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### Mothers and Independent Citizens: Making Sense of Wollstonecraft's Supposed Essentialism

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## Mothers and Independent Citizens: Making Sense of Wollstonecraft's Supposed Essentialism

Sandrine Berges

**Abstract:** Mary Wollstonecraft argues that women must be independent citizens, but that they cannot be that unless they fulfill certain duties as mothers. This is problematic in a number of ways, as argued by Laura Brace in a 2000 article. However, I argue that if we understand Wollstonecraft's concept of independence in a republican, rather than a liberal context, and at the same time pay close attention to her discussion of motherhood, a feminist reading of Wollstonecraft is not only possible but enriching. I will attempt to show, in particular, that the seeds of a feminist argument for co-parenting are to be found in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

### Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft, in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,<sup>1</sup> first published in 1792, proposed the following: women must become independent citizens on an equal footing with men but only if they fulfill certain duties when they are mothers. This has long posed a dilemma for readers of the *Vindication*. On the one hand, Wollstonecraft seems to make citizenship for women dependent on their fulfilling certain duties as mothers, thus closely tying their contribution to society to their biological functions. On the other hand, the requirement that women, as citizens, should be independent seems to buy in to a patriarchal ideology that fails to take into account the ties of care that women, when they are mothers, experience. Given this, it is not surprising that feminist scholars have often been tentative in embracing Wollstonecraft's writings, or even discussing them at any length. One notable exception is Laura Brace, who, in her article on marriage in Wollstonecraft tackles

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1 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, A Vindication of the Rights of Men, An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1993). All page references in the text are to this edition.

both the issues mentioned above but concludes that Wollstonecraft, on the whole, fails to offer a solution that will reconcile independence and motherhood for all women. (2000: 453)<sup>2</sup> Brace seems to suggest that although Wollstonecraft bravely attempts to build a position for women both as mothers *and* citizens, she fails on both counts because she is too steeped in patriarchy on the one hand, and essentialism on the other. In this essay, I want to argue that there is more to be said on both aspects of the problem.

I will begin, in Section Two, by examining the relevant part of the philosophical framework within which Wollstonecraft operates, namely her discussion of independence. Brace interprets Wollstonecraft's notion of independence as 'self-ownership' thereby situating her within the liberal tradition. (2000: 433) I refrain from doing this and argue that her concept of independence is probably best understood within a republican tradition as non-domination. This reading of Wollstonecraft's views on independence allows me to respond to a potential objection drawn from Iris Marion Young's critique of the liberal notion of independence as applied to mothers.

In Section Three, I will follow this discussion with an exposition of the problem of feminine essentialism in Wollstonecraft and some suggestions as to how one might understand it in the light of her view that women should be independent from men. I will argue, in particular, that while Wollstonecraft associates certain duties with motherhood, she does not claim that all women need be mothers, nor that those who are should be reduced to the demands of motherhood.

Sections Four and Five will examine in more detail some of the arguments of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that might appear particularly problematic in the light of this apparent conflict between essentialism and independence, namely women's duty to breast-feed their children and the question of whether women should work outside

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<sup>2</sup> See Laura Brace "'Not Empire, but Equality": Mary Wollstonecraft, the Marriage State and the Sexual Contract', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 8.4 (2000), pp. 433-455.

the home. I hope to show that what Wollstonecraft has to say on these topics is more compatible with her arguments for independence than her apparent essentialism might suggest.

## 2. Independence and Citizenship

Wollstonecraft's plea for independence for women is complex: both internal and external. Dependent beings 'act according to the will of another fallible being, and submit, right or wrong, to power.' (1993: 115) To become independent, women 'must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the modest slaves of opinion.' (1993: 119. And she adds: 'For it is the right use of reason alone which makes us independent of everything—excepting the unclouded Reason,—“Whose service is perfect freedom.”' (1993: 197) Wollstonecraft is truly a child of the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason as her colleague Thomas Paine called it. She sees the possibility of progress, both in human development and political arrangements, in the pursuit of reason.<sup>3,4</sup>

Wollstonecraft's understanding of independence is also external, practical even: to be independent means to be capable of earning one's own living: 'earn their own subsistence: the true definition of independence' (1993: 158). For Wollstonecraft, a being who is financially

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3 This is why she dedicates her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to Talleyrand, who had just published a pamphlet on educational reforms in republican France. If France's pursuit of equality and democracy is going to succeed, she argues, then all its adult inhabitants must be taught to live according to reason, so women should not be excluded from the new educational system, cf. Sandrine Berges *The Routledge Guidebook to Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (2013), pp. 19-25.

4 Her belonging to that tradition can, of course, be held against her in the sense that some feminists believe that the enlightenment was a fundamentally patriarchal framework (see, for instance Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (Routledge, 1993), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition). But this attitude has been questioned. See Karen Green, *The Woman of Reason* (Continuum, 1995). More particularly, Eva Kittay, *Love's Labour* (Routledge, 1999), p. 41 argued that 'the Enlightenment vision leaves unchallenged women's role as dependency workers. The public space, within liberal, political and economic theory, has largely remained the domain of free equal, rationally self-interested beings. Entering that space does not free the dependency worker from responsibilities to her charges.' In this paper I challenge this view of the enlightenment insofar as Wollstonecraft is concerned and show that, for her, the space of free equals includes mothers.

dependent on another is not just a burden to herself but also not in a position to be of any use to society:

But to render her really virtuous and useful she must not, if she discharges her civil duties, want individually the protection of civil laws, she must not be dependent on her husband's bounty for her subsistence during his life, or support after his death—for how can a being be generous who has nothing of its own? (1993: 227)

