ON THE RECEPTION OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S
A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN

BY R. M. JANES

It is popularly assumed that Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was greeted with shock, horror, and derision when it appeared early in 1792, that the forces of reaction massed against this bold attempt to assert the equality of woman and spattered the Amazon with their pens. Her biographers have repeatedly asserted that the first reviews and recorded reactions to the work were generally favorable, but they have had little impact on the popular misconception. The reasons for that scholarly ineffectuality are obvious enough. Later in the decade, Wollstonecraft was vilified by the press, and for much of the nineteenth century hers was a name to brandish at feminists as evidence of the horrific consequences of female emancipation. The furious clamorings of 1798 quite overwhelmed the calm approbation of 1792 in both intensity and duration. Since most writers on Wollstonecraft and the *Rights of Woman* are concerned primarily with the tardy progress of female emancipation, they expect a negative response to her and her work and have less than an active interest in the peculiarities of late eighteenth-century social thought. But the reception of Wollstonecraft’s work and that of her followers, Mary Robinson and Mary Hays, illumines an interesting moment in the historical transformation of women's status. Those works, part educational, part psychological, part political, appeared when the contest for improvement of women’s education and their status in the family had been largely won, and the contest for enlarged political, civil, social liberties was about to be joined. The progressive intellectual circles represented by the leading reviews reacted positively to demands for intellectual equality, improved education, and reformed manners. Demands for political participation by women or for changes in women's social behavior were regarded as unessential and absurd. Those elements of the works in question that corresponded to changes that had been in train for half a century were approved; those that marked out the direction of more drastic social transformations were rightly though disapprovingly remarked as revolutionary and visionary, if they were seen at all.

With one important exception, every notice the *Rights of Woman* received when it first appeared was favorable. The reviews were split along party lines. Periodicals of radical inclination, sharing Wollstonecraft's philosophical assumptions, sympathetic towards the rights of man and events in France, distressed by Edmund Burke’s lack of consistency, approved the work. Enthusiasts of the rights of man, they did not greet the rights of woman with horror. Wollstonecraft had written for the *Analytical Review* since 1788. Joseph Johnson who had published both the *Analytical* and the book, reviewed it positively, of course, as did the *Literary Magazine*, the *General Magazine*, the *New York Magazine*, the *Monthly Review*, and the *New Annual Register*. These periodicals had also favorably noticed her
Vindication of the Rights of Men, one of the first answers to Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France. The single journal that had favorably reviewed her Rights of Men and ignored the Rights of Woman was the English Review.¹ Although periodicals less politically or more conservatively committed did not in the main choose to review the work, the Critical Review attacked it in two passionate installments.

The contents of the reviews favorable to the work indicate why it was ignored rather than virulently attacked by most of those opposed to the political assumptions Wollstonecraft held. Most reviewers took it to be a sensible treatise on female education and ignored those recommendations in the work that might unsettle the relations between the sexes. The Analytical's response was typical. The work was catalogued for the year not under politics, but under "political economy," and the reviewer observed that "in reality the present work is an elaborate treatise of female education. . . . If the bulk of the great truths which this publication contains were reduced to practice, the nation would be better, wiser, and happier than it is upon the wretched, trifling, useless and absurd system of education which is now prevalent."² This ability to ignore the work's political implications crossed party lines. In an exchange between Horace Walpole and Hannah More, neither of whom had read the book and both of whom had "been much pestered to read" it, Walpole told More that he had been "assured it contains neither metaphysics nor politics. . . ." When Walpole flung his memorable phrase "that hyena in petticoats" at Wollstonecraft, the occasion was a political provocation to which the Rights of Woman was irrelevant. He objected to her attack on Marie Antoinette in the Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution (1794), and his phrase reciprocates Wollstonecraft's hostility and contempt towards the French queen.³ As in later attacks on Wollstonecraft, Walpole's hostility was directed against the female republican writer, and not against the vindicator of the rights of woman. In 1792 in Walpole and in More's circle, there were those

