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Rebel writer: Mary Wollstonecraft and enlightenment politics

Wendy Gunther-Canada; Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb Illinois, 2001, ISBN: 0-87580-280-X (Hbk)

This fascinating book poses the question, was Mary Wollstonecraft a political theorist? It answers with an exploration of how gender and sexuality were inscribed within enlightenment humanism and rationality, meaning that Wollstonecraft came to the texts of the political theory canon as an outsider, disrupting the boundaries of both genre and gender. From this perspective, Wollstonecraft emerges as both a more marginal figure and a more explicitly *political* thinker than she appears to be from other accounts.

The book is structured around the contrast between the 'quest plot' and the 'marriage plot'. The quest plot ties the individual to the search for the good society; the quest for knowledge brings them to rationality and self-government. Women are excluded from this quest because it unfits them for marriage and takes them outside their proper sphere. Instead, they must pursue the marriage plot, centred around sentimentality and the reproduction of society through the generations. Gunther-Canada argues that Wollstonecraft understood how Rousseau used the novel to romance his female readers into embracing the marriage plot and accepting their inferior status within the social contract, and that Wollstonecraft's own work was about rejecting the marriage plot as the basis for women's story in the history of political philosophy. She argues that the political intent of Wollstonecraft's writing 'was nothing less than the complete subversion of the traditional philosophical plot in which she claimed women were born only to "propagate and rot"' (Gunther-Canada, 2001: 40).

The motif of the quest plot versus the marriage plot is striking and successful, bringing out the shift from a dream of negative liberty based on freedom from familial obligations of gender and generation to a dream of positive liberty based on the freedom to become a new type of being. Wollstonecraft's passion for reason and the importance of education was about filling up the 'empty spaces of traditional femininity' (Gunther-Canada, 2001: 56), the vacuum created when women were not obliged to struggle with the external world, to strive for independence and self-mastery, and were instead immured in their families, groping in the dark. By not isolating the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* from Wollstonecraft's other works, Gunther-Canada makes it clear how the novels, *Mary: A Fiction*, and *Maria: or the*

Wrongs of Woman are also a response to the powerlessness of women in the home and civil society and an exploration of the definitively feminist idea that the personal is political.

When she turns to the *Vindication* in Chapter 4, Gunther-Canada argues that Wollstonecraft problematized the traditional opposition of rationality to femininity, and exposed the patriarchal motivations behind the portraits of women drawn from 'nature'. Women, like men, were 'rational subjects who could be ennobled by the pursuit of virtue' (Gunther-Canada, 2001: 100). The quest plot was a universal and eternal standard which should include women as well as men. Virtue was a human attribute and a divine gift: it was based on a rational nature derived from God, and from the power to govern yourself. It had no sexual character. Gunther-Canada goes from here to insist that the issue for Wollstonecraft was to legitimate women's participation in the public sphere, to grant them public speech and action so that they could end their silence and stop feeling buried alive. Women had to be incorporated into the social contract, or they would remain a constant threat to it, hyenas with false penises under their petticoats (see p. 101). This, again, provides an important reminder of how political Wollstonecraft's work is, and brings out some of the connections she makes between gender, rank and education. However, Gunther-Canada argues Wollstonecraft's theory of women's rights 'was dependent on extending to women the experiential lessons of the public sphere that were the basis of civic education' (Gunther-Canada, 2001: 114–115), but offers little proof for this claim. A full discussion of motherhood, paying attention to the complexities of the 'personal is political', is missing. The restrictive ideology of republican motherhood, for example, is mentioned but not discussed. It seems odd to describe the distinction between women's reproductive and men's productive acts as a problematic 'false dualism' without exploration, especially since the distinction seems to mirror the one between the quest and marriage plots. Without such a discussion, the assertion that the idea that the personal is political 'is one principle that has historically united feminist theory in all its multivocal diversity' (Gunther-Canada, 2001: 68) risks becoming simplistic and flattening.

The book works best where it talks about Wollstonecraft's refusal to remain within the gender borders separating the public and private spheres or to respect the discursive boundaries between philosophy and fiction. It offers a convincing and challenging portrait of Wollstonecraft's project by taking her novels seriously as challenges to traditional political philosophy and by drawing out the political dimensions of all her work. This approach offers fresh insight into the ways in which she refused to confine her analysis to separate spheres theory, and insisted that the oppression of women within the home was a consequence of politics, not nature. Wollstonecraft materializes as a political theorist, with lessons to teach us about liberty, property, independence and virtue as well as about gender and genre.

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