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Understanding Mary/ Understanding Women's History

In a review article that appeared in the mid 1970's, Janet Todd considered the highly various portraits of Mary Wollstonecraft's life that had emerged since Mary's untimely death in 1797.¹ The biographies, she suggested, could be used to illustrate the history of two centuries of feminist and anti-feminist concerns.² She concluded that Wollstonecraft "is interpreted according to the needs of the age, and her image is affected by its hopes and fears."³ I don't wish to go over the same ground that Todd and others have very capably covered.⁴ Instead, I should like to reflect in a very preliminary way on the question of what happens to an individual life and the part it plays in history as we move from an age that was pre-eminently historical in outlook to an age in which the dominant paradigms are a-historical, an age that deals in probabilities, an age in which there are no agreed plot lines.

The early biographies of Mary were the products of the long nineteenth century – an age preoccupied with history.⁵ Living in the shadow of disruptive revolutions, thoughtful individuals looked to the past to try to understand how they had got where they were and where they were going. In the case of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) the foundation for this historical project was laid by her husband William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which appeared in 1798, the year after Mary's death. The grieving widower was extraordinarily frank about his late wife's tempestuous life, telling of Mary's infatuation with the artist Henry Fuseli (who was married), her affair with Gilbert Imlay and the birth of their daughter

out of wedlock, her despair and suicide attempts following Imlay's rejection, and his own relationship with Mary, informing readers that they married only after Mary became pregnant.⁶

His motive in writing the *Memoirs*, Godwin indicated, was to do "justice" to his late wife – whom he characterized as a "benefactor of mankind" and whom he thought had been the subject of "calumny" and "misrepresentation."⁷ Doing justice to the "illustrious dead," Godwin suggested, would provide encouragement to "those who would follow them in the same career." "The human species at large," he wrote, "is interested in this justice, as it teaches them to place their respect and affection, upon those qualities which best deserve to be esteemed and loved."⁸

The case Godwin made for Mary was broadly consistent with assumptions that informed his *Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793), an uncompromising defence of private judgment. Here he suggested that as mankind became increasingly enlightened, the need for institutional restraints would wither away and mankind's propensity towards benevolence would gain sway. Mary's life, as told by Godwin, is emblematic of this enlightened future. It is the story of a woman of exquisite sensibility and benevolent impulses, who despite tragic disappointments, sought to live life in accordance with her principles.⁹ Although not uncritical of the *Vindication of the Rights of Women*,¹⁰ Godwin emphasized the "importance of its doctrines" and "the eminence of genius it displays." He concluded that:

The publication of this book forms an epocha in the subject to which it belongs, and Mary Wollstonecraft will perhaps here-after be found to have performed more substantial service for the cause of her sex, than all other writers male or female, that ever felt themselves animated in the behalf of oppressed and injured beauty."¹¹

Godwin's account invites us to read Mary's history as the history of the future, with Mary's life and work pointing the way for the rest of humanity.¹² It assumes a historical scenario that closely parallels that of the Christian revelation.¹³ (Although he was a non-believer, Godwin's views were strongly colored by his Dissenting background.) A vanguard of enlightened individuals spread the good word through their life and works. Ahead of their time, they are apt to

be martyred for their troubles. However, eventually, as the rest of humanity is gradually converted, there is a working out of a new moral dispensation. (Mary herself seems to have conceived her life and work in similar terms.¹⁴)

Subsequently, Mary's story became incorporated in various story lines that were informed by an understanding of history as "time's arrow."¹⁵ Read positively, her history pointed to a better future. Read negatively, her story was that of false prophet, pointing the way to dystopia.¹⁶ Either way it formed part of a story with a sense of direction.

As Barbara Caine and others have discussed, for much of the nineteenth century, Mary's was a largely subterranean presence, remembered in feminist circles in Britain and America, but widely seen as too compromised by her personal life to be publicly acclaimed, even by her admirers.¹⁷ However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a stream of biographies of Wollstonecraft appeared, most of them "of liberal descent," claiming her as the prophet of the contemporary women's movement. They were preceded by a bowdlerized, vindictory version of Mary's life in Charles Kegan Paul's account of *William Godwin, his Friends and Contemporaries*, which, as Ralph Wardle remarked, "[p]aved the way for public recognition of Mary's share in the feminist movement."¹⁸

Although these biographies painted very different portraits of Mary, they assumed a paradigm that was broadly similar to that sketched by Godwin. Mary, far in advance of her own times, pointed the way to the future -- now become the present -- and the author's own preoccupations. Elizabeth Robbins Pennell's *Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1884) sketched a pure-minded Mary,¹⁹ whose *Rights of Women* was "the first word in behalf of female emancipation":

Her book is the forerunner of a movement which . . . will always be ranked as one of the most important of the nineteenth century. Many of her propositions are, to the present advocates of the cause, foregone conclusions. Hers was the voice of one crying in the wilderness to prepare the way.²⁰

Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough's *A Study of Mary Wollstonecraft and the Rights of Woman* (1898) was a more scholarly work, but had a similar mission: "to define the influences which have resulted in the social revolution of the present day."²¹ The study concluded that:

A century has passed since Mary Wollstonecraft made her demands in behalf of women. The principles which served as foundation of her argument have become the watchword of progress in the onward course of civilization."²²

G. R. Stirling Taylor's *Mary Wollstonecraft. A Study in Economics and Romance* appeared in 1911. Composed at time when New Liberals were directing attention on the economic dimensions of freedom and sexologists were promoting a reevaluation of sex,²³ Taylor's Mary had "not . . . underrated the importance of the sex passion" and had understood that "the fundamental practical need of womanhood was economic independence"²⁴ However, the meta-narrative was the same:

As so often has happened the new thought has come before its time of realization. There is then the tragedy of the prophet crying in the wilderness Mary Wollstonecraft remains in front and the Suffrage movement of to-day can only follow her lead.²⁵

According Mary's history a tutelary role,²⁶ these lives fit comfortably into a Whig tradition of historiography which emphasized the importance of the march of mind in women's struggle for freedom.²⁷ Millicent Garrett Fawcett's *Women's Suffrage. A Short History of a Great Movement* (1912) traced the demand for women's political liberty back to Mary Wollstonecraft: "The torch which was lighted by Mary Wollstonecraft," Fawcett declared, "was never afterwards extinguished."²⁸ Ray Strachey's history of *The Cause* suggested that in *The Rights of Woman*:

[T]he whole extent of the feminist ideal is set out, and the whole claim for equal human rights is made; and although at the time it was little noticed, it has remained the text of the movement ever since.²⁹

On this view, the demand for women's freedom is modern, with Mary being the first to stake the claim.

By contrast, Mary occupies but a marginal position in another Whig tradition that viewed English liberties as ancient and saw the women's movement as claiming historic rights rooted in a

distant past. Thus, for example, Charlotte Carmichael Stopes's account of *British Freewomen. Their Historical Privilege* accorded but a passing nod to Wollstonecraft ("she sowed the seed that is still growing"). Stopes rather emphasized British women's "ethnological" heritage (not least the "racial peculiarities of the ancient Britons and early Saxon invaders"), custom, and legal precedent.³⁰

In the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries the trajectory of Mary's life and its import for the present become less certain. Ralph Wardle's biography of Wollstonecraft (which appeared in 1951) contains premonitions of later developments. On the one hand, as Janet Todd has indicated, it harkens back to Godwin's *Memoirs* in its wonderfully sympathetic depiction of "a courageous woman eager to serve humanity," whose life is depicted as inspiring future generations of feminists.³¹ On the other hand, the depth of its scholarship, the wealth of the sources that it uses, and the richness of its texture lends a new complexity – and lack of consistency – to Mary's life.³² The extent and nature of Mary's influence on the women's movement appears more problematic. Wardle thought that "the vindication of Mary's character [by Charles Kegan Paul] came too late . . . to permit her ideas to have any profound influence on the course of the feminist movement of the nineteenth century."³³ Mary is characterized as "a pioneer in the movement [for women's emancipation] if not actually a leader" and *The Rights of Woman* as "an original, if not an influential, book."³⁴ But for her untimely death, her life might have taken a new twist: she "might well have helped to rally the new forces of Romanticism."³⁵

As the second-wave feminist movement gained steam, Mary's lives not only multiplied at an unsettling rate but also were characterized by greater instability. We find a Mary who changes her outlook and sometimes behaves well, sometimes badly in the course of a single life. Eleanor Flexner's biography (1972) argued for the centrality of religious faith in Mary's early life and intellectual formation but suggested that Mary suffered an impoverishing loss of faith as a result of

her disappointed love for Fuseli.³⁶ Although Flexner identifies *The Rights of Women* as "a classic whose seminal influence on the social history of women has no equal,"³⁷ she indicates that in some respects Mary's mindset was different from the present, e.g. her faith in human perfectibility.³⁸ Although Flexner depicted Mary's history as broadly exemplary ("except for the few occasions when she strayed to the verge of aberration."³⁹), the tendency was for Mary's life to assume a greater moral complexity. Claire Tomalin's biography (1974), for example, presented a multifaceted Mary, who was far from admirable in *all* her aspects. (She unwisely abducted her sister Eliza from her husband, indulged in self-pity, attempted suicide without thinking of the child she is abandoning.) She is a moody woman, and her outlook changes. (In her youth, we learn, in some moods she "displayed the bitter root of feminism, a determination to reject the other sex, an insistence that one sort of life must be denied if the other were to develop: a woman could not be a free agent and enjoy family life." Later, in *The Rights of Woman* she abandoned this position.⁴⁰) The Mary of the biography co-authored by Moira Ferguson and Janet Todd (1984) is also changeable. (E.g. her religious beliefs vary, and her ideas as to the meliorative potential of education alter.⁴¹) Moreover, her views are not always consistent.⁴²

