling habits and then panders her to a business associate from whom he has borrowed large sums of money. These, however, are not the worst of Venables' crimes; his real offense consists in threatening, particularly through his sexual slumming, the chastity that is so central to Maria's identity as a middle-class female. For while Venables' affairs discomfit Maria to begin with, it is in the information of his preference for working-class women that her anxieties center and find focus. Already repelled by her husband's corporeality to begin with, her thoughts seize on the contagion of the lower-class bodies with which he comes into intimate contact. The site of contamination, it is these bodies, associated with Venables' own, that indirectly threaten her chaste one and from which she is so eager to escape:

I was glad, I own, to escape from his [bed]; for personal intimacy without affection, seemed, to me the most degrading, as well as the most painful state in which a woman of any taste, not to speak of the peculiar delicacy of fostered sensibility, could be placed. But my husband's fondness for women was of the grossest kind, and imagination was so wholly out of the question, as to render his indulgences of this sort so entirely promiscuous, and of the most brutal nature. My health suffered, before my heart was entirely estranged by the loathsome information; could I then have turned to his sullied arms, but as a victim to the prejudices of mankind, who have made women the property of their husbands? I discovered even, by his conversation, when intoxicated, that his favourites were wantons of the lowest class, who could by their vulgar, indecent

mirth, which he called nature, rouse his sluggish spirits. Meretricious ornaments and manners were necessary to attract his attention.’
(109)

Venables’ shared body is thus the source of a possible, and of course dangerous, alliance between women of the middle and lower classes. It is the medium through which Maria is literally contaminated (“my health suffered”) by infectious diseases originating and spreading from working-class women’s bodies, as well as figuratively contaminated by working-class crassness. That Venables threatens to connect Maria to the whores of his liaisons and thereby taint her with lower-class pollutants is not, however, his single greatest indiscretion. Rather, it is when he (mis)construes Maria’s sexual identity as bourgeois lady by treating it as equivalent to the pernicious sexuality of “wantons of the lowest class,” that Venables commits an unpardonable *faux pas*. Thus the discovery that her husband has sought to sell her into prostitution – that he has “dared sacrilegiously to barter the honour of the mother of his child” (120) – is a decisive moment in determining the protagonist’s actions, and specifically her resistance to patriarchally inscribed social laws. Venables’ aborted attempt to peddle his own wife, together with his proposition of an open marriage, represent an exertion to implicate Maria in a sexual underworld that is both unknown to and beneath her. Thus the profoundly classist articulation of her response takes the form of denying relationship, even one of shared humanity, to the urban poor: in narrating the sequential events of her marital history, Maria writes of how Venables’ suggestion that they “tacitly consent to let each other follow their own inclination [. . .] excited sensations similar to those I have felt, in viewing the squalid inhabitants of some of the lanes and back streets of the metropolis, mortified

at being compelled to consider them as my fellow-creatures, as if an ape had claimed kindred with me” (124). Venables’ intentionalities provoke such an intensely anxious response in Maria because they threaten to collapse class differences, raising the specter that prostitute and proper lady are one and the same. Indeed, Venables’ inability to sort out the bashful from the modest, the virtuous from the non-virtuous, the lower-class woman from the bourgeois lady, is what legitimizes Maria’s willful act of abandoning him and beginning anew. Her movement away from Venables and towards Darnforth thus charts a symbolic movement away from the prostitute and towards the proper lady. While central to the confessional mode that his narrative assumes is a repentant disclosure of previous social and sexual intercourse with sexually loose women of the lower classes, as a reformed version of Venables, part of Darnforth’s attraction is that he can readily tell the chaste bourgeois woman apart from her lower-class inferiors: “I was taught to love,” he owns, “by a creature I am ashamed to mention; and the other women with whom I afterwards became intimate, were of a class of which you can have no knowledge” (75). What appears out-and-out contradictory about these blatant expressions of classist sentiments, articulated by (through) Maria and Darnforth, is that they take place in the face of an espousal of sympathy for the prostitute when she is, in the form of Jemima, materialized among them. In the narrative circle that is formed by the three, and in which each – Maria, Darnforth, and Jemima – perform the roles of listener/reader and teller, the two middle-class characters’ autobiographical accounts reveal hostile attitudes towards (lower) classed others even as their responses to Jemima’s account of lower-class suffering include an instinctual denouncement of middle-class

uncharitableness. Jemima, indeed, complicates the equivocation in the text between the inherently virtuous working-class woman and the prostitute, an ambiguity that she herself – forced to sacrifice her virtue in an attempt to eke out a living – seems to personify.