¹ The English Review clarified its position in supporting Mirabeau's Treatise of Public Education, which restated Talleyrand's view that women should be confined to a domestic education "in opposition to some modern philosophers, or rather what the Italians call filosofas iri, who would wish to put into soft female hands the rod of government, and the sword of justice," XIX (1792), 56. The Gentleman's Magazine had a good laugh over the Rights of Men: "We should be sorry to raise a horse-laugh against a fair lady; but we were always taught to suppose that the rights of woman were the proper theme of the female sex; and that, while the Romans governed the world, the women governed the Romans" When the fair lady descended to her proper subject, the reviewer was not there to meet her. Both Wollstonecraft and the Analytical had anticipated the jocularity of the wits. Gentleman's Magazine, 61, pt. 1 (1791), 151; Analytical Review, 12(1792), 241-49, 13(1792), 481-89; Literary Magazine, 1(1792), 133-39; General Magazine, 6(1792), 187-91; New York Magazine, 4(1793), 77-81; Monthly Review, 8(1792), 198-209; New Annual Register (1792), p. [298]; Critical Review, N.S. 4(1792), 389-98, N.S. 5(1792), 132-41.

² Analytical Review, 12(1792), 249; 13(1792), 530.

³ Horace Walpole's Correspondence with Hannah More, et alii, eds. W. S. Lewis, Robert A. Smith, Charles H. Bennett, XXXI (New Haven, 1961), 370, 373, 397.
who managed to find the work innocuous as a political tract and valuable as an educational and critical one.

In approving the work, the reviewers endorsed the view that the character of women at the present time needed to become more independent, more rational, more equal to men in mind and spirit; and they indicated how widespread the assumptions of earlier educational reformers had become. As is so often the case with British reformers, the benevolent, improving impulse sought to ameliorate the condition of the sex, not to alter relative positions between the sexes. Her demands for change in woman’s spiritual condition approved, Wollstonecraft’s hopes for social change earned from most of her reviewers the general reservation that “several of her opinions are fanciful, and some of her projects romantic.” The differences were specified by the most feminist of the reviewers, William Enfield.

Enfield was a dissenting minister with impeccable credentials; he had been associated with the Warrington Academy, was the memorialist of John Aikin, Mrs. Barbauld’s father, and was memorialized in his turn by Aikin’s son, Dr. John Aikin. Reviewing the Rights of Woman in Ralph Griffiths’ Monthly Review, he refrained from chiding Wollstonecraft for her “challenge to the ancient wisdom that considered women to be inferior men,” and rejoiced that “how jealous soever WE may be of our right to the proud preeminence which we have assumed, the women of the present age are daily giving us indubitable proofs that mind is of no sex, and that, with the fostering aid of education, the world, as well as the nursery, may be benefited by their instructions.” He included her in the class of “philosophers” and would not offend her by styling her “authoress” (as the Literary Magazine had done). He copiously endorsed “the important business here undertaken . . . to correct errors, hitherto universally embraced, concerning the female character; and to raise woman, from a state of degradation and vassalage, to her proper place in the scale of existence; where, in the dignity of independence, she may discharge the duties and enjoy the happiness of a rational Being.” The opinions that Enfield explicitly rejected are those that Wollstonecraft had anticipated would provoke laughter: the suggestions that women assume “an active part in civil government,” that they abandon “the useful and elegant labours of the needle,” and that the distinction of sexes be obliterated in social intercourse save where “love animates the behavior.” The first and second Enfield considered of little importance in improving the condition and character of women, the third impracticable outside of heaven. In spite of his retreat at those points where feminist opinions might make a practical social difference, Enfield did fortify the lonely outpost of a rational asexual ideal: “Both men and women should certainly in the first place, regard themselves, and should be treated by each other, as human beings,” and he concluded his remarks with a wish that English possessed “some general term to denote the species, like άνθρωπος and Homo in the Greek and Roman languages. The want of such a general term is a material defect in our language.”

Enfield’s position both typifies the limitations of the response to the Rights of Woman and corresponds to the order in which reforms were to be achieved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Women were to be better

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4 Monthly Review, 8(1792), 209. 5 Ibid., 198, 209.
educated, more respectable, and more useful as doctors, nurses, teachers before
they were to be admitted to civic participation. They would have colleges
before they had the vote, and the vote before the question of obliterating
behavioral differences between the sexes was raised again. The principal
difference between the pro- and anti-feminist positions at the end of the
eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth was less their atti-
tude towards future change than their attitude towards past formulations.
The Critical Review, which produced the only attack on the Rights of Woman,
was also the only review to maintain the essential inferiority and the neces-
sary subordination of women.

