

Mary Wollstonecraft, 1759–97



'It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world.'
— Mary Wollstonecraft

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT WAS A MORAL and political philosopher and advocate of women's rights, whose analysis of the condition of women in contemporary society retains much of its original radicalism although her achievements until the twentieth century were much less regarded and reported than her unconventional relationships. After ill-fated affairs with the painter Henry Fuseli and American businessman Gilbert Imlay, Wollstonecraft married the philosopher William Godwin, one of the founders of the anarchist movement. Wollstonecraft died at the age of thirty-eight, eleven days after giving birth to her second daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, future author of the Gothic novel, *Frankenstein*.

After Wollstonecraft's death, her widower published a memoir (1798) of her life, often cited as the first biography, revealing her unorthodox lifestyle. It was a brave and honest account which tarnished her reputation for almost a century as she was reviled as a prostitute, described by Horace Walpole, 'a hyena in petticoats'. Scurrilous poems abounded, including a piece called *The Un-sex'd Females*; this was poetry functioning as an eighteenth-century Twitter, trolls mocking Wollstonecraft as a 'poor maniac' a 'voluptuous' victim of 'licentious love.' With the emergence of the feminist movement at the turn of the twentieth century however, Wollstonecraft's advocacy of women's equality and critiques of conventional femininity became increasingly important. As a key Enlightenment philosopher, her ideas on justice and education have become core values in Britain and beyond. Her words directly informed Gladstone's plans for state education in 1870 and today Wollstonecraft is regarded as one of the founding feminist philosophers.

With her sister Eliza and friend Fanny Blood, Wollstonecraft set up a girl's school in Newington Green in 1774, a community of dissident intellectuals and free thinkers. Wollstonecraft was then a young schoolmistress, as yet unpublished, but the libertarian and republican Richard Price saw something in her worth fostering, becoming a friend and mentor. Through him she met the humanitarian and radical publisher Joseph Johnson, who was to guide her career and serve as a father figure. Through him, she published *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (subtitled *with reflections on female conduct, in the more important duties of life*) which was less a radical tract than a didactic work on female manners. The ideas Wollstonecraft ingested from the sermons at Newington Green Unitarian Church pushed her towards a political awakening. After leaving Newington Green, these seeds germinated into *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) a response to Edmund Burke's condemnation of the French Revolution. Her response attacked his idea of monarchy and hereditary privilege that supported an unequal society and saw women as weak and passive. Hers was the first response in a pamphlet war that became known as the Revolution Controversy, in which Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1792) became the rallying cry for reformers and radicals debating the French Revolution.

In September 1791, Wollstonecraft began *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1782) arguing that in most cases, marriage was solely a property relation, and that the education women received ensured that they could not meet the expectations society had of them almost certainly guaranteeing an unhappy life. In the chapter *On National Education*, she recommends the establishment of a national education system of mixed-sex schools. She also argues it essential for women's dignity that they be given the right and the ability to earn their own living and support themselves.

In 2018 the artist Maggi Hambling was commissioned to capture the spirit and strength of Wollstonecraft in a sculpture to be erected on Newington Green, North London where Wollstonecraft had her roots. The plinth will incorporate Mary's most famous quotation 'I do not wish women to have power over men but over themselves.' 'The sculpture is designed to encourage a visual conversation with the obstacles Wollstonecraft overcame, the ideals she strived for, and what she made happen,' Hambling said. 'In this sculpture female forms commingle, rising inseparably into one another, transmuting and culminating in the figure of a woman standing, free, her own person, ready to confront the world. The figure embodies all women'. ★

DETAIL OF OIL PORTRAIT OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT BY JOHN OPIE, CIRCA 1797, ON DISPLAY IN ROOM EIGHTEEN OF THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON.

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