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## **‘Seeing through a glass darkly’: Wollstonecraft and the Confinements of Eighteenth-Century Femininity**

By Naomi Jayne Garner

### **Abstract**

This essay applies Luce Irigaray’s theories of the speculum and subversive mimesis to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. I argue that Wollstonecraft reveals the limitations of eighteenth-century femininity by using her text as a mirror that distorts and also reflects the image of womanhood at the men who have prescribed an idealised version of femininity. Anticipating Irigaray, Wollstonecraft exposes and undermines this male ideal through mimicry of the masculine position. I begin by assessing modern interpretations of Wollstonecraft’s feminism, her characterisation as a masculine writer and how this can be viewed as a deliberate feminist tactic on her part. I analyse the way in which she deliberately mimics male writers such as Edmund Burke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau before focusing on her specific use of the word beauty. I argue that in the *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft carefully chooses words that are closely connected to women in male discourse but also common in other topics of male interest such as botany and royalty. Through a process of associative organisation, surrounding the keyword ‘beauty’, Wollstonecraft repeatedly uses and mimics male discourse to subvert the logic and reveal the inconsistencies behind the insistence on a specific sort of femininity in the eighteenth century. I conclude that Wollstonecraft is seeking, through this technique, an eradication of sexual difference in the hope of re-invigorating an otherwise barren social system.

*Key Words:* Mary Wollstonecraft, Luce Irigaray, Mimesis

### **Introduction**

In Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, she paraphrases a Biblical quote: “we shall no longer see as through a glass darkly, but know, even as we are known”,<sup>1</sup> echoing I Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see through a glass, darkly...now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known.” The image of the mirror has been frequently used in feminist theory to describe the female as a looking glass, as trapped inside a looking glass, or as situated in the realm beyond or through the glass like the infamous Alice. This essay explores Wollstonecraft’s interest in women as confined objects of men’s pleasure, reflecting an idealised male construction, and the ways in which this idealisation can be undermined by subversive mimesis.

Wollstonecraft’s feminist tract, the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) reveals that the men of Wollstonecraft’s eighteenth-century society ought to see, in the female mirror they have created, their own image reflected very darkly indeed. The “artificial, weak characters” of women that Wollstonecraft describes, are the handiwork of men and their ideals.<sup>2</sup> To illuminate the responsibility of men for what Wollstonecraft

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, ‘Thoughts on the Education of Daughters’ (1787), *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. J. Todd and M. Butler, 7 vols. (London: William Pickering, 1989), IV, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Wollstonecraft, ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Woman’ (1792), *Works*, V, p. 84. All subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text as *Rights of Woman*

sees as women's degradation in the *Rights of Woman* I argue that she works from a stance that foreshadows that of Luce Irigaray's 'speculum'. Irigaray's speculum or mirror reflects the world back at itself revealing, in its necessary reversal and distortion of the image it receives, the limitations of accepted modes of living and interacting. While Wollstonecraft does not use her metaphorical mirror to revolutionise the social structure through a celebration of sexual difference as Irigaray does, in the *Rights of Woman* she does play on her gendered position as object as opposed to subject, by reflecting, revealing and finally undermining the male through mimicry of the masculine position. This essay will begin by examining the way in which the principles of Irigaray's speculum can be applied to an analysis of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*, before moving on to an examination of the ways in which Wollstonecraft uses mimesis to reveal the inconsistencies of male prescription of eighteenth-century femininity.