Even marriage, she says, is meaningless as an institution if women cannot earn their own money: 'the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship, men and women will never fulfill the peculiar duties of their sex, till they become enlightened citizens, till [women] become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men; in the same manner I mean, to prevent misconstruction, as one man is independent of another' (1993: 250). And of course, as not all women must or can marry, single women too should achieve financial independence:

And is not the government very defective [...] that does not provide for honest independent women by encouraging them to fill respectable stations? But in order to render their private virtue a public benefit, they must have a civil existence in the state, married or single. (1993: 230)

Although admirable in many respects, this external aspect of independence is also somewhat problematic because it links virtue and usefulness to the ability to earn a living. 'Independence I have long considered as the grand blessing of life, the basis of every virtue—and independence I will ever secure by contracting my wants, though I were to leave on a barren heath' (1993: 65). In this passage, Wollstonecraft appears as an early proponent of the claim that independence is necessary for the development of the virtues of citizenship.<sup>5</sup> This is perfectly compatible with what she says elsewhere, namely that someone who lacks independence cannot be expected to think for themselves and if they do not think for themselves, they cannot become virtuous: 'And

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5 See W. Galston, 'Liberal Virtues', *The American Political Science Review* 82.4 (1988), pp. 1277-1290.

that from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow, is equally undeniable, if mankind be viewed collectively'. (1993: 76) The idea that independence is a requisite for virtuous citizenship has come under scrutiny from the late Iris Marion Young who proposed that at least in modern political thought, the norm of independence was 'male biased and operative in relegating dependent people and their usually female caretakers to an inferior status.' (1995: 536) Here she takes independence as meaning that one has a 'well paid, secure job' which allows one to support oneself and one's children and to pay for them to receive the necessary education so that they in turn can have well-paid jobs. If parents achieve this, and also spend time and effort nurturing the seeds of virtues in their children, they might succeed in making good citizens out of them. But this requirement puts a lot of women in a double bind. They are, on the one hand, required to nurture independence in their children, to help them become good citizens, and on the other, they cannot do this and be financially independent—they need to rely on a man's income to allow them to stay at home and educate their children. On this picture, citizenship means different things for men and women: for men, it requires independence, economic and otherwise, but for women, it requires only that they educate their sons to be independent, and their daughters to be nurturing of male independence.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that Brace, who reads Wollstonecraft's independence as self-ownership and thereby ties her to a liberal tradition (2000: 433) has similar worries for Wollstonecraft's conception: women, if they are mothers, will almost certainly fail to be independent in the way that men can be, so they are doomed not to achieve the full status of citizen, to remain socially and politically inferior. But if the concept of independence understood as self-ownership is a patriarchal one that does not take into

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6 Iris Marion Young, 'Mothers, Citizenship, and Independence: A Critique of Pure Family Values', *Ethics* 105 (1995), pp. 535-556. Young is responding to Galston and his book *Liberal Purposes* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) in which he argues that single parenthood is bad for the economy.

account the particular life situations women tend to find themselves in (namely, motherhood and home making), then it is hardly surprising that women should not do well by its standards. I believe, though that Brace may be wrong in her interpretation of Wollstonecraft's concept of independence. Historically speaking, Wollstonecraft is much more likely to have thought within a republican framework, not just because she was herself a political republican, but because the intellectual circles she moved in belonged to that tradition.<sup>7</sup> Republican theory differs from liberalism in subtle but significant ways. Whereas the liberal concept of negative freedom is freedom from interference, Republicans think in terms of non-domination, or freedom from arbitrary powers.<sup>8</sup> This has the following implications for the concept of independence. For a liberal, to be independent can mean self-ownership in the sense that I stand in relation to myself as a slave owner does to a slave, and I can do what I like to or with myself, and no-one has the right to stop me.<sup>9</sup> From a liberal perspective, independence is also a matter of self-sufficiency, of an individual's capacity to thrive without relying on outside help. This is of course problematic from the point of view of those who do depend on others because they are, for example, sick, and cannot look after themselves, but it is also problematic for those who care for them, and cannot, as a result of the time and effort they expend caring for others, also earn an income that is sufficient so that they do not need to rely on others to survive, let alone thrive. This is Young's critique of the liberal concept of independence, and the context in which Brace situates Wollstonecraft's debate.

On the other hand, a republican concept of independence does not necessarily require complete self-reliance. Freedom from domination or

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7 Alan Coffee in his 'Mary Wollstonecraft, Freedom and the Enduring Power of Social Domination', *European Journal of Political Theory* (2012), pp. 1-20, convincingly argues that Wollstonecraft's concept of independence is best understood as non-domination.

8 See Philip Pettit, *Republicanism* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

9 Gerry Cohen argues that this is in fact more of a libertarian than a liberal concept in his *Self-ownership, Freedom and Equality* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 69.