What I have hinted at all along – that we understand Wollstonecraft’s representation of the prostitute as structured by a dialectic of *seeming* differences – is an idea that I return to in my proposal of how to read Jemima. If we consider her character in terms of the fetishization of the prostitute, then we can begin to understand the fluctuations in response between differentiation and identification, antipathy and sympathy, that the figure of the prostitute incurs. In the case of Jemima, we observe less an instance of this dialectic at work, however, and instead more an instance of synchronized identification and sympathy since, by way of contrast to the unindividualized prostitutes that parade through Wollstonecraft’s two works under discussion, as character, Jemima most visibly approximates, even mirrors, not only Maria but also Wollstonecraft herself. Sympathy becomes possible because the prostitute’s experience is constituted as an exact, or near-exact, copy of the protagonist’s/author’s own. Thus, if we revisit *A Vindication* for a moment, Wollstonecraft claims to feel “most lively compassion” for the prostitutes when they are understood as “unfortunate females broken off from society” and as “innocent girls [who have] become the dupes of a sincere, affectionate heart” (142). In a text that otherwise gives us denigrating representations of the prostitute, here the prostitute’s experience, where it is most markedly distorted to fit a middle-class perspective, elicits solicitude. By the same token, in *Maria*, Jemima gains the

narrator's and author's approval because her story is as much about their experience as her own: she was, we are told, "loved not by her fellow-creatures, because she had never been beloved. No mother had ever fondled her, no father or brother had protected her from outrage" (66). A story that is essentially about parental abandonment and abuse, as well as financial suffering, Jemima's narrative is simply an inflated version of Maria's and Wollstonecraft's, and as such belongs to them. A stereotypical, undeveloped character, Jemima suffers from an oppression which is simply a repetition with difference of Maria's – and Wollstonecraft's – own suffering. Thus to take Wollstonecraft at her word, that is, to accept that the text successfully fulfills its mandate "to show the wrongs of different classes of women, equally oppressive, though [. . .] necessarily various" (60), would be to overlook Wollstonecraft's reproduction of middle-class experience.

Yet while Wollstonecraft's middle-classness prevents her from engaging complexly in issues of class in *Maria*, this fictional work is not nearly so class-bound as *A Vindication*. Jemima's experience of prostitution is understood as resulting out of her economic position – as an act of survival, it is a choice among lack of choices. In *A Vindication*, however, the economic dimensions of prostitution are entirely eclipsed in an attempt to represent it, in middle-class terms, as morally derived. Thus while *Maria*, if only tacitly, expounds the need for economic reform, in *A Vindication* the terms put forth for positive change are almost purely social: Wollstonecraft, for instance, maintains that "Asylums and Magdalens [homes for reforming prostitutes] are not proper remedies for these abuses. It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world" (142). Motivated only by the aim of emancipating middle-class

Englishwomen, *A Vindication* is not complicated by an appeal to cross-class female suffering. Instead, its single political aim is to begin the process of bourgeois women's liberation. While the pairing of titles has led some critics to speculate that *Maria* simply pursues in novel form what was already articulated in *A Vindication*, the two texts are not so intimately bound up in one another as we might initially think. Indeed, the titles themselves suggest the continuation of a shared project as much as they point toward fundamentally different concerns. Note the plural 'women' of *Maria, or the Wrongs of Women* – a novel that emphasizes that all women have in common their oppression under patriarchy – and the singular 'woman' of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* – a polemic that insists that only one class of women have any rights to vindicate. While the gap that exists between the strained beginnings of a materialist feminism that we observe in *Maria* and the emphatically exclusionist ideology of *A Vindication* is attributable to a belief that while injustice is shared, rights are less so, the generic requirements that each text demands also shapes its representation of class. For while the "feminine" sentimental novel positions itself in relation to a mostly female audience, the specifically "masculine" form of the polemical essay that Wollstonecraft selects for her feminist apologia is clearly geared toward a (male, middle-/upper-class) constituency with the political clout to activate change. Attuned to her audience and its fears and desires, Wollstonecraft most effectively invokes the prostitute as a vehicle for criticism of the middle-class in *A Vindication*. By turning the prostitute into a mirror-image of the bourgeois woman, Wollstonecraft is able to offset the threat inherent in her feminist demands and make them agreeable, even desirable, to an audience that wants to

affirm its class superiority. To write about prostitution as an issue of class inequality, rather than a case of debased subjectivity and dangerous sexuality arising out of gendered circumstances, would not only dilute the strength of her argument in favour of social reform but also interfere with her strategy of using the prostitute as a means for the domestic woman's self-redemption.