### **Wollstonecraft, Irigaray and Mimetic Feminism**

While a number of different theories have arisen concerning the nature of Wollstonecraft's feminism, critics return again and again to her 'masculine' approach and her adoption of 'manly' tendencies. The reiteration of Wollstonecraft's masculinity is wary, as if her critics are not sure whether this approach should be praised as revolutionary for its time or looked upon nostalgically as a mode of feminism long outdated. This wariness is captured by Poovey when she comments that Wollstonecraft allies "herself with the individualistic values of middle-class men...heaping scorn on the posture of helplessness, which she can see only as weakness and personal failure".<sup>3</sup> Tauchert adds to this when commenting that Wollstonecraft "recoils from 'feminine' writing",<sup>4</sup> and Taylor emphasises the importance of masculinity to Wollstonecraft's particular sort of feminism: "Manliness was intrinsic to the serious mind...whatever the sex of its possessor".<sup>5</sup> The wariness of these critics in relation to Wollstonecraft's masculinity may, however, seem less significant if we consider instead that Wollstonecraft was using a masculine stance to explore how best to change people's habits of mind within an unaltered social structure. By adopting and, at times, agreeing with a traditionally masculine posture and position in the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft works to undermine it. She claims that it is the language of men "which robs the whole [female] sex of its dignity" (*Rights of Woman*, 122), and so uses that same language to reveal men's own indignity and insufficiencies through her argument. Poovey and Reiss both touch on this mimetic tendency in Wollstonecraft's work. Poovey writes that in the *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft demonstrates that,

Arguments about women's "natural" inferiority...are only men's rationalizations for the superior social position they have unjustifiably seized, and their talk of "natural" female wantonness is merely a cover for the sexual appetite that men both fear and relish in themselves.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer. Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Ashley Tauchert, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Accent of the Feminine* (Palgrave, 2002), p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Poovey, p. 71.

Reiss describes Wollstonecraft's "overt acceptance but implicit rejection of women's cultural subordination".<sup>7</sup> By applying a theory of subversive mimesis, based on Irigaray's *speculum*, it becomes clear that in Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* she deliberately uses mimicry to reflect men back at themselves, slightly distorted, to reveal their inadequacies and unjust subjectivity.

According to Irigaray, men have created their vision or idea of women in the image of themselves (continuing the Biblical and patriarchal discourse of Genesis): "Man seeks her out, since he has inscribed her in discourse, but as lack, as fault or flaw",<sup>8</sup> a traditional discourse that Wollstonecraft had rejected in *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect it has Produced in Europe* (1794):

We must get entirely clear of all notions drawn from the wild traditions of original sin: the eating of the apple, the theft of Prometheus, the opening of Pandora's box, and the other fables, too tedious to enumerate on.<sup>9</sup>

Women have traditionally been perceived as an empty sheet of glass waiting to be filled and inscribed with the image of a man.<sup>10</sup> However, it is this lack that is particularly appealing to men because the empty glass can be filled with their own image and hence the female becomes nothing more than a means of reflecting and confirming male identity, as Irigaray articulates: "Enjoying a woman, amounts then, for a man, to reappropriating for himself the unconscious that he has lent her."<sup>11</sup> This is a sentiment that is foreshadowed by Wollstonecraft when she comments that,

...the fanciful female character, so prettily drawn by poets and novelists, demanding the sacrifice of truth and sincerity, virtue becomes a relative idea, having no other foundation than utility, and of that utility men pretend arbitrarily to judge, shaping it to their own convenience. (*Rights of Woman*, 120)

Irigaray argues that to break this circle of male dominance and subjectivity, the feminine needs to be reappropriated and revealed as a male-constructed concept, a game of "make-believe" that is ultimately destructive to both sexes.<sup>12</sup> To do this, she argues that women need to resubmit "to the concept of femininity in order to mimic men" by using "playful repetition"; a woman should imitate a man to reveal that the negative views held about women are mere fabrications.<sup>13</sup> This imitation does not have to be completely accurate;

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy J. Reiss, 'Revolution in Bounds: Wollstonecraft, Women and Reason' in *Gender and Theory. Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, ed. L. Kauffman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. 11-50 (15).

<sup>8</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'Cosi Fan Tutti' in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Translated by C. Porter with C. Burke (Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 86-105 (89).

<sup>9</sup> Wollstonecraft, 'An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution' (1794), *Works*, VI, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Irigaray, 'The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine' in *Literary Theory: An Anthology, Revised Edition*, pp. 57-573 (571).