arbitrary power implies that one can be subject to a non-arbitrary power, one that is itself subject to reason and agreement. It is not incompatible with a person's independence that they draw a salary from the state in order to enable them to look after a dependent. If there are laws that specify how and when the state will support carers, then someone who benefits from this support does not thereby sacrifice their independence. One issue with the republican theory is the question of whether we can and should tolerate interference. If the right focus is non-domination, rather than interference, does it mean that I can be independent and be interfered with? To some extent, interference is often caused by domination. Those who wield arbitrary power are more likely to interfere: it is what they do. On the other hand, it is perfectly possible for a non-arbitrary power to be *very* interfering because it has, for example, set out a large numbers of laws very clearly and precisely dealing with every aspect of our lives as a result of common deliberations. Though this is not the place to solve this problem, some light can be cast on the question by Wollstonecraft herself. In Chapter Two of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she criticizes the tendency to treat women as if they were children in not allowing them to use their reason to make decisions about their own lives. She follows this immediately with thoughts on how children themselves ought to be treated. Her own experience as a teacher dictates the following mode of address towards her young charges: 'your reason is now gaining strength, and till it arrives at some degree of maturity, you must look up to me for advice—then you ought to *think*, and only rely on God.' (1993: 85) Children are prime recipients of interference, as they are not mature enough to make decisions for themselves. But, Wollstonecraft insists, this interference must not take the form of arbitrary power over them: as their teacher, she embodies the reason that they do not yet have, and, she promises, she will abandon that role as soon as their reason, with her help, has matured. This model, in turn, can be applied to the case of an adult woman (or man) who find herself dependent on the state for her support. The state is financing her activities according to some pre-

agreed rules, not according to any arbitrary power. If, by contrast, a woman is dependent on the good will of her husband to have enough money to bring up their children, she is subject to arbitrary power. In neither case is the woman independent in the sense of economic self-sufficiency, but if she depends on the state, rather than her husband's goodwill, there is a sense in which she is truly independent.

It would strengthen my account to be able to offer evidence that Wollstonecraft sees the government's role as providing women who are mothers and for whom it may be more difficult to develop financial independence with protection of some sort. Though she does not say anything of the kind in either *Vindications*, she comes very close to it in *A View of the French Revolution* when she says that: 'Nature, having made men unequal, by giving stronger bodily and mental powers to one than to another, the end of government ought to be to destroy this inequality by protecting the weak.' (1993: 289) If we believe that for a woman to agree to stay at home and raise children instead of working to earn her living is tantamount to putting herself in a situation of dependence on her husband, then such a government as Wollstonecraft describes in that passage would have to step in and redress the inequality born out of that situation, by either making it a matter of law that the father provide for his wife adequately or by giving women an income directly (although there is no evidence that the latter is what Wollstonecraft had in mind).<sup>10</sup>

The corollary of demanding that a government should protect women from becoming subject to arbitrary power is that women should be considered citizens in their own rights. Wollstonecraft asserts that women 'must have a civil existence in the state, married or not.' (1993:

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10 See Karen Green, *The Woman of Reason* (Continuum, 1995) for a discussion of how Wollstonecraft's arguments offer the beginning of a solution to women's disadvantage born out of their responsibilities as mothers, 98. Wollstonecraft denies that women are by nature weaker than men in any respect other than bodily strength. But if we understand her comment as a metaphor for economic inequality (and, after all, she did not believe that French aristocrats were stronger or cleverer than French peasants!), we can apply it to gender inequality.

230) In particular, she strongly disapproves of the idea that a household or family should be regarded as a unit run by its senior male member, thereby foreshadowing Susan Moller Okin's arguments in *Justice, Gender and the Family* (1989). 'The laws respecting woman, which I mean to discuss in a future part, make an absurd unit of a man and his wife; and then by the easy transition of considering him as responsible, she is reduced to a mere cypher'. (1993: 226) This view of what a family ought not to be entails, amongst other things, that a wife should not, even if she is a mother, derive her independence from her husband: she must have her own. 'But to render her really virtuous and useful she must not, if she discharge her civil duties, want, individually, the protection of civil laws; she must not be dependent on her husband's bounty for her subsistence during his life, or support after his death—for how can a being be generous who has nothing of its own?' (1993: 227)

It also follows that we shouldn't be misled by Wollstonecraft's own desire for financial independence acquired outside marriage into thinking that she somehow looks down on women who are not striving towards the same goal. What she disapproves of are laws and practices which prevent women from being self-sufficient by giving their property and decision making power to their husbands. This need not entail the stronger claim that all women to whom that capacity is restored should strive to earn enough money to support themselves at all costs.

### 3. Feminine Essentialism

Even if Wollstonecraft's proposal that independence be a prerequisite for developing virtues compatible with citizenship does not fall foul of Young's objection, it remains worrying for a different reason. Wollstonecraft believes that men and women should be full citizens. She also believes that there is no such thing as 'feminine virtue'—virtue, like reason, is genderless, and we should look for the same character development in women as in men.<sup>11</sup> Yet, independence, which is supposed

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11 The only difference she grants is in physical strength, but even this, as Adrianna Craciun

to nurture virtue, seems to have different consequences for men and women. Notably, an independent woman will be a better wife and mother: ‘It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree independent of men; nay, it is vain to expect that strength of natural affection which would make them good wives and mothers.’ (1993: 221) This passage in Chapter Nine of the *Vindication* should not be read in isolation as Wollstonecraft also takes care to extol the virtues of fatherhood, and makes it very clear that women cannot become better mothers ‘till men become attentive to the duty of a father’. (1993: 68) However, it seems as if the duties of motherhood are going to be, in Wollstonecraft’s picture, rather heavier than the duties of fatherhood. A father is expected to go to work from morning till evening to support his family (1993: 223) and he should refrain from visiting prostitutes, because that would endanger his family’s health and financial security. (1993: 68) A mother should do somewhat more: ‘The wife, in the present state of things, who is faithful to her husband, and neither suckles nor educates her children, scarcely deserves the name of a wife and has no right to that of a citizen.’ (1993: 227) This is not an isolated point. Just a few paragraphs before she tells us that ‘speaking of woman at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, as citizens, is that which includes so many, of a mother.’ (1993: 226). It is worth noting that both these passages are qualified, the first by ‘in the present state of things’ and the second by ‘speaking of woman at large’. Certainly, Wollstonecraft is not making any universal claim here, and she could easily be read as commenting on the situation of her contemporaries, rather than trying to define womanhood in general. I will come back to this point later in this section.