Its failure to articulate prostitution as a commercial activity mediated by a capitalist system makes *A Vindication* an accessory to the partial (middle-class) interpretations that proliferated during the nineteenth century and continue to dominate contemporary representations.⁵ From *A Vindication* to the present, prostitution as a form of alienated labour, and specifically, women's alienated labour, has been elided in favour of analyses that understand it as a deviation from a middle-class ethical norm. This aporia, which perpetuates itself academic writing, and

⁵ Where Wollstonecraft's view of prostitution is located in terms of other late-eighteenth century depictions, and more specifically in terms of turn-of-the-century women writers, is difficult to discern because of the near absence of scholarship in this area. In contrast to the prodigious amount of work done in relation to representations of prostitution in the field of Victorianism, there is a startling neglect on the part of eighteenth-century scholars to adequately account for prostitution, either as literary trope or historical phenomenon. The scant scholarship that does exist investigates only early- to mid-century representations and only as they are found in the literature of male writers. Vern L. Bullough, for one, alleges that the prostitute was viewed "from an eighteenth-century masculine middle- and upper-class perspective" (61), at the same time that she herself repeats this distortion by discussing prostitution only as it is projected in male representations (i.e. in the fiction of Defoe and Richardson). Less a model of pathological sexuality, prostitution was understood, Bullough maintains, as economically based. More research would be need to determine whether Wollstonecraft on the one hand subverts, in *A Vindication*, the conventional eighteenth-century view of prostitution, or whether on the other she inaugurates the morally-confined view of the nineteenth century.

particularly in literary studies,⁶ where the fascination that finds its way into *A Vindication* discovers another context, can only be remedied if the view that prostitution is a matter of social reform is shed and instead, as Victoria P. Tillotson recommends in her materialist feminist reading, “recast as an economic issue – reflecting the status of women’s sexuality under capitalism.” She continues: “The stigmatizing of prostitution is not merely an issue of superstructural representation, but a result of the interworkings of the capitalist system of global accumulation in conjunction with patriarchy and imperialism” (290). The ideology of “sexual imperialism,” as Tillotson calls it, buttresses the exploitation of women’s domestic and sexual labour, so that the unpaid labour of housewife and prostitute maintains capitalist, colonial economies (292).

Wollstonecraft, in contradistinction, sees prostitution and ‘housewifisation’ as cohabiting a comparable place within a marketplace that is more libidinal than it is economic. Apart from fulfilling the function of mirroring the sexual objectification of the domestic woman, the prostitute’s representational repertoire is severely limited. Indeed, once she acts to displace the desire and the desirousness of the middle-class woman she is safely relegated to the ends of Wollstonecraft’s discourse or, in the case of *Maria*, to the margins of her plot. With respect to *A Vindication*, this means that Wollstonecraft for the most part sticks to her promise to “pay

⁶ This point is developed in some depth by Victoria P. Tillotson in her exceptional reading of prostitution from a materialist feminist point of view. While Tillotson engages in readings of mid-nineteenth century texts, she also confronts academics, who, she contends, through their readings of prostitution, perpetuate a tradition that elides the issue of labour. Examples to which she draws her readers’ attention are Derrida’s *Given Time* and an edition of *Social Text* edited by Anne McClintock that explores the issue of sex work. For her discussion, see Victoria P. Tillotson, “A Materialist

particular attention to those in the middle class” (73), veering from it only to appropriate figures from other classes, from the aristocratic lady to the harlot, as convenient yardsticks against which to define bourgeois femininity. The prostitute’s subsidiary role means that in *Maria*, her narrative works merely to complement the title character’s dominant one; that this is so has been commented on by Sarah Webster Goodwin: “Jemima’s narrative of abuse, framed within Maria’s story, is,” she writes, “simply the downstairs version” (161). The hierarchical framework that privileges bourgeois normativity significantly places Jemima, in the most detailed of the novel’s possible endings, in the position of housekeeper to a liberated Maria and her refound child, thereby emplotting what Wollstonecraft suggests is most desirable in *A Vindication*: that existing systems of class stratification operate to enable “women of a superior cast [. . .] to pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence” (228). Aside from the narrative displacement that this move encapsulates, it also goes to show how Wollstonecraft endorses a system of capitalist division.

These signs of supporting, indeed promoting, a system of class privilege are particularly disturbing because they reveal that Wollstonecraft almost achieves but ultimately thwarts her own vision of a society free from identity-determined constraints. A rhetoric of equal rights is synergistically coupled with maintenance of the status quo so that the revolutionary potential of Wollstonecraft’s politics is held back. This paradoxical blend that has the effect of stagnating her would-be

transformative ideology also debilitates many contemporary feminisms as they continue to grapple with the legacy Wollstonecraft left behind over two hundred years ago: a feminist politics projected almost exclusively in terms of women's equality that often finds itself unable to recognize, much less challenge, divisions among women by class and race.