That the Critical should have picked up the volume at all is surprising,
although Derek Roper has pointed out that the review went through a mod-
derately liberal phase between 1774 and 1805. Robinson, the publisher of
the New Annual Register, who was to be fined in 1793 for selling Paine's
Rights of Man, had become a partner in 1774 and exerted a moderating in-
fluence on editorial policies. In spite of Robinson’s association, the Critical
reviewed Burke’s Reflections favorably and scarified both Wollstonecraft and
Paine on the rights of man. In the Rights of Woman the Critical saw the
revolutionary implications of the social recommendations more clearly than
the liberal reviews. As a consequence, it rejected explicitly the feminist
premise that there is no characteristic difference in sex, but at the same time
it endorsed educational premises that would have seemed actively and aggres-
sively “feminist” fifty years earlier. Most disturbing to the reviewer was
Wollstonecraft’s attack on the idea of a sexual character.

The reviewer favored educating women for the same objects Wollstone-
craft had suggested: women should possess knowledge so as to be more
suitable companions to their husbands, better tutors to their children, more
useful members of society. They should be able to examine a subject cooly,
compare arguments, estimate degrees of evidence, and trace the evolutions
of the human mind. And Wollstonecraft is praised for the force and conviction
that her arguments on this score carry. The point of difference was not the
cultivation of women’s minds, but the relative roles of the sexes and the
psychological characteristics that are and ought to be peculiar to each. The
author stood firm on the intellectual inferiority of women: no women exist
or have existed who are the intellectual equals of men, and demonstrate the
same strength of reasoning or reach of intuitive perception. Even if women
should possess the abilities that men do, it is not desirable that they should
exercise them: “and when all are strong, to whom must the weaker opera-
tions belong? The female Plato will find it unsuitable to ‘the dignity of her
virtue’ to dress the child, and descend to the disgusting offices of a nurse . . .
and the young lady, instead of studying the softer and more amiable arts of
pleasing, must contend with her lover for superiority of mind, for greater
dignity of virtue; and before she condescends to become his wife, must prove
herself his equal or superior.” The utilitarian base of the argument is comical
enough: the tasks allotted women are so disagreeable that if women possessed
alternatives, no one would do them; the child would stop undressed, the
weak unnursed. Contempt for feminine duties, fear of equality in relations
between the sexes, conviction of the superiority of men and the masculine

sphere of activity are all evident. At times the eighteenth-century fascination with polygamy seems to be lurking just under the surface of the prose, revelling in the grammar: we are told that “women [plural] are the companions of man [singular], and the companions of a rational creature should possess reason not totally uncultivated.” Elsewhere the tendency to consider women as an undifferentiated herd and masculine achievement as singular turns up in the numbers used to refute Wollstonecraft’s contention that women should have representatives in parliament: if they did, “the state would lose 10,000 useful domestic wives, in pursuit of one very indifferent philosopher or statesman.” Although he faulted Wollstonecraft for discussing modesty and carnal appetites too freely, the reviewer was not afraid that the work would promote sexual license. Quite the contrary: “The precepts are calculated to form such women as we hope never to see; such as we are certain would waste their days in joyless celibacy, their sweets upon the desert air.”

When the Rights of Woman first appeared in 1792, reviewers and readers alike agreed with its recommendations for reform in women’s education. If we take “feminism” to mean anxiety for the education of women and the improvement of their minds, there did not exist an anti-feminist in England in 1790. If we take feminism to mean restlessness with the subordinate position of women and a vague desire that women should be possessed of more “liberty” and more consequence, then public opinion was divided between those who thought that women had quite enough liberty as it was and those who thought the rhetoric of submission inappropriate to relations between men and women. If we take feminism to mean demands for specific changes in women’s civil disabilities, including the right to vote, Wollstonecraft herself barely qualifies, and her followers, Hays and Robinson, do not even make the attempt. But although Wollstonecraft stayed securely enough within the established boundaries of educational writing not to terrify her first readers, she ventured out of bounds often enough to exhilarate them.