In the next chapter Wollstonecraft reinforces her argument by

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(Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: A Sourcebook* [Routledge, 2002], p. 83) points out, is always qualified in terms of appearance. It is almost as though Wollstonecraft is keeping her fingers crossed behind her back while telling men they don’t have to worry because they are still superior in some way. See also Sandrine Berges, *The Guidebook to Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Routledge, 2013), pp. 63-66.

claiming that ‘the care of children in their infancy is one of the grand duties annexed to the female character by nature’. (1993: 233) She reiterates this thought in Chapter Thirteen when she says that ‘the rearing of children [...] has justly been insisted on as the peculiar destination of woman’. (1993: 278) This, it seems, goes back on her earlier and often repeated claim that there were no moral differences between men and women, merely physical ones. Of course, nature has made it physically impossible for men to breastfeed infants: but why turn this into a matter of character and duty? Some of the claims Wollstonecraft makes here suggest that she might adhere to a form of feminine essentialism, i.e., that she might believe that there is something fundamental in women’s nature that makes them different from men. For Wollstonecraft, the essence of human nature is reason and the capacity to become virtuous. So to be a successful human being one needs to use reason to acquire knowledge and virtue. And although Wollstonecraft may seem to believe that there is a female essence over and above this human essence, she is adamant that it is neither reason nor the capacity for virtue, which both belong to human nature and are genderless. Instead she claims it is linked to women’s physical nature: women are physically equipped to give birth to children and to breastfeed infants, and from this, Wollstonecraft deduces that they have a naturally derived duty to do so. That she does not argue for this position may indicate that she has not spent a great deal of time analyzing it or attempting to justify it. Rather, it may have struck her as obvious that as women could not help giving birth to babies once they were married, they had a duty to look after them.<sup>12</sup>

How can Wollstonecraft maintain both that the only differences

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<sup>12</sup> One thought which probably would not have occurred to Wollstonecraft, but is helpful here, is that a distinction can and should be made between birthing and mothering. Only women can give birth, but men and women can provide the sort of care that babies and young children need. So the duties of mothers do not derive from their biological capacity to produce babies, but from their taking on the responsibility to look after them. See Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 50-51 for this argument.

between men and women are those of bodily strength and yet, that in order to be virtuous and good citizens women must perform duties that men do not? Three possible explanations come to mind. First, she may be exercising caution in some of her claims so as not to scare off her audience. She is almost certainly weighing her words so as to maximize her chances of her very radical views being heard. By reassuring men that women will still be good wives and mothers if they are educated and granted equal citizen rights, she is making potential allies of them. A second possible explanation is to be found in Chapter Three of the *Vindication*, in which Wollstonecraft defends the view that men and women must share the same virtues i.e., that there is no such thing as a feminine virtue. Here is what she says there: 'Women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfill; but they are human duties, and the principle that should regulate the discharge of them, I sturdily maintain, must be the same.' (1993: 119)

But what, we ask, are *human* duties? One suggestion is that they be contrasted to what she has called elsewhere grand duties i.e., duties that concern our being worthy of the afterlife, divine duties, as it were. Human duties, by contrast, are what one needs to fulfill in order to be a good citizen, in order to make the best one can of this life. This does fit in with the quote at (1993: 226), namely that women's first duty is to live as rational beings, and then to be good mothers in order to be good citizens. It does not fit, however, with Wollstonecraft using the terms 'grand duty' to refer to the mothering of infants at (1993: 233).<sup>13</sup>

For a third and more satisfying explanation of this perceived essentialism, we must turn again to the passages in which Wollstonecraft strongly qualifies claims about the role or nature of women. 'In the present state of things' she says, a woman must be a good wife and mother in order to earn the title of citizen (1993: 227), suggesting that it is a matter of contingency rather than necessity. And it is 'woman at

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13 Brace thinks that the duties of motherhood are characterized as grand duties because they are natural duties (448). That yet another interpretation is possible shows how loosely Wollstonecraft was using the expressions 'grand end' or 'grand duty'.

large' who finds herself landed with the duties of motherhood (1993: 226), again, with an emphasis on the non-absoluteness of the situation. Wollstonecraft's view of motherhood can, therefore, plausibly be read as contingent on what is possible for women in late eighteenth-century England, in which there indeed seems to be very few options available for women to lead a good life which does not involve being primary carers of children.<sup>14</sup> But there is, even in these passages, a very strong suggestion that there might be a different state of things, in which 'woman at large' and not just exceptional individuals, could be citizens without being first mothers. She already does consider that this should be the case for her contemporaries when she remarks that some women will not marry, by choice or necessity, and that the government has a duty to enable them to live useful lives outside of marriage by making it possible for them to enter interesting and challenging professions. (1993: 230)<sup>15</sup> We are unfortunately at a loss when it comes to outlining much of Wollstonecraft's positive proposal for a gender-balanced state. This is because although she intended to write a second volume to her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she never did. She does, however, hint strongly that the second volume was meant to discuss such a positive proposal, stating that it would deal with 'the laws respecting woman'. (1993: 226)<sup>16</sup>

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14 This brings to mind the view held by Ruddick (1989: 41), that 'in most cultures the womanly and the maternal are conceptually and politically linked' and that we cannot 'at will transcend' this division of labour, because it has 'shaped our minds and lives'. It is certainly the case in Wollstonecraft's culture that women do the work of raising children, and, especially given the inevitable confusion of birthing and mothering, Wollstonecraft was not in a position to transcend this prejudice.