<sup>11</sup> Irigaray, 'Cosi Fan Tutti' in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), Translated by G. C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Irigaray, 'The Power of Discourse' in *Literary Theory: An Anthology, Revised Edition*, p. 570.

indeed, it is more successful when mimicry is not entirely faithful because it reveals further nuances and inconsistencies within male ideology.

Wollstonecraft submits to the masked surface of the glass, purposely imitating and reflecting men to reveal that, “Wicked women, and their invidious effects, are men’s handiwork”.<sup>14</sup> Her use of mimesis is often very direct. It could be argued, for example, that Wollstonecraft’s earlier *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), in its entirety, is an exercise in subversive mimesis. The *Rights of Men* is Wollstonecraft’s response to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790), a work which prophesied danger and chaos in France as a result of the overthrow of the aristocracy. Wollstonecraft, a member of the liberal reform circle in London, responded by rejecting Burke’s philosophy as elitist. Her method throughout the work was to repeatedly quote from Burke’s *Reflections*, but to manipulate the meaning of those quotes. In his *Reflections*, when describing the “barbarous philosophy”<sup>15</sup> that was overtaking the French nation, he predicts that “All homage paid to the [female] sex” will be “regarded as romance and folly”.<sup>16</sup> In reply, Wollstonecraft quotes this, prefacing it with a seeming acquiescence to his opinion: “I will still further accede to the opinion you have so justly conceived of the spirit of this age”, before quoting Burke out of context and then concluding with,

Undoubtedly; because such homage vitiates them, prevents their endeavouring to obtain solid personal merit; and, in short, makes those beings vain inconsiderable dolls, who ought to be prudent mothers and useful members of society.<sup>17</sup>

Wollstonecraft mimics Burke in order to undermine his philosophy by refusing to be faithful to his original meaning, and playfully isolates his statements to ridicule what she perceived as his seduction by and romantic fondness for women in general, and Marie Antoinette in particular. Burke ‘sees through a glass darkly’, according to Wollstonecraft, because his vision is clouded and confined by lust and a liking for fine appearances and surface charms, which Wollstonecraft reveals as being wholly inadequate and destructive of female sense and usefulness.

### **Wollstonecraft, Rousseau and the Chimera of Womanhood**

Throughout the *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft is direct in her use of mimesis. Her chapter, ‘Animadversions on Some of the Writers Who Have Rendered Women Objects of Pity, Bordering on Contempt’ is devoted to subversive mimesis. Wollstonecraft quotes and then attacks a wide range of authors in this chapter, including Dr. Fordyce, Dr. Gregory and Lord Chesterfield. However, the particular author she targets in the *Rights of Woman* is Rousseau and she uses the same technique to undermine his philosophy on women as she had used with Burke in her *Rights of Men*.

In *Emile* (1762), Rousseau had claimed that in love everything is an illusion, it is a “chimera, deception, and dream” and states, “We are more in love with the image we

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), second edition (London: J. Dodsley, Pall Mall, 1790), p. 115.

<sup>16</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, p. 117.

<sup>17</sup> Wollstonecraft, ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Men’ (1790), *Works*, V, p. 25. All subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text as *Rights of Men*.

frame to our minds, than with the object to which it is applied".<sup>18</sup> Wollstonecraft echoes Rousseau in the *Rights of Woman* by describing the "wild chimeras" and "irrational monster[s]" (*Rights of Woman*, 108; 113) that Rousseau's vision has helped to create. She describes the "disjointed parts" of women and the "factitious character which an improper education and the selfish vanity of beauty had produced" (*Rights of Woman*, 154; 245). Wollstonecraft, by reflecting a distorted version of Rousseau's view, reveals his destructive love for his own creation (rather Frankenstein-like, ironically). She describes women as incomplete creatures made of many parts and reveals that Rousseau's fear of a love that has an object other than the self has created the depraved and sexualised monster of womanhood (*Rights of Woman*, 168). This monster, according to Wollstonecraft, is both enticing and self-destructive. Rousseau's ideal is "beautiful, innocent, and silly" but her understanding is sacrificed and there is nothing left behind once the bloom of beauty has passed (*Rights of Woman*, 158). Wollstonecraft argues that Rousseau likens women to Narcissus who wasted away gazing at his own image in a pool, before finally becoming a "fragile flower".<sup>19</sup> Women are reduced to the insignificant by men's projected objectification of an imaginary ideal on to them. In her rebuttal to Rousseau, Wollstonecraft therefore comes uncannily close to Irigaray's description of the game of sexual difference:

Between the "obsessive" on this side, who wants and demands and repeats, and turns around and around in his original desire, which he claims to master in order, finally, to establish his omnipotence, and the "hysteric" on the other side, who drifts aimlessly, wanting nothing, no longer knowing her own mind or desire, acting "as I" or "as you like it," her body the only reminder of what has been.<sup>20</sup>

Real women, as opposed to chaste coquettes, no longer exist and this is a further reason why Wollstonecraft focuses on women as mirrors, their surface image and its inadequacies. It is the horror and monstrosity of these that will have the most impact, rather than an explication on how women could un-confine themselves and seek autonomy. Wollstonecraft needs women to be entrapped objects to make her reiterated and main point of the *Rights of Woman*: it is not women who are weak and vain by nature, but men who have made them so.

### **Mimicking Beauty**

Fletcher has commented that "in women's writings we find many examples of how they could turn constraints into permissions"<sup>21</sup> and this is, in effect, what Wollstonecraft does by maintaining the female position of the mirror that reflects men. Throughout the *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft takes familiar words and concepts from masculine discourse and then subverts them through association, juxtaposition and contrast to illuminate the inconsistencies in male logic concerning women when it is

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emilius; or, An Essay on Education*, Translated by Mr. Nugent, 2 vols. (London: Printed for J. Nourse and P. Vaillant, in the Strand, 1763), II, p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> Wollstonecraft, 'The Wrongs of Woman; Or, Maria' (published posthumously, 1798), I, p. 95 All subsequent references are to this edition, incorporated in the text as *Maria*.

<sup>20</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (Yale University Press, 1995), p. 411.

compared to their logic in other fields of interest. In keeping with her focus on surface images and impressions, beauty is a recurring word throughout the *Rights of Woman* that Wollstonecraft uses to subtly subvert accepted male ideology. Men, according to Wollstonecraft, have turned women into the vain slaves of their mirrors, the woman's only power and influence being in and over her appearance. Wollstonecraft therefore reflects back to men the beauty-obsessed monster they have created, by revealing that it is their own double standards, lust and superficiality that have resulted in the degradation of the female.

As a term to base a subtle form of mimesis around, 'beauty' is particularly appropriate. Jones describes beauty in the eighteenth century as "an ambiguous oscillation of terms and meanings" with a "high degree of diversity of application".<sup>22</sup> In the eighteenth century Edmund Burke, William Hogarth and Joseph Spence all explored and attempted to define beauty.<sup>23</sup> It was a loaded term in male (and female) discourse and Wollstonecraft exploits this ambiguity. In the *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft describes beauty as "dimly seen" and throughout her work it has a variety of meanings and implications: artificial, corrupting, alluring, dangerous, and elevated, intellectual, moral, and divine (*Rights of Woman*, 100). She juxtaposes "intellectual beauty" with "artificial notions of beauty", the "beauty of moral loveliness" with the "beauty of features and complexion" (*Rights of Woman*, 116, 112, 219, 138). However, what is key to Wollstonecraft's use of subversive mimesis is her connection of beauty with other words and concepts drawn from familiar masculine discourse. Jones comments that it is possible to see "how a focus on eighteenth-century discussions of the beautiful can highlight the term's participation, as a keyword, within a wide variety of apparently divergent or merely coincidental areas"<sup>24</sup> and for Wollstonecraft what was significant was what these associations then revealed about male ideology concerning women. Through "associative organisation"<sup>25</sup> Wollstonecraft mimics men and their interests to reveal the illogical, inconsistent and ultimately corrupting nature of their insistence on a specific type of physically appealing femininity.

