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Some Overlooked Extracts from Mary Wollstonecraft's Writings Published in Britain, 1792–1795

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In the last forty years, a variety of incisive new research has been published on the multifaceted afterlives of Mary Wollstonecraft, the radical writer and philosopher (e.g. Botting, 503–27; Bour, 575–87; Janes, 293–302; Kaplan, 246–70; McKinnes). This note contributes to these scholarly endeavors by analyzing four publications of substantial extracts of Wollstonecraft's writings in Britain between 1792 and 1795, which have not been discussed in Janet Todd's *Mary Wollstonecraft: An Annotated Bibliography* (1976) or, as far as I have been able to discover, in any other study (Todd, 1–7, 8–25). As Todd (23) had only previously commented on one extract of Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) in the *Scots Magazine* (1796), these writings shed light on a distinct textual mode of engaging with Wollstonecraft's *oeuvre*. For periodicals and compilations often published extracts from Wollstonecraft's works not only because of the political relevance of her arguments, but also because of the eloquence and beauty of her prose.

The fashion for printing extracts of Wollstonecraft's writings was initiated by the popularity of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In the same year that the *Rights of Woman* was published, the August 1792 issue of the *Sentimental and Masonic Magazine* included an essay “*On the Effect which an Early Association of Ideas has on the Female Character*” by “Miss Wollstonecraft”. This essay was a close reproduction of the sixth chapter of the *Rights of Woman*, which condemned corrupt social norms and superficial education for enervating women's rationality and destroying their happiness. There are some salient differences between the chapter and the essay. The first is that the chapter only refers to the effect that the association of ideas has on character in general, rather than specifically the female character. The second is that the essay omits two footnotes from the chapter on the irrationality of materialist accounts of the passions and on how the social emphasis on women's beauty often renders them miserable as they age (*Masonic Magazine*, 1:100–104, Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 259–72).

There are several possible reasons why this chapter appeared in the *Sentimental and Masonic Magazine*. The editors' address to the public in the inaugural July 1792 issue of the periodical had remarked that they offered the publication to “*the learned, the witty, and ingenious*” and that “*Their communications shall be gratefully acknowledged, candidly examined, and, when approved, cheerfully inserted*” (*Masonic Magazine*, 1:5). As the editors thus accepted submissions from authors, Wollstonecraft may have sent in the excerpt herself in order to promote the *Rights of Woman*, but there does not appear to be any independent evidence of her doing so. In any case, the editors had professed their interest in only publishing pieces that displayed both literary novelty and moral instruction, so this reproduction of a chapter from the *Rights of Woman* further indicates that contemporaries admired these aspects of Wollstonecraft's writings. Wollstonecraft's radical politics may have also contributed to the inclusion of her work within this magazine because the editors had published extracts from other works, which were optimistic about the emancipatory potential of the French Revolution, such as the second volume of Helen Maria Williams' *Letters from France* (1792) (*Masonic Magazine*, 1:106–13).

The significance of politics for the popularity of Wollstonecraft's writings was more clearly displayed in the anonymous 1793 *Comparative Display of the Different Opinions of the Most Distinguished British Writers on the Subject of the French Revolution*. This compilation included an abridgment of Wollstonecraft's critique of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790): the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). The anonymous editor of the *Comparative Display* declared that he had impartially chosen "those works which the public opinion has declared to be the best" from both loyalists and radicals (*Comparative Display*, 1: vi). The aim was to provide an introduction to the debate over the French Revolution for those who did not have the leisure to search through the numerous publications on this important subject themselves. The summary of Wollstonecraft's opinions on the French Revolution contained passages from various different parts of the second edition of the *Rights of Men* ordered according to their place in her argument. It began with a paragraph from the eighth page of the *Rights of Men* on her view that liberty based on the immutable divine order had never been truly implemented by any government (*Comparative Display*, 2:412; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 8). It was followed by pages eleven to nineteen, which began by depicting hereditary property and customs as undermining the happiness and intimacy that would result from equality. Burke was then decried for suggesting that the irrational constitutional accretions of the medieval period could be exalted above the natural rights of modern Britons (*Comparative Display*, 2:412–17; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 11–19).

The abridgment then reproduced pages twenty-two to twenty-three on the irrationality of submitting implicitly to authority (*Comparative Display*, 2:417–18; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 22–3). The next passages were from pages one hundred and thirty-seven to one hundred and forty-six. These pages described Burke's passionate wit as obscuring his rational judgment and his aesthetic sensibilities as subsuming the moral desire to better the condition of the poor (*Comparative Display*, 2:418–24; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 137–46). Finally, the abridgment reproduced the last four pages of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Men*, presenting her declamation on the value of "those principles which rest on an eternal foundation, and revert for a standard to the immutable attributes of God" (*Comparative Display*, 2:424–6; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 156–8). The editor had clearly given considerable thought to constructing this abridgment and ensuring the reproduction of Wollstonecraft's core conceptual argument, which testifies to the importance of the *Rights of Men* to the revolutionary debate. As the *Comparative Display* went through a second edition in 1811, it may also have been an effective vehicle for the promotion of Wollstonecraft's philosophy (*Comparative Display*, 1811).

Extracts from Wollstonecraft's writings were not, however, only reprinted in political publications. Her works were often treated as a form of delightful and diverting educational literature. One example of this aspect of Wollstonecraft's reception was a passage from the *Rights of Woman*, which was reproduced in the October 1794 issue of the *Pocket Magazine*, a periodical that described itself as printing useful and enjoyable literature. That issue of the *Pocket Magazine* published what it described as "A Picture of Connubial Felicity" from chapter nine of the *Rights of Woman*. This extract presented a vivid vision of the happiness of a middling family in which the mother rears her children herself, converses about literature, and engages in charitable endeavors (*Pocket Magazine*, 1:158–9; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 324–7). As the *Pocket Magazine* was not aligned with any specific political project, this passage from the *Rights of Woman* must have been published to fulfill that publication's aim of displaying the best literary works.

The perceived value of the *Rights of Woman* as polite literature is further evident from the *Caledonian Bee* (1795). This collection of interesting pieces from modern publications included six different extracts from the *Rights of Woman*. These extracts were given the following explanatory titles: "Reflections on What is Called Amiable Weakness in a Woman" (*Caledonian Bee*, 266–68; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 132–4); "Fine Ladies, and Notable Women" (*Caledonian Bee*, 268–70; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 142–6); "The Virtue of Modesty" (*Caledonian Bee*, 270–72; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 293–7); "A Picture of Connubial Love" (*Caledonian Bee*, 272–4; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*,

324–7); “Employments of Women” (*Caledonian Bee*, 1795, 274–7; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 337–42); and, the “Duty of Mothers” (*Caledonian Bee*, 77–80; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 439–44).

The “Picture of Connubial Love” displayed the same passage that had been published in the *Pocket Magazine*, which strongly suggests that the editors of the *Caledonian Bee* had read the earlier periodical. In general, the passages from Wollstonecraft’s writings published in the *Caledonian Bee* provided moral or practical lessons in a particularly vivid manner. As with the *Pocket Magazine*, the *Caledonian Bee* did not have a clear political orientation, so these extracts from the *Rights of Woman* appear to have been included because they had an eloquent and interesting message. Thus, the *Caledonian Bee*, in addition to the *Masonic Magazine* and the *Pocket Magazine*, reveals that the popularity of Wollstonecraft’s writings was not always driven by the political concerns that motivated the *Comparative Display*, but was also connected to the status of her works as fascinating, useful, and beautiful.

Disclosure statement

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