
BOOKS & WRITERS

Rights & Wrongs

On Mary Wollstonecraft—By LORNA SAGE

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S LIFE was a mess: she was attractive, but singularly graceless; she was plagued with irritable, importunate sensibilities; in practice, in the course of her hasty, uncertain career, she contrived to compromise most of her reasoned arguments about the rights of women. All of this, which one might have suspected before, Claire Tomalin's biography¹ spells out moment by moment, muddle by meddle, with a quiet orderliness that highlights still further her subject's almost indecent lack of poise. For this is not a private life—it contains very few interludes of personal, unhistoric consolidation, very little sense of the richness and complexity of unactive day to day existence. Instead, everything seems motivated, blown up, by the spirit of the age. Mary Wollstonecraft saw the imperatives of her own nature as philosophic necessities; the decorous distinction between private ills and the tyranny of cultural tradition lapsed for her; she justified herself to herself by blaming the moral cowardice and inertia of others, and revelled in the chronic insecurity, and even the wretchedness, of living by abstractions.

The main things she learned in her youth, Claire Tomalin suggests, were a sense of grievance and a sense of rootlessness: her father gradually idled his way through a substantial inheritance, and a series of places to live (not homes to Mary) which corresponded to his diminishing means; her elder brother Ned inherited money from his grandfather. The masculine conspiracy, in other words, was early in evidence, and she was to respond by trying to supplant both father and brother in managing the lives of her younger sisters Eliza and Everina. The trite, but unusually candid passion of her adolescent friendships (with Jane Arden at 14, and Fanny Blood at 16) supplies the keynote. She was already thinking in terms of the opposition between conforming stupidity and individual truth:

¹ *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*. By CLAIRE TOMALIN. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £4.75.

"I have a heart that scorns disguise, and a countenance which will not dissemble. . . . I am a little singular in my thoughts of love and friendship; I must have the first place or none. I own your behaviour is more according to the opinion of the world, but I would break such narrow bounds."

Her "I" somehow manages to sound grander than mere self—as indeed it needed to be to sustain her through the prolonged failure to set up an independent female household. The nearest she came was in 1784 (at 25) when along with Fanny, Eliza and Everina she started a school at Newington Green. "The world", though, loomed large on every side—Eliza had (with Mary's encouragement) left her husband and baby; Fanny was about to leave for Lisbon to be married. Instead of being at the centre of things, Mary found herself on the margin of other people's lives, other people's tragedies. In 1785 she followed Fanny to Lisbon, and arrived to find her dying of consumption and childbirth. The school folded finally the next year, and she made over her still sketchy ideas about re-educating women in her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, before accepting the only role the conventional world seemed to offer, and becoming a governess.

And that might have been that—except for her stubborn refusal to acquire the techniques of servility. Her brief, stormy career in the sprawling, aristocratic Irish household of Lord and Lady Kingsborough brought all her prejudices, aggressions, insecurities bubbling to the surface. The clash between her touchy pride and her employers' casual condescension was total, and irresistibly comic: they treated their governess very well, almost like an equal, and she resented it in every irritable fibre of her being. They were so careless, beautiful and rich that their generosity became an intolerable insult—they could so easily afford it. The poverty of her own life (not just material, but personal and emotional) seems to have become oppressively clear to her as a result of this confrontation; when she returned to London she deliberately sought out her own kind and tried to give her world a rival solidity.

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What she found was the motley group of radicals who surrounded Joseph Johnson (who had published her book on education)—dissenters like Anna Barbauld, and Price and Priestley (both of whom she'd met earlier at Newington Green); Blake and Fuseli; the perfectibilitarians Holcroft and Godwin. It was in this company, who all felt themselves in different ways spiritual partakers in the French revolution, that she produced *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* in answer to Burke, and a year later (1792) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She wrote hastily, more a pamphleteer than an author; and her success and notoriety was of the same instant, rather insubstantial kind. She had found a circle, and an audience, but the sexual and emotional hunger of that early letter was still painfully unappeased, and she was falling into a habit of faintly absurd philosophical flirtation that led nowhere. Johnson was perhaps homosexual; Fuseli, for whom she conceived an unappetising theoretic passion, certainly had been, and for good measure was now busy getting married and settling down. She was still on the margins of life—as was made nastily clear when, with awesome naivety and self-centredness, she proposed to Fuseli's wife that she should move in as his soul-mate.