As should now be commonly known, Wollstonecraft’s reputation collapsed as a consequence of two separate events: the course of the revolution in France and consequent repudiation of the vocabulary of revolution in England; and Godwin’s publication of her posthumous works, including Maria Or The Wrongs of Woman and his Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman. When she died in 1797, generous obituaries appeared in the Gentleman’s Magazine, the Monthly Magazine, the European Magazine, and New York Magazine. When Godwin’s Memoirs appeared the following year, they were picked up for review by far more periodicals than had taken up the Rights of Woman itself.

The Memoirs revealed that Wollstonecraft had borne a child out of wedlock and then been deserted by her lover (Gilbert Imlay), that she had pursued him and had attempted suicide on two occasions, that she had found consolation with Godwin and had engaged in sexual relations with him before marriage. This series of actions found no approval at the time from any

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7 N.S. 4(1792) 390, 396, 393; 5, 139. The Critical insisted on a characteristic difference in sex even against Catherine Macaulay Graham N.S. 2(1790), 618.

political persuasion. The periodicals that had been favorably disposed towards the *Rights of Woman* united in wishing the *Memoirs* unwritten, unpublished, and unread. If the *Memoirs* were “a singular tribute of respect to the memory of a well beloved wife,”9 the vindication of adultery in *Maria* was scarcely more palatable. The most sympathetic readings of the *Memoirs* attempted to palliate her acts by attributing them to virtuous though mistaken motives. Having shared Wollstonecraft's political principles, this set of reviewers did not insist upon a necessary connection between her politics and her sexual divagations.

For those opposed to her politics, the *Memoirs* and *Maria* served up a delicious evidence of the consequences of Jacobin principles in action. The anti-Jacobin attacks on Wollstonecraft took two forms: the merely scurrilous attack and the politically motivated scurrilous attack. The anti-Jacobin but professedly apolitical periodicals, displayed the scandals in detail but paid little attention to her works. The life alone testified to the consequences of adhering to the “new order” and provided an example which, “if followed, would be attended with the most pernicious consequences to society; a female who could brave the opinion of the world in the most delicate point; a philosophical wanton, breaking down the bars intended to restrain licentiousness; and a mother, deserting a helpless offspring, disgracefully brought into the world by herself, by an intended act of suicide.”10

The reviews founded for polemical purposes, the *British Critic* and the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, gave her publications more attention and distinguished themselves by a particularly nasty use of the argument ad feminam. To the clergyman conducting the *British Critic* (Archdeacon Robert Nares and William Beloe), she appeared “in the strongest sense, a voluptuary and sensualist but without refinement.” As had the *Gentleman's Magazine*, they remarked the contrast between the *Rights of Woman* and Godwin's version of Wollstonecraft's last hours: “The reader of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman, will perhaps be surprised when he is informed, that, during her last illness, no religious expression escaped the author's lips. In that work, the grand principle is, that woman is not the inferior of man, but his equal in moral rank, walking along with him the road of duty, in which “they are both trained for a state of endless improvement.”11 With his version of the general proposition enforced by the *Rights of Woman* the reviewer has no quarrel, but it is clear that Wollstonecraft was led from the road of duty by the glimmerings of false philosophy. The *Anti-Jacobin* compared her to Messalina, denigrated the originality of her work, and isolated its political elements:

9 *New Annual Register* (1798), p. [271]. The *Monthly Review* wisely considered the opinions on marriage and religion to be those of Godwin, not of his wife, 27(1798), 321-24.
10 *European Magazine*, 39(1798), 246-51. The original editor of the magazine was James Perry, a Foxite, who left after the first year, 1782. By 1798, the chief publisher of the magazine was J. Sewell, who, though he belonged to the Association at the Crown and Anchor in the Strand which busied itself in the distribution of anti-republican propaganda, had dismissed the business of compilation and had prohibited political talk on his premises in 1792 (notice dated Dec. 31, 1792, 22, last page).
11 *British Critic*, 12(1798), 228-33.
Next succeeded her Rights of Woman, which the superficial fancied to be profound, and the profound knew to be superficial: it indeed had very little title to the character of ingenuity. Her doctrines are almost all obvious corollaries from the theorems of Paine. If we admit his principle, that all men have an equal right to be governors and statesmen, without any regard to their talents and virtues, there can be no reason for excluding women or even children.12

As had the Critical in 1792, the Anti-Jacobin located the vulnerability of the Rights of Woman in precisely those elements that account for the continuing interest in the work. The political features exaggerated for satiric purposes by eighteenth-century opponents are those isolated for praise by twentieth-century readers. Figure and ground have changed places.