### Botanical Mimesis

In Chapter Nine of the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft writes:

Men are not aware of the misery they cause, and the vicious weakness they cherish, by only inclining women to render themselves pleasing; they do not consider, that they thus make natural and artificial duties clash, by sacrificing the comfort and respectability of a woman's life to voluptuous notions of beauty, when in nature they all harmonize. (*Rights of Woman*, 212)

The corruption of nature through the male insistence on a specific sort of female physical beauty recurs in the *Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft relies on the association of women

<sup>22</sup> Robert W. Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> See Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (1757), William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), and Joseph Spence, *A Dialogue on Beauty* (1752).

<sup>24</sup> Jones, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Poovey, p. 84.

with flowers to tap into the contemporary and popular botanical discourse to reflect the corrupting and dangerous favouring of physical artifice in women. Botany was an area of growing interest in the eighteenth century. A number of scientific botanical gardens were established including the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew and the Jardin du Roi in Paris. Following this trend, associated with the word 'beauty' in the *Rights of Woman* are a number of references to flowers, propagation, and cultivation. Seeds and plants, especially exotic ones, became a form of currency in the eighteenth century as objects of exchange and symbols of status, and it is easy to see why Wollstonecraft would consequently draw the comparison between plants and women who, in Wollstonecraft's opinion, were the objects of exchange in the marriage market between men: "Girls are sacrificed to family convenience" (*Rights of Men*, 23).

Over the course of the century there was a growing interest in exotic species of plants, an interest that Rousseau partook in, and Wollstonecraft consequently exploits. Using botanical language as a way to mimic male discourse and reflect male inconsistencies, Wollstonecraft reveals that the male insistence on female delicacy and helplessness seduces and entraps women in a male dream of beauty. Women have become languishing "exotics" who, confined to "flowery bed[s]...supinely sleep life away" (*Rights of Woman*, 105; 191). Wollstonecraft echoes Rousseau who described exotic double flowers as "monsters deprived of the faculty of producing their life with which nature has endowed all organized beings".<sup>26</sup> Wollstonecraft questions why Rousseau can feel pity for plants and yet will not acknowledge or permit women to have the status of "organized beings" who ought to be able to produce their own life rather than follow a male dictated pattern. She accuses men like Rousseau and Burke for having sown the seeds of moral and sexual depravity which have seduced men and women alike:

I know that it will take a considerable length of time to eradicate the firmly rooted prejudices which sensualists have planted; it will also require some time to convince women that they act contrary to their real interest on an enlarged scale, when they cherish or affect weakness under the name of delicacy, and to convince the world that the poisoned source of female vices and follies...has been the sensual homage paid to beauty. (*Rights of Woman*, 116)

Wollstonecraft describes the "sensualists" as though they were the errant gardeners and cultivators who Rousseau, elsewhere, disapproves of. Wollstonecraft also reveals the monstrous nature of the sexual depravity to which the "homage" paid to surface beauty leads. The female flowers, static and trapped in their flowery beds, conjure an erotic image of women as sexually available objects, languishing for fulfilment. This imagery is not only playing on the contemporary male discourse and debates on botanical cultivation and propagation of exotic plants, it also imitates the metaphor of the female as a flower, which had a long history in the literature of men. The helpless female flower, confined in her flower bed, and the eroticism this suggests, draws, in part, on the medieval tradition of *The Romance of the Rose* where the female flower waits passively for her lover and succumbs to seduction. The rather overt sexuality required of the delicate female flowers, however, is ultimately destructive.

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Botanical Writings' in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Translated by A. Cook, ed. C. Kelly, 11 vols. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), VIII, p. 156.