As the evidence about Mary's life has accumulated and become ever more readily available,⁴³ her life has come to seem increasingly unpredictable. Janet Todd's biography (published in 2000) draws to splendid effect on Mary's changeable, sometimes contradictory voice as it appears in her letters and her works. Mary's history has thickened.⁴⁴ Todd provides a wonderfully detailed account of Mary's life and her associates and the social milieu in which she found herself. At the same time, it is evident from Todd's history that important details of Mary's life remain unknown, so we cannot be quite sure of her motivations - or those around her.⁴⁵ It is a life with many subplots. (We are told of a myriad of circumstances and individuals that impinged on Mary's life.) There are some constants. (E.g. Mary's perception of herself as an unloved child continues to

haunt her; repeatedly she displays great energy, courage, and imagination in grasping the chances that come her way.) However, it is clear there was much in her history that was contingent (beginning with the fact that she was a second-born child – and, of course, a girl.⁴⁶) One of the many strengths of the Todd biography is the contrasts it points up between Mary's unlikely history and the more predictable paths followed by her sisters.⁴⁷) Essentially, Mary's is a story without any single overarching plotline.⁴⁸ Like her reading of Mary's unfinished novel *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* (which, interestingly, is coming to rival *The Rights of Woman* as an object of scholarly interest), Todd's account of Mary's life suggests multiple possibilities and unresolved contradictions.⁴⁹

At the same time we learn ever more about Mary, her life and thought are coming to unfold in a past that is "a foreign country."⁵⁰ Rather than being far in advance of her age, Mary has come increasingly to be seen as embedded in it. For example, Mary Poovey's study (from 1984) suggested that contemporary construction of the "The Proper Lady" (culturally defined by her sex but obliged to suppress or sublimate her sexual appetites and feelings) cast a long shadow over Mary's life and work. "[A]s long as an individual's self-definition . . . is derived primarily from the values implicit in the culture . . . she wishes to change," Poovey points out, "the solutions the imagination generates will be governed, on some level, by these values."⁵¹ Barbara Taylor's absorbing study of *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (2003) is another case in point. Suggesting that too often her interpreters have imposed a spurious modernity on Mary, Taylor presents us with a woman who inhabits a far-away world of Enlightenment discourses and radical, perfectibilist imaginings.⁵² Barbara Taylor's Mary is a radical utopian, whose visionary feminism is fueled by religious faith, and whose political aspirations are inseparable from her individual situation. Although Taylor's Mary clearly inhabits a world that is in many ways very distant, she is very modern in her constant impulse to self-invention.⁵³ Adopting a psychoanalytic

framework, Taylor argues that while the *components* of Mary's and others' selfhood have a historic dimension, "the fundamental psychological processes through which self-identities are forged . . . are ubiquitous and constant."⁵⁴ Insofar as Mary's history is one of *process*, it is timeless. Taylor's is a brilliant, multifaceted study. It provides an engrossing account of the multiple components of Mary's imaginative life: familial and other life experiences; intellectual encounters, fictional fantasies, erotic longings, the impact of particular socio-cultural milieu.⁵⁵ It depicts an imagination that was often tugged in contrary directions.⁵⁶ Ultimately, it appears to me, Taylor recreates an imaginative life so rich and complicated and so unruly that it escapes its psychoanalytic paradigm.

As Cora Kaplan has observed, "Wollstonecraft's standing today is at once higher and less settled than at any time since her reincarnation in the early 1970s as the origin and avatar of western feminism."⁵⁷ Her place in the history of feminism is contested. In his history of *Feminism in the United States and England* (1969) William O'Neill could still claim that "All histories of feminism properly begin with the appearance of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*."⁵⁸ However, subsequently, as the feminist movement fragmented, Mary was quite often identified as the founding figure of a feminist *faction* – rather than the mother of all feminisms. In *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (1974) Sheila Rowbotham indicated that "The *Vindication*, often taken as the beginnings of feminism, was rather the important theoretical summation of bourgeois radical feminism."⁵⁹ Similarly, Olive Banks's *Faces of Feminism* (1981) identified Wollstonecraft with but one face of feminism (stemming from the Enlightenment) – and that not the most important in the U.S.A.⁶⁰) Zillah Eisenstein thought that Mary had embraced "the new bourgeois order" and liberal values but as a woman found these values unrealizable in practice. Eisenstein found grounds for hope that Mary's history pointed to a radical future for liberal feminism. By contrast Jennifer Lorch (1990) saw Mary evolving from a "prim radicalism – pro-woman concepts embodied in a conservative outlook" to an outlook combining "feminism and

proto-socialism."⁶¹ Insofar as Mary's history continued to be incorporated in a vision of history as "time's arrow" the arrow appeared to be flying off in many different directions.