15 Of course not being married does not mean that one will not become a mother: indeed Wollstonecraft herself was a single mother to her first daughter. But here we should probably read her as suggesting that those women who chose to remain unmarried will also remain childless. I owe this point to Gökcenur Hazinedar.

16 Wollstonecraft announces in her advertisement that there will be a second volume. That she did not write it is not terribly surprising as she died a mere five years after the publication of the first volume and that in between she spent time in Paris, writing about the revolution, traveled to Scandinavia, to investigate a stolen ship, had two daughters, and twice attempted suicide. She did leave some notes which Godwin published after her death

This third reading of the apparent essentialism in Wollstonecraft's writing makes it less problematic in view of her insistence that women must be independent: in the context of the eighteenth century, independence has to go via motherhood.<sup>17</sup> So let us now turn to the particulars of what Wollstonecraft expects of mothers. By looking further into what the burdens Wollstonecraft lays on women are, we might in particular consider whether some of them might have struck her as a necessary have revised her views if she had known what motherhood could mean in the twenty-first century?

#### 4. The Duty to Suckle

The duty of a mother, Wollstonecraft says, 'includes so many'. The first one according to her must be to suckle one's babies. In the *Vindication* she goes so far as to argue that mothers must breastfeed in order to preserve their children from vice: 'Her parental affection, indeed, can scarcely deserve the name, when it does not lead her to suckle her children, because the discharge of this duty is equally calculated to inspire maternal and filial affection: and it is the indispensable duty of men and women to fulfil the duties which give birth to affections that are the surest preservative against vice. Natural affection, as it is termed, I believe to be a very faint tie, affections must grow out of the habitual exercise of a mutual sympathy; and what sympathy does a mother exercise who sends her babe to a nurse, and only takes it from a nurse to send to school?' (1993: 234) Receiving real affection from one's parents is a good way of not becoming vicious, she says. Presumably she believes

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under the title *Hints* (chiefly designed to have been incorporated in the second half of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*). But these are to scant to give much of an idea of what she might have written. These can be read in Todd and Butler, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Pickering and Chatto, 1989), Volume 5.

17 Again I disagree with Brace's interpretation. She sees Wollstonecraft's attempts at reconciling independence with motherhood as evidence that she is 'trapped by liberal assumptions and traditions' (2000: 446) whereas I believe that she is trying to integrate independence into the actual life conditions of her contemporaries, with the proviso that she hopes these conditions will change, and that she is making an effort to help them change.



that someone who is loved as a child will not be desperately seeking pleasure as an adult—and failing to find it—in vicious practices. This makes a certain amount of sense. But what is more difficult to accept is her linking of women feeding their infants to the giving of affection. This makes more sense in context. It would have been fairly common in the eighteenth century for a well-off mother to send her babies to live with a wet-nurse, not to see them till they were three, and then spend very little time with them, preferring to leave them to the care of servants until they were old enough—particularly if they were boys—to be sent to school. So not feeding one's babies, in many cases, would amount to refusing to give them affection. Mothers, if they cared, would make the mistake of relying on the natural bond between them and their child and be surprised, eighteen years later, to find themselves facing a polite but cold stranger. So Wollstonecraft is probably not attacking women who do not breastfeed as such. In particular, she might well have been understanding of women who, for one reason or another, end up feeding their babies from bottles.

One interesting aspect of Wollstonecraft's view is that it is also teleological: she thinks women are designed to fare better if they are good mothers. For instance, breastfeeding means that women will be healthier and have less crowded families, because they are not fertile whilst they are breastfeeding and therefore cannot become pregnant again as soon as they have given birth.<sup>18</sup> This is roughly right, but there are exceptions and reservations. Breastfeeding is not the healthiest option for all women. It can in fact be extremely painful and lead to

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18 Brace reads rather more than I do in Wollstonecraft's claim that breast-feeding is advantageous to women, as she claims that it can 'help women to escape from the traps set for them by patriarchy. It releases them from being caught in the present; it provides them with an active rationality which is neither "brutish" nor masculine, and it allows them to find a course between slavery and tyranny. Maternal solicitude can make women whole by uniting reason and affection, bringing together her person and her body. It also gives women a place in the world, the potential to be recognized by others as a self-conscious being'. (2000: 450) It is not surprising then, that Brace finds Wollstonecraft's solution to paternalism not entirely satisfying (2000: 453).

children not feeding enough if they don't latch on properly. And while feeding a child for two years may ensure a space of nearly three years between each birth, this may also place a burden on a woman's health, cause her, at the very least to have back ache, which will worsen with every child and make her household and childcare work more difficult and painful. Unfortunately Wollstonecraft's ideal of the healthy, muscular woman cannot be realized for everyone: not all women have the same natural propensity towards health and strength, and some will suffer from giving birth and suckling their infants, no matter what Wollstonecraft tells us. She is also highly critical of aristocratic women's habits, such as drinking, and the diseases they have contracted through libertinage, which makes them incapable of producing healthy milk for their children. But what would she say of women who are taking medications which prevent them from breastfeeding? Would her faith in nature's designs be shaken by this? It is hard to tell, but one might surmise that she might be willing to revise some of her views, at least as far as allowing exceptions is concerned.