By describing women as languishing “exotics” that are “reckoned beautiful flaws in nature” in the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft is mocking Rousseau’s description of Emile’s ideal wife, Sophia (*Rights of Woman*, 105). She considers Rousseau’s presentation of Sophia to be “nonsense”, an artificial construction in which he attempted to give “a little mock dignity to lust” (*Rights of Woman*, 148: 147). By terming women “exotics” and mimicking a male discourse, Wollstonecraft reveals that what Rousseau approves and condones in one area, he condemns in another. Exotic plants, in Rousseau’s opinion, were monstrous disfigurements of nature that are “adorned according to our fashion”,<sup>27</sup> rather like, as Wollstonecraft argues, women adorn themselves according to the desires of men: “the instruction which women have received has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire; mere propagators of fools!” (*Rights of Woman*, 76) Wollstonecraft continues the use of botanical language here by describing women as ‘propagators’. For Wollstonecraft, men propagate, through the limited education they permit women and their general social sanctions, insignificant and decorative female flowers who in turn can produce nothing better than silly sons. Through propagation for pleasure men corrupt women and Wollstonecraft mirrors this corruption by reflecting and revealing the “fools” that result from such restrictive cultivation.

Significantly however, the double flowers which Rousseau describes are sterile - the sacrifice of healthy propagation to external beauty does not only corrupt reproduction (the “fools” that are the offspring of men’s silly wives), but can halt reproduction altogether. According to Wollstonecraft, women are “poisoned” by male desire (*Rights of Woman*, 116). In the introduction to the *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft uses an extended botanical metaphor to reveal that the horror Rousseau expressed at the deformation of nature and the curtailing of reproductive abilities in plants can just as aptly be applied to the ‘cultivated’ woman that he, and others, have helped to create:

The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity. – One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men, who considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers. (*Rights of Woman*, 73)

Wollstonecraft emphasises the damage done to the female flower as she wilts and withers away, unable to function as a reproductive or creative force. Planted in “too rich a soil”, the female diet of vanity, pleasure, artifice and inactivity is too luxurious for women to survive on; the female is never invigorated or challenged by the rockier and more nourishing ‘soil’ of intellectual pursuit and therefore rots from the inside out. Wollstonecraft’s use of the words ‘fade’ and ‘barren blooming’ bring forth imagery of an autumnal rather than a spring garden, placing the female in a sterile wilderness as opposed to the more traditional fecund pleasure ground of reproduction. Wollstonecraft,

<sup>27</sup> Rousseau, ‘Botanical Writings’, *Collected Writings*, VIII, p. 133.

through her mimetic use of botanical language, therefore undermines the contemporary linguistic, literary, philosophical, and economic framework of the period at the same time as she works within it.

### **Patriarchal Decay**

In the *Rights of Men* Wollstonecraft had touched on this idea of the ultimate undermining of patriarchal society when she described the “beautiful” ivy that “insidiously destroys the trunk from which it receives support” (*Rights of Men*, 10). Through botanical mimesis Wollstonecraft therefore demonstrates that the male insistence on female conformity to delicate, physical beauty is ultimately undermining the patriarchy that men seem so desperate to maintain. As a consequence of male delusion and illusion, the glass upon which they see themselves reflected will gradually darken until there is nothing left to see as women become gradually less able and fit to reproduce and rear anything other than “fools”, if they can reproduce at all. Social decay is consequently inevitable, according to Wollstonecraft, because of the illogical nature of male preferences.

The corruption and decay of patriarchal society that Wollstonecraft reveals by mirroring a distorted version of male logic in the *Rights of Woman* is emphasised by her placing concepts of power around the word beauty, a mimetic technique that Sapiro has touched upon when she commented that Wollstonecraft:

...consistently framed her discussion of gender relations with metaphors of power and tyranny that would be more immediately politically comprehensible to the men around her than arguments about gender.<sup>28</sup>