Some of the paradoxes of Mary's history and her place in the history of feminism are evident in Barbara Caine's *History of English Feminism 1780-1980* (1997). On the one hand, Caine indicated that Mary's status as "the founding figure of modern feminism" has been enhanced by recent scholarship.⁶² On the other, she stressed that Mary's life and work unfolded in the shadow of the French revolution and emphasized that by the late 20th century feminism had transformed into feminisms.⁶³ We have a Mary who is ever more firmly rooted in her own era but who continues to enjoy iconic status with an ever more diverse assortment of feminists headed their multiple ways. Perhaps Caine indicates a way of understanding these paradoxes in insisting on the significance of Mary's sense of "the possibilities of change."⁶⁴ Seen in this way, Mary's significance is not as a historical actor whose life points in a particular direction, but as a figure whose life and work suggest an open-ended future, a future concerned with possibilities, probabilities, but no longer locked to a formative past.

Endnotes

¹ Janet M. Todd, "The Biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft" *Signs* Vol 1., No 3, pp. 721-734.

² Todd, "Biographies," p. 721.

³ Todd, p. 734.

⁴ Todd's discussion builds on Ralph M. Wardle, *Mary Wollstonecraft. A Critical Biography* (London and Lawrence, Ka.: The Richards Press Ltd. And University of Kansas Press, p. 1951) Chp. X "Epilogue" *passim*. Cora Kaplan, "Mary Wollstonecraft's reception and legacies" in Claudia L. Johnson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) offers an always interesting interpretive review of the literature (I wish it had arrived via interlibrary loan when I was beginning rather than completing this essay), and Barbara Taylor provides a valuable addition to the discussion of "[t]he fantasy of Mary Wollstonecraft" in the epilogue to her *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 236-253.

⁵ Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period. The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890* (London and New York: Longman, 1993) chp. 1 and *passim* provides an excellent introduction to "The Sense of Time and the Uses of History" as it developed in the Victorian era.

⁶ William Godwin *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* with a Preface by John Middleton Murry (London: Constable and Co., 1928). He described Mary's difficult early years with a feckless, sometimes violent father and seemingly unloving mother and Mary's unhappy experiences in the few conventional occupations available to gentlewomen. (She was by turns a paid companion, schoolmistress, and family governess). Longing for independence, Godwin told, Mary moved to London in 1787, hoping to support herself by writing. The move was assisted by her publisher Joseph Johnson, who as Godwin notes had already published Mary's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and was shortly to publish *Mary, A Fiction* and her *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788). In London, she joined a circle of literary figures, artists, and other intellectuals who met at Johnson's. Godwin relates that during her first years in London she was largely involved in translating and contributing to Johnson's *Analytical Review* begun in 1788. Encouraged by the reception of her *The Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790), she proceeded to write *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Meanwhile, Godwin told, Mary became infatuated with the artist Henry Fuseli, one of Johnson's regular visitors, who was married. Fleeing from an impossible emotional situation (on Godwin's account), Mary escaped to revolutionary France. Here she met the American adventurer Gilbert Imlay, with whom she had an affair and a child out of wedlock and wrote her *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*. Returning to London, Mary's forebodings that Imlay did not care to continue the connection were confirmed. Despairing, Godwin told, Mary twice attempted suicide. Between attempts, she had been despatched to Scandinavia to attend to Imlay's business interests, and letters written during this period formed the basis of her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796) Finally, Godwin sketched Mary's and his relationship -- a tale of "friendship melting into love." They had, he related, only married after Mary became pregnant. She was, he told, working on her novel *The Wrongs of Women: Or Maria* when she died, age 37, following complications after the birth of their daughter.

⁷ Godwin, *Memoirs*, p. 5.

⁸ Godwin, *Memoirs*, pp. 5-6.

⁹ Although Godwin's emphasis on Mary's inclination to "sensibility" and his own to "logic" has sometimes been seen as condescending, he was writing at a time when he was coming under the influence of the ethical ideas of David Hume and Adam Smith, suggesting that morality was situated in the first instance in the feelings. The operative assumption of the *Memoirs* appears to be that by encouraging a sympathetic identification with Mary they would encourage others to

identify with her general moral project. While a disastrous miscalculation in the short run, perhaps Godwin wasn't so far off over the long run. See Mark Philip, "William Godwin" *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See Barbara Caine, "Victorian Feminism and the Ghost of Mary Wollstonecraft" *Women's Writing*. Vol. 4, No. 2, 1997, 264-65. and Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) pp. 40-43 for a somewhat negative reading of Godwin's *Memoirs*, emphasizing Wollstonecraft as a creature of feeling. Janet M. Todd, "The Biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft" *Signs* Vol 1., No 3, pp. 722-23 views the *Memoirs* in a more positive light.