Wollstonecraft's very demanding claims about parenting are worrying enough, however, there is worse: Wollstonecraft does not trust nature to enforce its own rules, but believes that society should ensure that nature's dictates are observed: 'I mean therefore to infer that the society is not properly organized which does not compel men and women to discharge their respective duties, by making it the only way to acquire that countenance from their fellow-creatures, which every human being wishes some way to attain.' (1993: 222) She appears to believe that society should be so organized that a woman who chooses not to breastfeed her babies herself should be shunned by others. It is not entirely clear that she believes that this should be legislated for, but given her reference to the proper organization of society, it is likely that she meant this. This way of thinking is obviously problematic from a feminist perspective in that it puts women at a disadvantage by forcing them to use their bodies for the welfare of others for an extended period of time after each birth—as long as two years. Women of Wollstonecraft's

time could not choose not to get pregnant if they were married as contraception was neither reliable, nor very much used. Wollstonecraft suggests that by breast-feeding infants they could make the intervals between pregnancies longer, but that means replacing one physically demanding job with another. In other words, Wollstonecraft is demanding of women that they perform a physically demanding job of the kind that their husband will never have to do whether they choose to or not.

Wollstonecraft is not the only philosopher to believe that women should be forced to breast-feed. Aristotle, in Book VII of the *Politics*<sup>19</sup> states that the lifestyle of pregnant women (diet and exercise) as well as the rearing of infants should be legislated for. (1335b14-1336a1) More recently, philosophers have debated whether women should be obliged by law to breastfeed their children, contrasting women's rights to choose how they use their body to the rights of infants to receive benefits of breast milk.<sup>20</sup> In some countries, this is actually legislated for, as for example in Indonesia, where women who do not breastfeed their children up to the age of six months face a fine of seven thousand pounds. It is clear that Wollstonecraft's thoughts on this would not be rejected by all.

One reason why women nowadays might reject the claim that they have a duty to breastfeed their children is that this would be incompatible with their career. Of course, women do have alternatives to

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19 Aristotle's *Politics* might well have been an inspiration for some of Wollstonecraft's views. Natalie F. Taylor, in her excellent discussion of Aristotelianism and Lockeanism in Wollstonecraft cites evidence that Wollstonecraft was familiar with at least some of the *Politics*. She points out that in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft challenges Burke by suggesting, rightly, that he is quoting a misleading extract from the *Politics*, where Aristotle says that a democracy has points in common with a tyranny. N.F. Taylor, *The Rights of Woman as Chimera* (Routledge, 2007), p. 8. This passage makes it plausible either that Wollstonecraft had access to the 1598 translation of the *Politics*, or that she had taken part in some extensive discussions of this text with her more learned friends. This would not have made her an expert on Aristotle, but certainly she would have been conversant with his arguments.

20 For instance, see Roache's 2010 discussion 'Is it criminal not to breast-feed?' <http://blog.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/2010/08/is-it-criminal-not-to-breastfeed/>

breastfeeding which do not involve sending their children away to live with a wet-nurse for two years. We can feed children formula milk, specially designed to meet infants' nutritional requirements, or we can express our milk (provided our employers allow us sufficient time, comfort and privacy to do so) so that that others can bottle feed our children. These options simply did not exist in the eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

If there was no possibility of equalizing parenting by sharing the feeding of infants, there were, however, other tasks for fathers to perform in return for mothers breastfeeding infants. Wollstonecraft suggested that men had a duty to work in order to support their family. (1993: 223) However, the offer of financial support in exchange for raising children is often perceived as unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. First, women may prefer to earn a living and be part of the professional world than stay at home with children. Secondly, the spending power often belongs by default to the person who earns it, and so does consequently the decision making power. This means that being supported by one's husband is not truly a financial compensation. Thirdly, those who don't work outside the home typically don't take part in politics, and are under-represented. Fourth, men do actually miss out on not being part of their children's lives as they grow and develop if they are never at home during the day time.

The second and third worry seem to be taken care of if I am right that Wollstonecraft believes that the government should ensure that women who stay at home to raise children should receive some sort of protection—depending, of course, on what form that protections takes in practice. Also relevant is her statement 'that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government.' (1993: 228) This means that women are instrumental in choosing the ways in which they are protected as carers.

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21 The extraction of breast-milk through mechanical pumps or by hand became a recognized practice for the feeding of infants in the mid-nineteenth century: (J. Lepore, 'Baby Food', *The New Yorker*, January 19 2009).

## 5. Working mothers

In this section, I want to show how in the story she tells, women would not miss out on a richer life by staying at home to care for children, but that on the contrary, such a life would afford them valuable opportunities of the kind that their working husbands could only dream of.

Wollstonecraft by no means limits her discussion of women's place in society to the roles of being a wife and a mother. In fact, she suggests very strongly that for a woman who does not need to do all the work in her home herself, a woman who can afford servants, it is not enough that she should be a wife and a mother. Society ought to afford her more opportunities to make herself useful. Women, she says

might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses. And midwifery, decency seems to allot to them, though I am afraid the word midwife, in our dictionaries, will soon give place to accoucheur. (1993: 229)

So not only are there insufficient professions open to women, but some are to be taken from them—midwives' jobs, she predicts, will go to men, men with a fancy French appellation, which no doubt makes them seem more professional, hence more trustworthy.<sup>22</sup> This is particularly interesting in the light of the recent movement towards having only midwives present at birth, or in some cases, doulas, trained birth-partners. Replacing midwives by male doctors does not just take a profession away from women, it also puts men in control of yet another aspect of women's lives. No wonder Wollstonecraft is displeased.

She continues to suggest that women 'might, also, study politics', that they could be put in charge of 'businesses of various kinds'. All these choices would be better, she says than what is currently available, namely marrying for the sake of financial support, prostitution (which is a version of the same), or joining the thousands of women ruining their

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<sup>22</sup> In fact from the 1720s it had become a fairly common practice in at least some parts of England to call a 'man-midwife' in case of emergencies or difficult births, and by the 1770s man-midwives also commonly attended normal births. See Adrian Wilson, *The Making of Man-midwifery: Childbirth in England, 1660-1770* (Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 164-165.

eyesights sewing for a living, or again, Wollstonecraft's own bugbear, choosing a profession that offers very few rewards of any kind, i.e., that of a governess.