In doing so, Wollstonecraft reveals that power based on artifice will eventually be undermined by its own corruption. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s ‘Empire of Beauty’, which consoled women “for being excluded every part of Government in the State”<sup>29</sup> is founded on a biological accident, that of good looks, which will inevitably decay. The ‘Empire of Beauty’ is a transitory and fragile state of power that Wollstonecraft repeatedly calls into question. She emphasises, throughout the *Rights of Woman* that ostentation, a pretty face and some outward charms all have a very short expiry date: “artificial graces...enable them to exercise a short-lived tyranny” (*Rights of Woman*, 105). The bloom of beauty can command a certain amount of power, but, like a crown of flowers it soon fades and decays, and Wollstonecraft reveals that inheriting beauty, like inheriting the throne, does not necessarily qualify a person to tyrannise over others: “it is their persons, not their virtues, that procure them this homage” (*Rights of Woman*, 213; 164). Beauty is a mask that men have placed over women and their rulers to disguise the “illegitimate power” and ultimately limited power they both possess (*Rights of Woman*, 90). The tyranny of beauty is no more than a fabrication and cover for patriarchal control of society.

<sup>28</sup> Sapiro, p. 130.

<sup>29</sup> Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, ‘The Nonsense of Common Sense’, no. II (27<sup>th</sup> December, 1737) in *Essays and Poems and Simplicity, A Comedy*, ed. R. Halsbrand and I. Grundy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 109.

However, for Wollstonecraft, men, the creators of the myth of beauty, see through a glass darkly on many levels, and are ultimately seduced by their own creation, which consequently threatens the stability of patriarchal society. Their placing of beauty on a pedestal keeps them locked in a repetitive cycle of adoration and disillusion that continually threatens their social structures. By repeatedly connecting the power of beautiful women with that of royalty, Wollstonecraft mimetically undermines men like Burke who were in favour of a traditional and hierarchical society. Burke's adoration of the French queen, Marie Antoinette is clear in his *Reflections* where he describes her as a "...delightful vision...glittering like the morning-star".<sup>30</sup> For Wollstonecraft, however, Burke had been dazzled by an ostentatious show. She very clearly indicates her belief that he has succumbed to lust when, in the *Rights of Men*, she writes: "your politics and morals, when simplified, would undermine religion and virtue to set up spurious, sensual beauty, that has long debauched your imagination" (*Rights of Men*, 48). The confined nature of the male ideal of sensual beauty has, in turn, confined women to ignorance and weakness, "...who, like kings, always see things through a false medium" (*Rights of Woman*, 111). Men, according to Wollstonecraft, do not allow women to see through a glass clearly because it would hinder their own projected image onto the female looking glass. The illusion of power through beauty that entices and entraps women is a manageable power that does not threaten male superiority. As Lady Mary points out, beauty is a substitute for real power, a consolation not a triumph. However, this conciliatory power, which men grant to women, seduces the men in turn. The homage given to ignorant beauties rather than virtuous minds incites sexual depravity on the part of men: "chastity will never be respected in the male world till the person of a woman is not, as it were, idolized" (*Rights of Woman*, 67). This lack of chastity, through a decadent succumbing to the "sovereignty of beauty" threatens the foundation of patriarchal society – the certainty of one's heritage through the male line, which is ultimately dependent on female purity (*Rights of Woman*, 124).

Wollstonecraft further reveals mimetically that men see through a glass darkly because the power that they grant to women is an illusion that will finally darken their own reflection, as they become the tyrants of the silly and ineffective wives they have created. The tyranny of beautiful women and wealthy kings is arbitrary, an accident of fate and biology that will not entice followers forever. A woman who, like a king, has been given a limited view of the world, will "find that her charms are oblique sunbeams" that soon fade "when summer is passed and gone" (*Rights of Woman*, 96). A man will ultimately tire of his queenly but useless wife, just as the French tired of their dazzling royal leaders. Wollstonecraft argues that Burke's love of royalty and femininity is because he sees through a glass darkly, and has been seduced by the most vulgar of attributes: "The respect paid to wealth and beauty...will always attract the vulgar eye of common minds" (*Rights of Woman*, 126). Beauty does not last forever; arbitrary power will not be tolerated indefinitely, once women lose their beauty (or royalty lose their ability to dazzle) they will then be tyrannized over by the very men who demanded their beautiful display. Wollstonecraft mimics Rousseau's sentiment, that men love the image they have created more than the object they apply that image to. Wollstonecraft emphasised this in her first novel, *Mary* (1788), where the protagonist's father prefers his