THE INEVITABLE REBUFF was another turning point: she might have retreated into surly spinsterhood—she was thirty-three and a "philosophess", "the asserter of female rights" as Fuseli maliciously described her (making her sound somehow monstrous, as though the very language was resisting such an innovation). Instead preceded by her reputation she set off alone for revolutionary Paris, where the first divorce laws were shortly to be passed, and where the sorts of experiments in living that seemed impossible in London were (almost) unremarkable. Perhaps she had it in mind to find herself a man. Certainly the alacrity with which she responded to Gilbert Imlay's advances—and her thorough misunderstanding of his character—suggest that she didn't so much fall in love with *him*, as with some lay-figure in her imagination, which the attractive, easy-going American obligingly incarnated. Her pregnancy, her growing insecurity and possessiveness coincided with the Terror, when her Girondin and women's rights friends were guillotined, and the English who had remained in Paris were arrested. Imlay had protected her by registering her as his wife at the American embassy, but it was already clear that he was restless, uncommitted. Mary's attempt to live freely, outside marriage, sustained by emotional and intellectual ties alone, was proving to be a fiction that even her will-power couldn't sustain—and the political tide had turned harshly against

such freedoms. Back in London (in pursuit of Imlay) she tried every kind of emotional blackmail: a suicide attempt with laudanum produced from him a business commission that sent her (plus baby Fanny and nurse) to Scandinavia; a second attempt in the Thames left her even more morally than physically bedraggled, and produced nothing.

Even Mary Wollstonecraft (who now called herself Mrs Imlay) could not, one would have thought, evade the crushing irony of her position any longer: her preachments about independence, will-power, the essential health of emotional appetites must have haunted and jeered at her. But no. She published *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, and went and called on William Godwin. Like her, though even more belatedly, he was looking for a sexual partner; neither was the other's first choice, and they knew it, and circled round each other in an ungainly kind of dance, protesting their independence, their sensitivity, their aversion to marriage. Hazlitt said of Godwin, "he resembles an eight day clock that must be wound up long before it can strike", and certainly there was a marked lack of spontaneity in his relationship with Mary; the notes they exchanged (signs themselves of the correspondent's stubborn

separateness) document their struggle to have the upper hand, to be the one conferring favours, even on the smallest occasions. "I will do as you please" Godwin writes. "Shall I come to consult you; or will you call on me?" Their marriage (when Mary was three months pregnant) promised to be untidily farcical, for all their mutual respect and occasional awkward tenderness. But then the birth (which Mary in self-confident style expected to be as easy as the first time) went horribly wrong; the placenta wouldn't come away, and had to be bloodily extracted by a doctor and eleven days after the birth of her second daughter, on the tenth of September, 1791 she died of septicaemia, and Godwin more than made up, in his way, for his earlier circumspection, by writing *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Godwin was no more tactful than his wife had been, and the frankness of the *Memoirs* fixed her in the public memory as a scandalous, insensitive woman. The obvious reaction (not obvious to Godwin) was that her life refuted her work—that the muddle of her personal relationships, and her apparently boundless capacity for self-justification made nonsense of the claim that women could cope with civil and legal responsibilities. In *A Vindication* she had more or less denied female sexuality as a motive or a hindrance, and yet that very instinct ruled much of her life, and brought about her death. Claire Tomalin has found a truly chilling quotation from the Reverend Richard Polwhele:

She had died a death that strongly marked the distinction of the sexes, by pointing out the destiny of women and the diseases to which they were peculiarly liable.

The way "destiny" and "diseases" complement each other in this smug utterance is meant to suggest that passive suffering is woman's role, and that fate (or was it God?) had given an object-lesson in Mrs Godwin's death, a dire warning. Claire Tomalin, as her title suggests, wants us to ponder the point: the book begins with foretastes of its end—Mary's grandmother making "the traditional and sensible marriage. . . . For her it meant a steady series of pregnancies, the deaths of almost all her children and the collapse of her health"; Mary's mother died in 1782, her "whole existence . . . bound up in her femininity"; and for all Mary's twistings and turnings and evasions, she too found herself trapped in the old rhythm of breeding and dying. The book makes one (or made me, at any rate) wince at the irony of this miserable ending; but it doesn't, of course, invite one to conclude that therefore all (feminism) is vanity. Today, Mary Wollstonecraft wouldn't have had to die like that, and she wouldn't have had to live like that either; biological roles no

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ROUTLEDGE

longer have the God-ordained finality Mr Polwhele found so reassuring.