She is very clear that a woman must have a place in society, whether or not she is married, and that no one should have to marry if they do not want to. (1993: 250)<sup>23</sup> Although she may feel that a mother who does not take care of her children does not deserve the title of citizen, she does not believe that all women have a duty to become mothers. One wonders what she would have thought had she known it would one day be the case that fathers could look after babies while mothers went to work. It seems she would have applauded that for she clearly does not believe that women's nature predisposes them solely for motherhood:

How many women thus waste their life away the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry, instead of hanging their heads surcharged with the dew of sensibility, that consumes the beauty to which it at first gave lustre. (1993: 230)

Whatever Wollstonecraft believes about the duties of a mother, she clearly does not think that woman's nature stops at motherhood, and she strongly believes in women having a set of real alternatives to marriage. This is consistent with her claim that woman's first duty is to herself as a rational being.

But despite this and her emphasis on the need for financial independence for women, and the idea that more professions should be open to them, the question of how much responsibility towards childcare should fall to the working mother is one that Wollstonecraft considers very little. In fact, she does not discuss in this respect the plight of working-class mothers, as we saw, and has very little to say that would be useful for the modern working mother. One thing she does suggest,

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<sup>23</sup> Here again I disagree with Brace who claims that Wollstonecraft 'sees the sexual contract as a universal problem for all women, regardless of race or class, which means that she imposes a single solution on all women' (2000: 454). That she several times includes a proviso such as 'in the current state of things' and 'most women' and that she specifies that marriage is not desirable for all women clearly shows that this is not the case.

though is that mothers may have the opportunity to engage in intellectually rewarding activities if they go about their duty well: 'And did they pursue a plan of conduct, and not waste their times in following the fashionable vagaries of dress, the management of their household and children need not shut them out from literature, nor prevent their attaching themselves to a science, with that steady eye which strengthens the mind, or practicing one of the fine arts that cultivate the taste.' (1993: 280) In other words, whether or not mothers can work, they can become writers, scientists and artists. This presents a stark contrast to what was commonly regarded as suitable for a married woman i.e., the exercise of accomplishments such as amateur drawing, painting and music. Women were expected to dabble in the arts, but not to become proficient. What Wollstonecraft is suggesting here is quite different and is an interesting consequence of the requirement that women should be free and educated, but responsible for children and household. Once the children are old enough to go to school, a woman who has some help with housework will have more free time than her husband who has to go out to work. She will, given her education, be able to use that time to conduct research just as an educated man of leisure might. In Wollstonecraft's world, the scientists, the artists and the writers will be women more often than men who in this picture, have to work in order to earn a living. Nor is this simply idle speculation: when a few years after writing the *Vindication*, she became a mother herself, Wollstonecraft carried on pursuing her career as a writer, producing an account of the French revolution written according to research she conducted while residing in Paris during the Terror while pregnant with her first child. Her *Letters from Sweden and Norway*, published in 1796, were written during a trip she undertook to these countries on an expedition to investigate the loss of her lover's ship, accompanied by her then toddler and a nanny.<sup>24</sup> Wollstonecraft is quite right to insist that being a mother does not necessarily preclude producing work of distinction.

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24 The letters can be read in Volume 6 of Todd and Butler (1989).

But what Wollstonecraft does not take into account, is that some working mothers will have much less flexible lives, and no time for reading, let alone writing, because they will still be responsible for their household and childcare. Her picture of the savant mother belongs squarely to the middle and upper classes. An Eighteenth Century working class mother who has to earn a living will never find the time for artistic, literary or scientific pursuits. And indeed, as Wollstonecraft herself informs us (1993: 253), these women's formal education will have stopped at the age of nine, so they would be in no way prepared for such pursuits, even if they had the time for them. This exclusion is somewhat surprising as Wollstonecraft seems very aware, throughout the book of the plight of the working women, and tends to praise them in comparison to middle class women who could claim their freedom but choose to remain in their gilded cages. She in fact knew from experience that working-class women had no time to devote to anything other than their work and family, having lived with the family of her friend Frances Blood, and observed how her friend's mother and herself worked from dawn till well into the night, sewing and embroidering, just to make ends meet, and received no help financially or otherwise from the father who could not keep a job, and did not regard it as his responsibility, as a man, to do household work. Wollstonecraft could not have expected women like this to become artists, writers or scientists.<sup>25</sup>

That Wollstonecraft does not consider in this discussion that motherhood means something very different for middle-class, aristocratic women on the one hand, and lower class women on the other, means that she also probably cannot provide a great insight on the condition of working mothers nowadays.<sup>26</sup> Twenty-first century women who have received a higher education tend not to decide to stay

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25 And yet, her friend Frances Blood was an artist, and made part of her living by selling botanical drawings. But this was hand to mouth living, and she did not have the leisure to experiment with her art, working only on what she sold.