To a considerable extent, it was the Memoirs rather than the Rights of Woman that shaped and colored Wollstonecraft's subsequent reputation. At the extremes of approval and disapproval were those like Godwin and the Anti-Jacobin who considered her acts an illustration of Jacobin morality in action. Between the ideologues were those like Matilda Betham who represented Wollstonecraft as an amiable eccentric who had refused to marry Imlay as a matter of principle, those who approved her principles and were embarrassed by her actions, and those who found both her life and principles reprehensible.13 The range of attitudes has remained much the same from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the last quarter of the twentieth. The most obvious shift has been the replacement of moral disapproval by psychological disapproval: the lady was not evil, but certainly very odd, and not to be imitated.14

13 Mary Matilda Betham, Dictionary of Celebrated Women (London, 1804), 374-77. Betham's principal source was the Analytical Review which, with the Monthly Mirror, had waxed rhapsodic about the letters to Imlay and had acclaimed their author another Werther. Analytical Review, 27 (1798), 235-45; Monthly Mirror, 5 (1798), 153-57. The Monthly Mirror is most familiar from its attempt to do a "cover story" on Wollstonecraft in its second issue for which a portrait was engraved, I (1796), 131-33, but it was also conducted by Thomas Bellamy, hosier turned bookseller, who had conducted the General Magazine, one of the periodicals to review the Rights of Woman favorably on its first appearance. The Critical Review and Gentleman's Magazine disapproved of what they read, but were surprisingly restrained in their animadversions. The Critical even praised her genius and "undaunted and masculine spirit." Critical, N. S. 22 (1798), 414-19; Gentleman's Magazine 68, pt. 1 (1798), 186-87. More injurious was Alexander Chalmers, General Biographical Dictionary, rev. and enl., XVI (London, 1814), 54-55. That article followed the language of the British Critic in finding Wollstonecraft "a voluptuary and sensualist without refinement." Perhaps the pleasantest indication of the mix in attitudes towards Wollstonecraft appeared a few years later. Discussing the associations of Castletown Roche where Edmund Burke spent several of his earliest years, James Prior enumerated such luminaries as Essex, Raleigh, Spenser, and "the famed Mrs. Wolstoncroft," now in very respectable company; Memoir of the Life and Character of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, 2nd ed. (London, 1826), I, 10.
14 The attacks on Wollstonecraft from the psychoanalytic point of view are familiar and have often been answered. Richard Cobb's comical hatchet job on
When the *Rights of Woman* first appeared, the attitude taken towards it varied directly with the political position of her reviewers, and the work was not generally regarded as politically significant. With the appearance of the *Memoirs*, the *Rights of Woman* came to seem more revolutionary than it had at first. Providing a vulnerable combination of sexual and political error, Wollstonecraft became the symbolic center for attacks on radical female writers. In certain circles, her name detached itself from her work and came to serve as a red flag for writers forgetful of what she had said. The influence of her name appears most strikingly in the reception accorded the works of her near followers Mary Robinson and Mary Hays.

Robinson's *Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination, with Anecdotes* appeared in 1799 with the author disguised as "Anne Frances Randall," a self-proclaimed follower of Wollstonecraft. The *New Annual Register*, *British Critic*, and *Critical Review* received the work without much hostility and without much respect. The *Critical* was admirably laconic in its complete notice: "Tolerable declamation in a cause which many will be inclined to support." These reviews endorsed her educational recommendations and reserved judgment on the central question, the justice of mental (not social) subordination. The *Anti-Jacobin* took her off at more length, adverted as had all save the *Critical* to her being of "the school of Wollstonecraft, ironically emphasized Robinson's anecdote of the lady who shot her lover, and closed by reaffirming its purpose to root out the corruption the Wollstonecrafts spread in society. In effect, Robinson's work disappeared into the larger category dominated by Wollstonecraft's Amazonian figure.