OR SO ONE MIGHT have thought. Certainly, my impression on first reading the book was that Claire Tomalin's main problem about her own tone (which she has solved by an admirable restraint and plainness) consisted in avoiding the impulse to canonise, resisting the temptation to pity (and self-pity, as a woman), and being true to the sheer complexity and muddle of Mary Wollstonecraft's progress. Several of the reviews, however, have rather startlingly revealed that the danger, even now, is not too ready an understanding, or a too-easy transition to myth-making, but quite the reverse: apparently people still find Mrs Tomalin's "anti-heroine" too offensive to contemplate squarely; she still manages to rouse the same furies, and the same spiteful smugness. Richard Cobb in the *Times Literary Supplement*, for instance, accused the author of being much too patient with her silly, parasitic, egotistical subject—only in her dying could he detect any evidence of dignity and fortitude, all the rest was destructive, unnatural, "semi-intellectual" nonsense. And in a milder vein, even Marghanita Laski implied it was a pity that it should have been this woman who first articulated the feminist cause, and did it lasting harm by her humourless enthusiasm, and the sheer ugliness of her life. There seems to be a sort of notion abroad that the woman who first called marriage "legal prostitution" could (and should) have been elegant, stable, unpretentious—instead of messy, divided and erratic.

The obvious answer to this (except that for some mysterious reason it seems impossible to accept) was provided by Mary Hays, a Wollstonecraft disciple.

Hence the eccentricities of conduct, with which women of superior minds have been accused—the struggles, the despairing though generous struggles, of an ardent spirit, denied scope for its exertions!

Translated out of the language of sensibility, this makes good sense—acting and thinking without the safe support of convention cannot help but be graceless, angular, uncertain; Mary had to support herself, not just materially, but spiritually as well, and it's hardly surprising that her career lacks the dim coherence of her mother's or her grandmother's. Far from refuting her work, as reviewers have suggested, her life was the necessary condition for it—unless one's prepared to believe that moral change and social change happen somehow insensibly, by a process of mere accretion, which seems a superstition as dubious as Mr Polwhele's. Mary believed that social change had to be made, and

that the making necessarily involved wrecking; the damage she did to her own personality, and to other people (her sister, her Irish pupils, her friends), is not thereby justified—it is simply part of the whole process. She didn't happen to say some sensible and true things by accident; only a rootless, tasteless, undignified woman could then have said them.

"She had no capacity for nuance or irony", as Mrs Tomalin (who does) points out, which means that she continuously offends one by her raw enthusiasms, and her wilful refusal to analyse or criticise herself. But then irony, especially for women (witness Jane Austen), was a way of accommodating oneself to the intolerable, the unjust, the humiliating prospect of living within the decorous limits. That took real courage, but not perhaps the final sacrifice for a woman—the sacrifice of delicacy and good taste. *A Vindication* focuses unerringly on the attitudes by which women tricked themselves into acceptance: the notion that there is a special feminine type of thinking called intuition—"This negligent kind of guesswork . . . the random exertions of a sort of instinctive common sense never brought to the test of reason"; the idea that a taste for domestic details is morally enlarging—"men order their clothes to be made and have done with the subject; women make their own clothes, necessary or ornamental, and are continually talking about them; and their thoughts follow their hands"; the romantic attractions of marital unity, two into one—"The laws respecting women . . . make an absurd unity of a man and his wife; and then, by the easy transition of only considering him as responsible, she is reduced to a mere cypher." That she and Godwin did indeed form "an absurd unit" followed inevitably from her inability to suppress either her intellectual aspirations or her sexual and social needs—both were real, both counted, they couldn't be balanced without subtly denying one or the other.