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<sup>30</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, p. 112.

ruddy-cheeked “pretty tenants” to his wife’s “sickly, die-away languor”.<sup>31</sup> However, by combining concepts of power and tyranny with beauty throughout the *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft reveals the confined cycle of male control, which Irigaray attempts to eradicate. Through mimesis Wollstonecraft demonstrates that male weakness and subjectivity will continue until women are paid homage for their virtues rather than their persons. The ‘Empire of Beauty’ is really just part of the grand and repeating game of sexual difference which is “Sadly repetitive, painstaking, or infinitely fragmenting things, rambling on with pauses only for explosions”,<sup>32</sup> the latest explosion of which being, for Wollstonecraft, the reaction against decadence during the French Revolution.

### Conclusion

Throughout the *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft reveals both male and female entrapment within a cycle that places too much emphasis on beauty as a means of control on the part of men and the promise of gaining power on the part of women. The ‘myth’ of beauty in the *Rights of Woman* is ultimately surrounded with concepts of confinement: the immobile, wilting flower, the languishing exotics, the queen in her ivory tower of ignorance: “To preserve personal beauty, woman’s glory! The limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live...weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves” (*Rights of Woman*, 110-111). Beauty was a torturous and torturing goal in eighteenth-century society, which condemned women to a confined and claustrophobic existence as Wollstonecraft emphasises with her imagery of “Chinese bands”, which suggests both exoticism and painful containment. She furthered this by claiming that “genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection” (*Rights of Woman*, 112). She reveals the unhealthy and obsessive nature of these female ‘slaves’ who, in an unusual juxtaposition, “glory in their subjection” and, by doing so, she calls into question the male authorities that require a perverse celebration of what amounts to little more than an illness the ultimate effects of which they do not find appealing.

Wollstonecraft therefore challenges male logic and prescription upon women in the *Rights of Woman* through her use of subversive mimesis, turning her text into a mirror that reflected the male-dominated society she lived in back on itself. However, Wollstonecraft, unlike Irigaray, is not looking to change this dominant system in the *Rights of Woman*. Rather she argues the case for women having the right to participate in the current social system on an equal footing as the means of breaking the tyrannical cycle of patriarchy. For Wollstonecraft, once beauty is no longer held in such high esteem the continual adoration and then hatred for women will cease, relieving women’s confinement to languorous ill health and invigorating and strengthening civilised society. Wollstonecraft is consequently not seeking to celebrate womanhood in the *Rights of Woman*, but to eradicate the advocating and praise of femininity and its pervasive effects. Rather than the two-sex model that Irigaray favoured, Wollstonecraft preferred to aim for an eradication of sexual difference as opposed to a celebration of it – she ‘throws down her gauntlet’ and ‘denies the existence of sexual virtues’ (*Rights of Woman*, 120). However, her theories were inevitably evolving ones, and by the time she wrote her final novel, *Maria*, her thoughts were moving more towards a development of a female

<sup>31</sup> Wollstonecraft, ‘Mary, A Fiction’ (1788), *Works*, VI, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, p. 61.

community. In the Preface to the novel she asks that the story be considered “as of woman, than of an individual” (*Maria*, 83). However, Wollstonecraft’s use of mimesis in the *Rights of Woman* foregrounds this later, rather revolutionary work, by revealing and rejecting the inadequacies of male logic and dominance. Wollstonecraft uses the *Rights of Woman* as a mirror that reflects a distorted and hence revelatory vision of men back at themselves. Women, according to Wollstonecraft, see themselves through a glass darkly because they are confined by the obscured and ‘dark’ vision of men who are corrupt and inconsistent in their desires, reasoning and wants and therefore confined themselves. Wollstonecraft’s ‘feminism’ is consequently not that she makes herself more masculine - her feminist act instead is a personal rejection of femininity as prescribed in the eighteenth century. She only adopts a masculine position in order to mimic and mock that position, revealing its flaws in the process.

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