¹⁰ While characterizing it as "a very bold and original production," he thought it "a very unequal performance and eminently deficient in method and arrangement." Moreover, he evinced some distaste for the "occasional passages of a stern and rugged feature" (which he suggests did not belong to Mary's "fixed and permanent character" but did belong "to her character of the moment." But alongside "this rigid and somewhat amazonian temper, which characterized some parts of the book, it is impossible not to remark a luxuriance of imagination, and a trembling delicacy of sentiment, which would have done honour to a poet." Godwin, *Memoirs*, pp. 54-56.

¹¹ William Godwin *Memoirs*, p. 56. Elsewhere in the *Memoirs*, Godwin characterizes Mary's early death as "hostile to the moral interests of mankind." p. 133

¹² Writing in a counter-revolutionary era, it took a leap of faith on Godwin's part to assume that Mary's life and works represented the way of the future. Moreover, as Janet Todd has pointed out, although *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* made a splash when it appeared it was a modest splash. It sold, she tells, c. 1500-3000 copies in the first five years and very few the next fifty – modest compared to the sale of works of e.g. Hannah More. Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft, A Revolutionary Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000) p. 185.

¹³ Leslie Stephen alluded to "that peculiar form of semi-rationalism which was combined with English radicalism." in his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* 2 vols. (Bristol: Thoemmes Antiquarian Books Ltd., 1991) I, p. 445.

¹⁴ "Those who are bold enough to advance before the age they live in, and to throw off, by the force of their own minds, the prejudices which the maturing reason of the world will in time disavow, must learn to brave censure. We ought not be too anxious respecting the opinion of others . . . those who know me will suppose that I acted from principle." Janet Todd provides this speculative reconstruction of a letter from Wollstonecraft to her friend and fellow author Mary Hays, [c. April 1797]. The reconstruction is based on a letter quoted in an obituary written by Hays, which Todd surmises was written by Wollstonecraft *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 2003) p. 410 and p. 410, fn. 872 p. 410 and p. 410, fn. 872.

¹⁵ Stephen J. Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: 1987) Gould points out that although there is an undercurrent of time as "time's cycle" the primary metaphor of time in the Bible is that of "time's arrow." p. 11.

¹⁶ In the words of *Chalmer's Biographical Dictionary*: "Her history . . . forms entirely a warning, and in no part an example." Quoted in Elizabeth Robins Pennell, *Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1884), p. 7. Pennell thought this source was especially influential in perpetuating Mary Wollstonecraft's ill-repute p. 6.

For further examples of negative readings of the life (e.g. those of the Rev. Richard Polwhele and Harriet Martineau) see the useful collection of texts in Harriet Jump, ed., *Lives of the Great Romantics III Godwin, Wollstonecraft & Mary Shelley By their Contemporaries. Volume 2. Wollstonecraft* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999)

¹⁷ Caine, "Victorian Feminism and the Ghost of Mary Wollstonecraft"; Ralph M. Wardle, *Mary Wollstonecraft. A Critical Biography* (London and Lawrence, Ka.: The Richards Press Ltd. And University of Kansas Press, p. 1951) p. 340. Barbara Taylor offers some further details, drawing attention to the publication of extracts from *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* in Owenite tracts and newspapers and some Chartist newspapers. *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p. 248.

¹⁸ Wardle, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 340. Harriet Jump tells that Charles Kegan Paul was a friend of Sir Percy and Lady Shelley. Especially the latter, it seems, was bent on establishing the posthumous respectability of her in-laws, including her mother-in-law's parents. Charles Kegan Paul was given access to the Shelly papers to write his version of *William*

Godwin, his Friends and Contemporaries, 2 vols (London: 1876) Harriet Jump, ed., *Lives of the Great Romantics III Volume 2. Wollstonecraft*, pp. 279-80.

¹⁹ Pennell's account was based in part on that of Charles Kegan Paul. "Indeed," Pennell wrote, "the infamy attached to her name is almost incredible in the present age, when new theories are more patiently criticised, and when purity of motive has been accepted as the vindication of at least one well-known breach of social laws." She concluded "Pure in their own eyes, they deserve to be so in the world's esteem." Elizabeth Robins Pennell, *Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1884) pp. 1, 314,

²⁰ Pennell, *Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 136.

²¹ Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough, *A Study of Mary Wollstonecraft and The Rights of Woman* (London, New York, and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1898) preface (n.p.) Rauschenbusch-Clough was interested in establishing the intellectual influences that contributed to Wollstonecraft's mental development.

²² Rauschenbusch-Clough, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 218.

²³ G. R. Stirling Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft. A Study in Economics and Romance* (London: Martin Secker, 1911).

