

Feminine Essentialism and Compulsory Maternity in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft

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Abstract: Mary Wollstonecraft is often credited as the “aesthetic foremother of feminist expository prose” (Gubar 454), but her status as a feminist icon is problematized by her essentialist ideology regarding gender and motherhood. While her work presents a radical imperative for the civic equality of the sexes rooted in a fundamentally genderless capacity for reason, this imperative is nevertheless constructed around traditional notions of motherhood as the essential role of the female. This essay seeks to explore the dissonance between her clear feminist imperative for change and her tendency to err towards feminine essentialism.

In considering the proto-feminist merit of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria* (1798), it is difficult to reconcile the novel’s clear feminist “imperative for change” (Gay 6) with its representation of motherhood as fundamentally linked to feminine identity and self-authority. Current feminist discourses take issue with cultural notions of the relationship between womanhood and motherhood; while Wollstonecraft argues for the importance of women’s biological “duty” as mothers, present-day feminist theorists assert that such notions are based on heteronormative and androcentric constructs which further serve to relegate women to the domestic sphere (Ford 189). Second-wave feminists have identified Wollstonecraft’s attitudes towards the institution of motherhood as indicative of her essentialist ideology. Wollstonecraft’s imperative for both partners to take equal share in the process of child-rearing was informed by eighteenth-century debates over the displacement of parenting

duties onto hired help, and she undoubtedly views the act of nursing as one of female empowerment; yet her conception of men's and women's respective duties is predicated wholly on biological difference and portrays women as inherently predisposed to motherhood. By positioning women's social value as citizens in conjunction with the act of mothering, Wollstonecraft perpetuates patriarchal associations of feminine power and agency along with traditional modes of heterosexual domesticity.

While the significance of Wollstonecraft's work to the feminist movement should not be understated, her writings on the subject of motherhood suggest that, when it comes to maternity, she agrees with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's assessment that men and women are not "constituted alike in temperament and character" (Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 158). It is therefore valuable to explore the extent to which her views on motherhood as an essential role of the female are the result of internalized notions of gender determinism. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft repeatedly comments on motherhood's relationship to femininity, stating that "the care of children in their infancy is one of the grand duties annexed to the female character by nature" (223). As Sandrine Berges identifies, this philosophy conflicts with her "often repeated claim that there [are] no moral differences between men and women, merely physical ones," thus conflating biological sex with a sense of "character and duty" (269). In keeping with Berges' assertion, Mary Poovey describes Wollstonecraft as "a prisoner of the category she most vehemently tried to reject" (81). Mitzi Myers echoes this sentiment, stating that "the core of her manifesto remains middle-class motherhood, a feminist, republicanized adaptation of the female role normative in late eighteenth-century bourgeois notions of the family" (206). Joan Landes extends Myers' argument to address Wollstonecraft's claim that the "first duty [of women] is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that which includes so many, of a mother" (*Rights of Woman*, 226); Landes points out that "[Wollstonecraft's] own rhetoric implies that the home and

women's role within it can be given a civic purpose ... and, consequently, that women may come to be satisfied with a domestic rather than a public existence" (129).

While contemporary feminists acknowledge the woman-centred experience of birth as a powerful aspect of feminine identity, critics such as Simone De Beauvoir question the status of motherhood as a compulsory occupation of all women. De Beauvoir argues that women are conditioned from a young age to accept that they are "made for child-bearing" and to look forward to the "splendors of maternity"; meanwhile, the negative aspects of the feminine condition, including the medical risks of giving birth and the boredom of domesticity, "are all justified by this marvelous privilege ... of bringing children into the world" (491). Wollstonecraft's work reflects these ingrained moral values: she argues that while virtue and the capacity for reason are genderless traits belonging to human nature, there exists a distinct feminine essence rooted in the biological capabilities of women to birth and breastfeed children; thus, she concludes, they have "a naturally derived duty to do so" (Berges 269). Throughout *Maria*, she portrays these maternal duties as inherent to all women and emphasizes the instinctually nurturing qualities that bond women to one another. It is this maternal instinct that initially incites a sense of pity in Jemima; upon learning of Maria's tragic separation from her child, "the woman [awakens] in a bosom long estranged from feminine emotions," and she becomes determined to help ease the sufferings of a "wretched mother" (167). These "feminine emotions" are apparently directly tied to the biological status of women as caregivers and a sense of comradeship rooted in the act of mothering, thereby reinforcing the notion that "maternal practice [is] at the heart of real femininity" (Brace 446). Wollstonecraft does not, however, fail to address the duties which fall to men as fathers. Maria repeatedly laments the fact that George Venables is incapable of being a respectable father to her baby (221); this sentiment is in keeping with those expressed in *Rights of Woman*, in which Wollstonecraft describes the "chastened dignity with which a mother returns the caresses that she

and her child receive from a father who has been fulfilling the serious duties of his station" (232). Such statements emphasize the mutuality of the burden of child-rearing, yet as Laura Brace identifies, this "call for men and women to fulfill their respective duties rel[ies] on fixed and static notions of what those duties are, attaching them firmly to biological difference" (446). Venables's failings as a father are chiefly rooted in his failure to fulfill the fatherly duty of adequately providing for his family, thus reinforcing established gender roles which cast men as breadwinners in the public sphere and women as caregivers in the domestic.