THE CENTRAL TRADITION of the female novelists in the 19th century, from Jane Austen via Mrs Gaskell to George Eliot, refused to think in such polarities, and tried to put the sense and the sensibility together—though the last two were a good deal more successful in their books than in their lives. And even in the careful, complex texture of the fiction, one detects at moments a hint of bad faith and self-consciousness, as though the writer herself isn't sure that her heroine's life can really be coherent. There's an unremarkable bit of description in *North and South* that always seems to me to epitomise this uneasy awareness: Mrs Gaskell is meaning to say that her heroine's sitting-room expresses the balance of her

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BELL

personality, but somehow it comes out a bit wrong—

Pretty baskets of work stood about in different places; and books, not cared for on account of their binding solely, lay on one table, as if recently put down.

Poor Margaret Hale comes out of this as a very confused woman indeed, consumed with nervousness about what's in good taste and what not, and settling for faintly scruffy books which she's not sure whether to read. Mary Wollstonecraft, as Mrs Tomalin says, always "travelled light"; she probably didn't know how to make a sitting-room sufficiently mindless; her settings like her person, were probably uncompromisingly serious and uninviting. But forced to choose between that tastelessness and Mrs Gaskell's version of taste (which thankfully one is not), one surely has to find the embarrassing bluestocking more plausible.

Claire Tomalin has done her anti-heroine a signal service, in presenting her as a contradictory,

infuriating, impossible person. I found myself wishing she had committed herself more about her attitudes towards this fragile Amazon, and said more about how she imagines Mary's mind as working when—for example—she was staging her suicides. But perhaps the book would have been impossible to write once it started to venture into fictional hypotheses. Nor can one see, for that matter, quite what style even of contemporary fiction could accommodate such a character, unless the Gothic. Mrs Tomalin wryly reminds one in her summing up that the daughter who cost Mary her life was to remark years later, concerning her child by Shelley—"Oh God, teach him to think like other people"—and the reviewers have pounced on this with sighs of relief. But Mary Shelley was more interesting than that, and more like her mother: *Frankenstein*, that lurid, rebellious piece of myth-making about the problems of creating a new, shapeless kind of creature, a monster, is the continuation of Mary Wollstonecraft's story.

Marginal Salvations

New Poetry—By DOUGLAS DUNN

SYLVIA PLATH CREATED innovations through which her female epigoni have been able to write about the consciousness of femininity. Erica Jong writes as if aware of the immense debt she owes to Plath, and as if attempting to repay it with nervous, agitated homage. Her poem "The Critics" is dedicated "For everyone who writes about Sylvia Plath including me."

*There is nothing to say now.
You have filled her grave with your theories,
her eyes with your sights . . .
She is grass you have trod.
She is dust you have blown away . . .*

she writes, in a mood of hagiographical sadness. While the whiff of martyrology is, in any context, an odour more foul than fair, Jong's manic celebration of downtrodden or by-passed sisters (in "Alcestis on the Poetry Circuit", for instance) is at least acceptable as an inflated gesture in a movement of consciousness which is still in a self-conscious "revolutionary" phase.

Although she is deeply committed to femininity and its associated predicaments and experiences as her subjects, there is a more widely human purpose to her poems in *Half-Lives*¹ than simply

to present verse adjuncts to Women's Liberation and its fashionable line in sexual overemphasis.

*Why does life need evidence
Of life?
We disbelieve it
Even as we live.*

Jarrell, of whom the sentiment and language are reminiscent, couldn't have said it better. Her poems have a stridency, an accusatory manner which too often caricatures the moral gestures she makes. They set the teeth on edge in a way which these four Jarrell-like lines don't; in these lines the saddened urgency in what she recognised is merely persuasive. Most of the time her poems attempt to enact something more authoritarian, to put the reader in a moral-poetic vice and achieve, by a sort of verbal torture, desperate agreement with what is being said.

As garrulous as America and twice as fierce, passionate, imaginative, surrealistically candid, colloquial, rushed, Jong's poems have all that engaging moral topicality which tricks the consciousness into an abject approval of what it is being exposed to as much as it convinces of her poems' genuine qualities. Poets like Jong are usually well liked. They give it all away with unswerving hubris, a fresh and turbulent self-confidence, and such an energetic assurance of

¹ *Half-Lives*. By ERICA JONG. Secker & Warburg, £3.00, paper £1.50.