²⁴ Taylor, *Wollstonecraft*, pp. 106, 109. Taylor thought the recognition that women needed economic independence "the essence of the Woman's Movement of to-day.") p. 109. Whereas Rauschenbusch-Clough was interested in Mary's intellectual genealogy, Taylor regarded her life as more instructive: "If one would seek to know what Mary Wollstonecraft taught about the emancipation of woman and the more general rules of social construction, then it is best to read what Mary Wollstonecraft did," he advised (pp. 205-06). However, since Taylor considered Mary's works "a perfect mirror of herself" the practical import of the distinction was minimal (p. 59).

²⁵ Taylor, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 111.

²⁶ According to Pennell, Mary had traced the problems of women to their real cause: "the fundamental misconception of the relations of the sexes. Therefore, what she had to do was to awaken mankind to the knowledge that women are human beings. Pennell, *Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 137. Taylor considered Mary's last years with Godwin as "perhaps her greatest lesson to posterity." Taylor, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 193.

²⁷ On different traditions of Whig historiography see J. W. Burrow. *A Liberal Descent. Victorian historians and the English past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981),

²⁸ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *Women's Suffrage. A Short History of a Great Movement* (New York: Source Book Press, 1970) pp. 5-6. Fawcett's Mary is "a woman of exceptionally pure and exalted character" with a "high sense of duty" and "allegiance to the pieties of domestic life." Fawcett discerns "[G]limpses of its light [the torch that Mary lit]" in Shelly's poems, an article by Sidney Smith in the *Edinburgh Review* urging improvements in women's education, and in Mrs. Elizabeth's Fry's prison visiting – i.e. a practical working out of her principles.

²⁹ Ray Strachey, *The Cause. A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London: Virago, 1978). The book first appeared in 1928.

³⁰ "She treats the subject [of women's rights] on lines that men and women are only beginning to learn to read." Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, *British Freewomen. Their Historical Privilege* (London: Swan Sonnenchein & Co., 1894) pp. 127-28. A broadly similar emphasis is found in Alice Zimmern's *Women's Suffrage in Many Lands. . . With a foreword by Mrs. Chapman Catt* (London: Woman Citizen Publishing Society [1909]) and Helen Blackburn's account. *Women's Suffrage. A record of the Women's Suffrage Movement in the British Isles with Biographical Sketches of Miss Becker* (New York: Klaus Reprint Co, 1971). The book was originally published in London by Williams and Norgate in 1902. Blackburn tells that "The effort to bring political liberty to the daily lives of women is not an isolated movement . . . it forms part of the continuity of history . . . it is part of the continuous action and reaction between law and custom of which human institutions are moulded and by which public conscience is modified." (p. v) The study begins in Anglo-Saxon Britain and again the emphasis is on retrieving lost rights.

³¹ Todd, "The Biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft," p. 729. Wardle wrote, "It is . . . Mary's personality that has kept her memory alive. Surely dozens of readers have thrilled to her history or been fired by her example for every one who has read his way through *The Rights of Woman*." Wardle, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 341.

³² To take one small episode, Wardle describes how having suggested to Mrs. Fuseli that they might share her husband (with Mrs. Fuseli allotted his person and Mary his mind), Mary took a very different line when a Miss Pinkerton, who had conceived a passion for Godwin, intruded on her own domestic relationship. Wardle, *Wollstonecraft*, pp. 296-97.

³³ Wardle, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, p. 339. Wardle suggests that John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women* was especially influential in guiding the women's movement: "After Mill's book had appeared . . . women's rights were defined and their goals clarified. Thereafter the course of reform scarcely swerved. Yet Mary Wollstonecraft had no part in determining Mill's theories. . . . But though Mary had little traceable influence on the course of female emancipation, no one can estimate how much her theories and example may have inspired workers in the cause." p. 341

Wardle is certainly correct in that there is no reference to Wollstonecraft in either Mill's *Collected Works* or Harriet Taylor Mill, *The Complete Works of Harriet Taylor Mill* Jo Ellen Jacobs, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). However, I find it rather difficult to believe that John Stuart Mill and /or Harriet Taylor were not familiar with Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. Taylor moved in Unitarian circles in which Wollstonecraft's work was well-known and although Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* and Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* could hardly be more different stylistically, they make remarkably similar cases for women's emancipation, sometimes employing the same analogies and tropes. E.g., both draw analogies between women's subjection and slavery and between despotic kings and despotic husbands. Wollstonecraft likens ladies to plants "planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty."; Mill likens them to "hot-house plants." i Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men with a Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Hints*, Sylvania Tomaselli, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 69, 112, 74. John Stuart Mill "On the Subjection of Women" *Collected Works* John M. Robson, ed. (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984) XXI pp. 284-87, 327.

³⁴ Wardle, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 341.

³⁵ Wardle, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 341.