Wollstonecraft's essentialist ideology surrounding the naturally derived duties of mothers informs her belief in the importance of breastfeeding and hand-rearing one's children. In *Rights of Woman*, she criticizes the prevalent use of wet nurses in eighteenth-century England, calling breastfeeding "the grand end of [a woman's] being" and "the first duty of a mother" (228). She expands on the subject in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), warning against the "negligence [and] ignorance" of wet nurses and calling for women to adopt "a regular mode of suckling" on the grounds that "[a mother's] milk is their proper nutriment" (3). Wollstonecraft revisits this pointed concern over the displacement of maternal duties onto nurses in *Maria* through Maria's lamentations over the loss of her child. She wonders if her baby is "pining in vain" for the "nutriment" of her breastmilk, and she is pained by the thought of another woman dispensing these duties without "a mother's tenderness" (162). Furthermore, Jemima's story of her mother's death seems to confirm Maria's fears regarding the damaging effect of wet nurses on a child's constitution. Jemima relates being "consigned to the care of the cheapest nurse [her] father could find" in whom "the office of a mother did not awaken the tenderness of a woman" (190). Having been denied the "feminine caresses" of genuine motherly affection, she states that she inevitably became "a weak and rickety babe" (190). These exchanges communicate the crux of Wollstonecraft's criticism of institutionalized motherhood as prescribed by patriarchal eighteenth-century social

structures; she associates women's loss of reason under patriarchal oppression with the compulsion to "cast off" one's child and argues that women who spurn their natural duties have not earned the title of "mother" (*Rights of Woman* 228). Conversely, she asserts that by embracing the virtue and reason inherent to maternal duties, women can access a sense of purpose and self-authority that is "neither brutish nor masculine" (Brace 450). As Brace points out, Wollstonecraft connects a mother's harnessing of self-authority to the execution of "her virtuous and dutiful relationships with other people, and in particular through her maternal duties towards her children" (450); for Wollstonecraft, a mother may "learn to respect [herself]" primarily through her "true affection" for her children (240). By suggesting that motherhood is the fulcrum upon which women should construct their sense of self-worth, Wollstonecraft sophistically conflates a sense of feminine self-realization with the fulfillment of normative gender roles.

While the implications of such associations are problematic, it is crucial to consider Wollstonecraft's line of reasoning within the context of eighteenth-century debates over childcare methods. For middle- to upper-class mothers, sending newborns to a wet nurse was common practice—it was considered vulgar to breastfeed one's own children—and they would often remain in the nurse's care until around age three (Berges 273). Once weaned, children were typically cared for by servants until they were old enough to be sent to school; parents were at best tangentially involved in the child-rearing process, and this practice undoubtedly did not foster close bonds between them and their children. The choice to send one's child to a wet nurse thereby represented an unwillingness to afford them proper care and affection. The potential for breastfeeding to be a profound bonding experience was not lost on Wollstonecraft: "The suckling of a child also excites the warmed glow of tenderness—Its dependent, helpless state produces an affection, which may properly be termed maternal.... It is necessary, therefore, for a mother to perform the office of one, in order to produce in herself a rational affection for her offspring"

(*Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* 4). Here, Wollstonecraft anticipates an important element of modern feminist discourse: the unique nature of a mother's relationship to her child, particularly if that child is a girl. Adrienne Rich comments on the conflicting qualities of the bond between mother and daughter: "the materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement" (226). *Maria* confronts this struggle to navigate the intergenerational nature of feminine oppression primarily through Maria's reveries on her relationship to her child; she repeatedly "lament[s] she [is] a daughter" (162) and worries that her child won't have her mother to confide in regarding "the oppressed state of women" (206). This aspect of Wollstonecraft's narrative is especially poignant given the autobiographical nature of Maria's concern; Wollstonecraft had been working on her own instructional manuscript for her daughter(s) prior to her death. Published by Godwin in 1798 under the title *Lessons*, the fragmentary manuscript is speculated to have been written either as a legacy for her first daughter before one of her suicide attempts, or while she was pregnant with Mary (Berges 283). Concurrently, *Maria* suggests that the loss of positive maternal relationships coincides with the enactment of gender-based oppression. Jemima is driven to vice by her stepmother's lack of maternal affection towards her, and the domineering presence of Maria's stepmother following her mother's death ultimately drives her out of her home and into an ill-fated marriage to George Venables. Furthermore, while four out of five of *Maria's* fragmentary endings suggest tragic resolutions, the fifth sees Maria resurrected from a suicide attempt by the return of her daughter (Ford 192), thus implicating the power of what Rich terms "the flow of energy between two biologically-alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other; one of which has labored to give birth to the other" (226). Although the gravity she ascribes to motherhood is partially rooted in essentialist theories, Wollstonecraft is singular among her contemporaries in her representation of mothers as complex individuals and compelling subjects, and she anticipates the interest in matrilineal narratives within modern feminist scholarship.