Epilogue

It has become relatively commonplace to gloss academic criticism in an articulation of race, class, and gender. Yet rather than serving as the ground for a rigorous examination of the imbrications of systems of exploitation and domination, this clichéd threesome is regularly used merely to confer legitimacy on theoretical and textual analysis. The primacy frequently given to one category of analysis privileges some modalities of oppression over others and thus denies the heterogeneity that constitutes experience as well as discourse. For feminism, this has meant a frequent failure to recognize that the category “woman” is complicated by other, overlapping categories that destabilize and subvert any attempt to classify “female” experience as such. Even methodologies that combine gender analysis with another experiential reference more often than not fail to take into consideration the force field that complicates female subjectivity. Post-colonial interrogations into gender routinely omit the determinant of class. Materialist feminism, while prioritizing the social construction of gender in its intersection with class, has for the most part neglected to integrate race into its theoretical apparatus.

The exclusion of race constitutes a serious omission in materialist feminism, for certainly any redefinition of feminist criticism needs to take into account an analysis of race in conjunction with a discussion of class. That matters of race have not been assimilated into a theory of marxist-feminism represents a rather paradoxical lacuna: for if the claim can be made that Marxism is insufficient without

feminism, certainly both theoretical perspectives are only partial without a consideration of race. The contradiction, moreover, of a praxis that locates itself in the interstices between class and gender ideology and yet continues to privilege gender over other subjectivities in the field of literary criticism has been well noted by Rosemary Hennessy and Rajeswari Mohan in their penetrating reevaluation of materialist feminism. The work of Cora Kaplan on Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*, while incisive and eminently readable, serves as an example of how materialist feminist interventions into literary studies have been limited to a consideration of representations of bourgeois femininity. Kaplan, while observing that "fragmented definitions of female subjectivity" have led women of the middle and upper classes "towards projecting and displacing on to women of lower social standing and women of color [sic][. . .] all that was deemed vicious and regressive in women as a sex" (167), sidesteps Wollstonecraft's construction of her female others in order to concentrate on her negative construction of female desire and pleasure. Certainly Wollstonecraft is preoccupied with the site of the sexual as the source of bourgeois women's oppression; yet by always only attending to Wollstonecraft's construction of bourgeois female sexuality, we lose sight of the extent to which racialized and classed others are essential to her articulation of a puritan sexual ethic. A focus on Wollstonecraft's excessive interest in bourgeois femininity ultimately leads to a limited understanding of the precise and significant ways in which immoderate sexuality is ultimately embodied, for example, in the prostitute. Indeed, Kaplan reduces her analysis of prostitution to one simple statement: "a brief, though not unsympathetic passage on the horrors of prostitution [. . .] is the selective and

sexualized attention that working class women get in *A Vindication*” (168). Although references to prostitution are few and far between in the text, I have not taken this exiguity to signify that the prostitute is not important to Wollstonecraft’s task. On the contrary, my endeavour here has been impelled by the belief that the prostitute’s textual presence – however apparently inconspicuous – is, together with the presence of sexualized Others abroad, brought to bear on Wollstonecraft’s project in meaningful ways and thus deserves critical attention. Tracing the role that these various Others are made to perform enhances, I suggest, our understanding of the text’s aims and assertions.

A Vindication can also function instrumentally as a point of entrance into a discourse of multiple oppression that seeks to redefine identity as the site of many subject positions. Complicated by multifaceted, contradictory identities, the text sits at the crossroads of different formations of power and powerlessness. Never at a standstill, these identities, it should be emphasized, are of course constantly shifting as they are constituted through various other identities. If, indeed, we are to begin a form of critical practice that recognizes identity as fluid and relational, we need to resist the overwhelming urge to categorize that is so endemic to the production of knowledge. The impulse to codify and classify leads inevitably not only to rating some forms of identity as somehow more noteworthy of attention than others but also to a reinstatement of binary systems of thought and discourse. The radicalness of feminist interventions into a politics of post-colonial reading, for instance, is diffused by a preclusion of class considerations. I am specifically thinking back to Spivak’s concept of “worlding” which she lays out in “Three Women’s Texts” as

“the emergence of ‘the Third World’ as a signifier” (896). By discursively positing global space in terms of first world/third world binaries, Spivak firmly entrenches a simplified conceptualization of the world – as structured rather than superimposed with differences – that her theoretical claims elsewhere gesture toward dismantling. In situating the instance of imperialism in the global deployment of capitalist power relations, we need to be conscious of how the capitalist system first required an Other at home in order to produce a colonized subject. By juxtaposing feminism with other progressive discourses, we can begin to elucidate the extent to which not only geographical borders, but also borders of the self, exist in a state of flux and contradictoriness. The application of a geography of identity to the act of feminist criticism will hopefully spur us to the realization, which I have only begun to grasp, that the parameters of the self exceed simple definitions.

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