26 Brace (2000: 435): 'She also fails to recognize that the tensions between motherhood and citizenship affect middle-class and working-class women in different ways.'



at home and look after their children while at the same time exercising their higher faculties by becoming artists, writers or scientists. Some do, of course, but in general, neither women nor men feel that their intellectual lives will be best fulfilled by becoming a scientist in their spare times. This is an eighteenth century ideal that no longer operates. Scientists work in labs, not homes. Science is a profession, not a hobby. And although art and literature are more likely to be perceived as hobbies, the production of artistically valuable works is seen as a full time occupation.<sup>27</sup>

The way in which a lot of people do try and fulfill their intellectual lives is through their professional lives: people who have studied tend to want interesting jobs, which will engage them intellectually, force them to use the skills they have acquired and develop new ones, present a challenge. It is often a complaint of mothers who end up staying at home to look after children that they do not find their lives challenging enough, that although they are sometimes hard, they are not interesting, consisting mostly of changing nappies, going to doctors' appointments, etc. Of course some women find that raising a child presents interesting challenges in itself. That was certainly the case for Wollstonecraft who drew on her experiences with her first born to write a manual of child rearing.<sup>28</sup> But Wollstonecraft was always fascinated with education—not everybody is, and many women may fail to be stimulated by a baby's daily progress. These women will probably long to go back to work, to an

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27 There are of course exceptions: best-selling writer Stephenie Meyer claims the idea for the *Twilight* book series came to her in a dream, and that she worked out the plot 'between swimming lessons and potty training', writing it out late at night when everyone was asleep. But she herself probably would not describe her works as great literature. And she would certainly not claim that this is a reliable way of producing works of art. Her example is perhaps one of how inspiration can strike in the most unlikely circumstances and how determination can overcome the greatest obstacles. As far as scientific pursuits are concerned, the cases that match most closely what Wollstonecraft may have had in mind is that of software developers, who write code in their spare time. But it is quite clear that nobody in their right mind would choose motherhood as a way into literature, art or science.

28 *Lessons* (1798) in Volume 4 of Todd and Butler (1989).

environment in which they can make use of the skills and abilities they have developed throughout their studies and early career. These women may, if they are lucky, find the fulfillment they seek by going back to work. But for many of them, no longer being able to look after their baby will cause them to feel guilty, even if only because this is what society is expecting them to feel.

Some women choose to go back to work, but, increasingly, many women, from middle-class as well as working-class background, have no such choice: they have to go back to work in order to earn enough money to support their family. And this work is not always rewarding, so the fact that Wollstonecraft is ignoring the plight of the working mothers when she considers how fulfilling an educated mother's life may be, is even more problematic as far as we are concerned. A large number of working mothers are not fulfilled, and have, somehow, to find the time and energy to care for their children, and look after the house. Part of the answer to this problem is, of course, that fathers need to take equal responsibility for household and childcare duty, and that we need to move away from Wollstonecraft's attribution of these duties to women. There is nothing natural about a couple coming home from a day's work, the man sitting down to read the paper while the woman cleans the house, puts the children to bed and prepares dinner—not unless we are prepared to think that women have vastly superior bodily strength than men i.e., deny the one superiority Wollstonecraft grants men have, and reverse it. But there is no other way of explaining the attitude that, after a day's work, men need to rest, but women must carry on working.

## 6. Conclusion: Equal parenting

The conclusion which I wish to draw, is obvious; make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives and mothers; that is—if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers. (1993: 265)

Despite the fact that Wollstonecraft expects so much more from mothers than she does from fathers, it is fair to say, I think, that she was of the

opinion that effective parenting had to be co-parenting. Men and women come together as parents, she says. This is where true marital affection is formed, in the joint love, and concern parents feel for their off-springs. There is no better illustration of what Wollstonecraft had in mind than the text she wrote for her own daughter, in which she describes the interaction of a child with her parents. This text, published by Godwin under the title 'Lessons' in 1798 was either written as a legacy for her first daughter before one of her suicide attempts, or when she was pregnant with her second daughter. Either way, she did not have time to finish it. The lessons consist first of words to learn and simple acts of hygiene and social interactions. Later, they place great emphasis on the development of reasoning skills. But they also always reflect Wollstonecraft's idea of what a family should be like, one in which the parents love, respect, and help one another. When the mother is working, or has a headache, the child is taught to seek her father, and to ask him, quietly, to play ball in the garden. When the father is sick, or asleep—Godwin suffered from narcolepsia—the child comes with her mother to bring him chamomile tea, or tiptoes and whispers so as not to wake him. What Wollstonecraft describes here seems like a very modern relationship, in which parents are equally concerned about the development and well-being of their child, as well as each other's well-being.

One must not forget, also that in the Wollstonecraft/Godwin family, both parents were professionals, each bringing a much needed income for the family's expenses. Their respect of each other's working life was marked by their keeping separate homes even after they were married, so they would each be able to go about their own work without having to make accommodations for the other (although of course, Wollstonecraft had her daughter with her and Godwin hence, had more freedom). Such arrangements were highly unusual for their time, and Wollstonecraft was right to state that 'women in the common walks of life are called upon to fulfill the duties of wives and mothers' and that only 'women of a superior cast' would want to pursue 'more extensive plans of usefulness

and independence.’ (1993: 228) So her picture of what a common marriage should be like—the wife at home nursing her children, keeping her house neat with the help of just one servant, greeting her husband when he comes home weary after a hard day’s work (1993: 223)—has little in common with the picture we have of her own marriage. But it is significant that her discussions of what a marriage should be like, what men and women should be brought to seek and expect, and what governments should support, can be accommodated to fit in both with the ‘common’ marriage, and the union of ‘superior women’ such as herself. That most women will choose to be only wives and mothers is not a natural necessity according to Wollstonecraft—but it is the most likely outcome for most of her middle-class contemporaries. It follows that much of what she says that a feminist nowadays might find objectionable is simply the result of an effort to instill progress in her contemporaries’ social and political arrangements, not aiming for a revolution because habits are hard to break, but progressive change over several generations (1993: 148): ‘who can tell, how many generations may be necessary to give vigour to the virtue and talents of the freed posterity of abject slaves?’<sup>29</sup>

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