³⁶ According to Flexner, "In the last analysis, Mary rested her argument, [in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*] not on appeals to justice, or logic – sheer reason itself – but on the basic principles of Christian faith" *Wollstonecraft*, p. 160. (I find the idea that Mary suffered a lasting loss of faith problematic, but that is by the by.) Given the greater religiosity of American life and widely acknowledged part played by religious convictions in the American feminist tradition this Mary would have seemed less foreign to American feminists than to many of their British counterparts, with their roots so largely in the left.

³⁷ Flexner continued: "It was read by all the woman leaders of stature throughout the nineteenth century and into our own and was often the decisive force in crystallizing their determination to struggle for education and social and political freedom for their sex . . . basically," Flexner concluded "Mary Wollstonecraft was right. If social consciousness was to move ahead, if human beings were to develop concern for their fellow creatures, then concern and progress could not be limited to men." Her ideas, Flexner concluded, had spread in our time from the Western world into Africa and Asia." Eleanor Flexner, *Mary Wollstonecraft. A Biography* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1972), pp. 165-66.

³⁸ "Mary Wollstonecraft is in the great tradition of her time in seeking the betterment of the whole human race. The reformers of the eighteenth century had not yet tasted the inherent limitations of reform." Flexner, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 154.

³⁹ Flexner's reading of the life suggests that (presumably unlike the annoyingly unrestrained, egocentric women's libbers who were popping up) Mary – apart from the aberrant occasions - had understood that the "whole import of freedom . . . was to prepare women for the duty of being human, of being woman – as mothers and wives as well as citizens." *Wollstonecraft*, p. 266.

⁴⁰ Claire Tomalin. *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974) p. 19.

⁴¹ Moira Ferguson and Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984) pp. 120- 122, 127.

⁴² The authors point out, for example, that Mary's views on class differences were problematic. Mary blamed the aristocracy for inequalities of rank and saw the bourgeoisie as potential liberators of humanity, seeing no class antagonism in their keeping servants. At the same time, she wanted an end to the tyranny of the rich over poor. Ferguson and Todd, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 127.

⁴³ All students of Wollstonecraft must be grateful for Janet Todd's meticulously annotated edition of Mary's correspondence which recently appeared - Janet Todd, ed., *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 2003), which builds on the pioneering work of Ralph M. Wardle, ed., *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1979). Also the edition of Mary's collected works co-edited by Janet Todd & Marilyn Butler, eds., *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* 7 volumes (London: William Pickering, 1989) and Sylvana Tomaselli's edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men with a Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Hints* are extremely useful.

⁴⁴ Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft. A Revolutionary Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000). Today's biographies – not just Todd's – do tend to be very amply proportioned. This relates, I think, not only to the plenitude of available facts but also to the circumstance that many authors discern no single story line in their subject's life. Subjects turn out to have multiple identities – as a daughter, friend, author, lover, educator, mother, etc. - and while their story lines may intersect, the relationship amongst them is often tortuous and obscure. It is unclear what, if anything, can be "left out" of a life.

⁴⁵ E.g. Todd moots various possible motivations for Mary's decision to encourage her sister Eliza, who had suffered a postpartum depression, to leave her husband, including the possibility that their brother Henry had suffered from madness and been incarcerated and memories of her parents' unhappy marriage. Todd, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 45 and chp. 5 *passim*.

⁴⁶ Todd suggests that Mary was a "classic case" of a second child, compelled to earn his or her place, which encouraged her to be more outgoing, opinionated, and unconventional than the eldest. *Wollstonecraft*, p. 4.

To take just one practical example, one wonders whether had Mary's initial attempt to establish a school in Islington succeeded and/or had she not tried again to establish a school in Newington Green (both times, it appears, assisted and advised by Hannah Burgh) would she ever have met the generous-spirited John Hewlett (an Anglican clergyman, schoolteacher and writer), who introduced her to her publisher Joseph Johnson – a crucial development in her life? (See Todd, *Wollstonecraft. A Revolutionary Life*, pp. xvi, 55-56, 61.

⁴⁷ After some miserable years of governing, Eliza and Everina managed to set up two small schools that were associated with one another in Dublin—Eliza's a day school for boys, Everina's a boarding school for girls. Wardle, *Collected Letters*, p. 416.

⁴⁸ E.g. Todd's account of Wollstonecraft's and Godwin's relationship - more complicated and more interesting than the idyll projected in Godwin's *Memoirs* - suggests to me that several possible futures might have awaited them but for Mary's tragic early death. One can imagine a companionate couple, combining a snug domesticity and a commitment to their work, or an increasingly irritable, thwarted couple, harassed by practical domestic difficulties and responsibilities associated with a growing family, or – more likely – some combination of the two.

⁴⁹ Todd, *Wollstonecraft*, pp. 426-34. Todd sees the special interest of the novel as being its scrutiny of "women's collusion in their subjection." (p. 431) She concludes that "[I]t was no small achievement for Wollstonecraft to have exposed contradictions [in her feelings about sexual passion, which she had come to revalue since *The Rights of Woman*] she could not resolve. . . . She respected strong emotion . . . but would not declare it either treacherous or supremely valuable." 432.