The importance that Wollstonecraft places on motherhood does not occur in a vacuum; as Sara Ruddick points out, “in most cultures the womanly and the maternal are conceptually and politically linked,” and such rigid constructions of gender roles are difficult to transcend given the formative forces they constitute in “shap[ing] our minds and lives” (Ruddick 45). In the case of Wollstonecraft, the works of Rousseau arguably constitute the primary cultural inspiration for her ideology; having read *Emile* (1762) while working as a governess in Ireland, she wrote to her sister expostulating how she “love[s] his paradoxes” (Reuter 1145), and she cites his novel *Julie* (1761) in the epigraph of *Mary: A Fiction* (1788). She revered Rousseau in many respects, even writing to Imlay in 1794 that she had “always been half in love with [Rousseau]” (*Works* 145), but she was nevertheless alive to his most glaring faults. In *Rights of Woman*, she states that while she “admire[s] the genius of that able writer, whose opinions [she] shall often have occasion to cite, indignation always take place of admiration ... when [she] read[s] his voluptuous reveries” (Reuter 1146). While *Rights of Woman* directly attacks Rousseau’s argument that boys and girls “should not be educated in the same manner” (158), much of Wollstonecraft’s rhetoric involving the natural duties of motherhood directly reflect Rousseau’s child-rearing philosophies. Like Wollstonecraft, Rousseau was deeply concerned with the importance of the maternal role in raising healthy children. He criticizes women who have “despised their first duty and refused to nurse their own children” and warns against the negligence of wet nurses who don’t share with the child the maternal “ties of nature” (*Emile* 12). Moreover, Rousseau draws a connection between maternal duties and bonded relationships in a manner reminiscent of Wollstonecraft’s ideology; he questions whether a woman should be “prepared to divide her mother’s rights, or rather to abdicate them in favour of a stranger; to see her child loving another more than herself; to feel that the affection he retains for his own mother is a favour, while his love for his foster-mother is a duty; for is not some affection due where there has been a mother’s

care?" (12). Wollstonecraft's sentiments on maternal duty are concurrent with those of Rousseau, and her own writings are rife with intimations of his philosophies. Although she opposes his belief that the biological differences between men and women extend to moral traits like virtue and reason, her writings on the subject suggest she likely agrees with Rousseau that gender differences ultimately rooted in biology and sexual dimorphism dictate the natural and civic duties of the sexes in terms of raising children.

It is therefore arguable that Wollstonecraft's essentialism is colored both by her relationship to Rousseau's work and by the context of eighteenth-century attitudes towards maternity. As Cora Kaplan identifies, Wollstonecraft exemplifies the fundamental paradox of feminist discourse, whereby "all feminisms give some ideological hostage to femininities and are constructed through the gender sexuality of their day as well as standing in opposition to them" (49). Despite her failure to transcend internalized cultural notions of maternal duty, Wollstonecraft's status as the mother of feminism is nevertheless well-deserved. By focusing her writings on the lives of women after marriage and respecting mothers as valuable novelistic subjects, she subverts years of literary tradition, which mandate that female protagonists be invariably portrayed as young, beautiful, virtuous, and sentimental. Her serious treatment of the trials faced by women in *Maria* represents an unprecedented subversion of conventional norms, and her tendency to err towards feminine essentialism does not diminish its value as a feminist work. On the contrary, the issue of motherhood's relationship to womanhood continues to represent a contentious issue among feminist literary critics. Thomas Ford expands on this tension between woman-centered experiences of maternity and patriarchal notions of compulsory femininity, stating that while "the rhetoric of motherhood has been a central target in the feminist project of exposing and repudiating the cultural logics that perpetuate the oppression of women" (189), feminist movements often deploy similar rhetoric in ascribing a sense of feminine power to the maternal experience. Modern feminist

discourse continues to debate whether feminist interpretations of motherhood are empowering or simply reductionist theories that define women by their fertility, thus excluding transgender and infertile women from the feminist imperative. Moreover, even the most vocal feminist critics of Wollstonecraft's work acknowledge her significance as a proto-feminist; Susan Gubar, for example, at once deems Wollstonecraft's essentialism a brand of "feminist misogyny" and simultaneously describes her as "the aesthetic foremother of feminist expository prose" (454). It is therefore necessary to consider Wollstonecraft's work ultimately as burdened by the patriarchal constructs she seeks to escape, while acknowledging the singularity of her bold confrontation of women's issues and her profound influence on the feminist movement.

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