⁵⁰ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁵¹ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer. Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) p. xvi.

⁵² Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 4, 10, *passim*.

⁵³ Barbara Taylor cites Margaret Walters' work in this connection. Margaret Walters, "The Rights and Wrongs of Women: Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Simone de Beauvoir" in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, eds., *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976). Drawing attention to the multiple roles that Mary experimented with, Walters suggested that it was precisely her self-preoccupation, that made Mary seem "so compelling, so curiously modern." (p. 313) Adopting a psychoanalytic framework, Taylor generalizes the point: "[T]he primary demand we make of ourselves, each other and our gods . . . is the demand for a self-identity that is psychically and culturally viable." (p. 128)

Taylor suggests that the impulse behind Mary's feminist vision ("a female self redeemed by transcendent fantasy, a Christian-platonic ideal of a feminine imagination, 'shaping itself to ideal excellence' ") is to be found in her "amorous identification with a sacralised parental figure." Barbara Taylor, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 21. The quote within the quote is from an obituary by Mary Hays.

⁵⁴ Barbara Taylor, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 128.

⁵⁵ E.g. there are fine contrasts drawn between the somewhat puritanical world of radical London that Mary inhabited and the more libertine environment she encountered in Paris. Barbara Taylor, *Wollstonecraft*, chp. 6.

⁵⁶ E.g. Taylor suggests that Mary "felt the tug of primitivist nostalgia, although . . . the appeal was offset by a (slightly guilty) preference for the culturally up-do-date and . . . by a powerful rejection of history." *Wollstonecraft*, p. 163 and like Todd, Taylor finds in Mary's *The Wrongs of Women* a recognition that some inner dilemmas cannot be completely resolved. (p. 132.)

⁵⁷ Kaplan, "May Wollstonecraft's reception," p. 247.

⁵⁸ "All histories of feminism properly begin with the appearance of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*" William L. O'Neill, *The Woman Movement. Feminism in the United States and England* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971) p. 15. The book was first published in London by George Allen & Unwin Ltd. in 1969.

⁵⁹ Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books: 1974) p. 45. Zillah R. Eisenstein took a somewhat different tack that pointed in the same direction. She thought Mary had embraced "the new bourgeois order" and liberal values but as a woman was unable to realize these values in practice and was hopeful that Mary's history pointed to "*The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*." Zillah R. Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (New York: Longman, 1981) p. 89, chp. 5 "Mary Wollstonecraft: The Feminist Embrace and Criticism of Liberalism."

⁶⁰ Moreover, she argued that while the Enlightenment tradition of feminist thinking that Wollstonecraft represented was more important than what she identified as an Evangelical tradition of feminism, she believed that the reverse was true in the U.S. Olive Banks, *Faces of Feminism. A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981) p. 32.

⁶¹ Jennifer Lorch, *Mary Wollstonecraft. The Making of a Radical Feminist* (New York, Oxford, Munich: Berg Publishers, Ltd., 1990) p. 10. Lorch's Mary is a very contemporaneous figure whose *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman* "is in many respects amazingly modern, presaging some of the late-twentieth-century work in this area." p. 2.

⁶² Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 24. Pointing to the work of Virginia Sapiro and Barbara Taylor, Caine pointed out that Wollstonecraft's claims to distinction were being extended to include recognition of her place in the history of political theory. The references are to Virginia Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972) and Barbara Taylor, "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Wild Wish of Early Feminism" *History Workshop Journal* 33 (1992).

⁶³ Caine underscores that "Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is emphatically a product of the French Revolution" and that the Revolution "marked an epoch in her personal life as well." Caine, *English Feminism*, pp. 24-25.

⁶⁴ Caine, *English Feminism*, p. 24. Barbara Taylor makes a somewhat similar point. Suggesting that it would be nice to be able to consign Wollstonecraft to history, she concludes that we can't: "Constantly re-moulded in feminism's

changing image, Wollstonecraft retains one enduring role: to represent women's hopes of a society free from misogyny and sexual injustice. However distant her ideas and imaginings may be from feminist thinking of the present . . . as a symbol of what remains to be achieved, Mary Wollstonecraft remains as vital and necessary a presence today as she was in the 1790s." Taylor, *Wollstonecraft*, p. 253.

In a somewhat similar spirit, Christine Bolt (who sought to incorporate both individual actors and broad societal trends in her account of the American and British women's movements) acknowledged the imitations of the 'women worthies' tradition of history but noted that "Attention to individuals recognizes . . . that the women's movement was concerned with women's right to develop themselves as distinctive individuals, to escape from the group generalisations made about the female sex." Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s* (New York; London, et al: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) p. 9. However, we only get fleeting glimpses of individual lives (including Mary's) in this densely populated history.