In 1803 an anonymous work often attributed to Mary Hays, *A Defence of the Character and Conduct of the Late Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin* maintained with justice that Wollstonecraft's vilification was provoked by the passions raised by the revolution in France and by the asperity of tone adopted in the *Rights of Woman*. The author suggested that Wollstonecraft's tone had alienated many readers who would have been sympathetic to her views. If the work was by Hays, she knew whereof she spoke. She had abandoned work on her own feminist *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in behalf of the Women* when the *Rights of Woman* appeared in 1792. In 1798, Johnson published her work anonymously. According to Claire Tomalin, the work found approval only at the *Analytical*, and like Wollstonecraft, Hays became "another butt for Tory sarcasm." But Johnson's habit of anonymous publication to protect his authors and Hays' moderation of tone produced a paradoxical juxtaposition. In the *Anti-Jacobin* for September

Wollstonecraft as "impossible crazy lady" (*TLS*, Sept. 6, 1974, 941) has been severely rebuked by Janet M. Todd, "The Polwhelan Tradition and Richard Cobb," *Studies in Burke and his Time*, 16(Spring, 1975), 271-78.

The *CBEL* lists the running title of Robinson's *Letter to the Women of England* as a separate work, *Thoughts on the Condition of Women*, n.d.

*New Annual Register*, 1799, p. [275]; *British Critic*, 14(1799), 682; *Critical Review* N.S. 27(1799), 360; *Anti-Jacobin Review* 3(1799), 144-46.

1800, Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* was reviewed enthusiastically for showing “that all the female writers of the day are not corrupted by the voluptuous dogmas of Mary Godwin, or her more profligate admirers.” The novel’s heroine, Bridgetina Botherim, is a parody of Mary Hays, and in the November installment, the reviewer tells us that the novel contains “an excellent imitation of that vicious and detestable stuff which has issued from the pen of M - - y H - - s.” Couched coyly in between, there appeared in October a long and generally favorable review of an anonymous work entitled *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in behalf of the Women*. While the reviewer has learned to “look with a suspicious eye upon demands” for rights by “advocates of the new philosophy . . . whether proceeding from the pen of a Paine or a Wollstonecraft,” this fair writer has no similar “sinister design” but advances a bold and fair specific appeal. Although the work contains some disputable propositions, “there will nothing occur offensive to the feelings of delicacy, nor injurious to the interests of religion and morality.” 18 Similarly favorable though briefer readings were reported out by the *New Annual Register and Critical Review*, while the scorching attack was reserved for the *British Critic*, which assigned her to the party professing that “whatever is, is wrong” and charged her with illiteracy. As in 1792, the attitude towards a feminist work was shaped by the reviewer's perception of the writer’s political stance, and in works after 1792 the presence of the name Wollstonecraft was a frequent though not necessary clue to the writer’s position. Hays’s work, sufficiently moderate in tone to earn the epithet “impotent” from William Thompson, 19 was protected by its mildness from the *Anti-Jacobin*, but fell an arbitrary sacrifice to the *British Critic*, which attacked a set of political views and contemptuously dismissed the work’s author as not worth correction, an indignity not visited upon Wollstonecraft, who was afforded much correction.

While Wollstonecraft did indeed suffer “stoning by the mob,” the cause was not “the reasonable and noble idea of woman's place in the family” presented in the *Rights of Woman*. Nor was the cause her assertion that “the sexes were equal, [her demand for] educational opportunities and even the franchise for women.” 20 The stoning came well after the book and was not caused by a reaction to its specific content. Her educational proposals, when they were remembered, were widely approved. Her political and economic recommendations excited little negative or positive comment at the time of publication. The political hopes were too far from the possibility of realization to be seriously threatening, and the problem of work for women was a common theme when it concerned women of the lower classes or women

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18 *Anti-Jacobin*, 7(1800), 39-46, 369-76 (Hamilton); 150-58 (Hays).
19 *Appeal of One Half the Human Race, Women, against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to retain them in Political, and hence in Civil and Domestic Slavery* (London, 1825), vii.
educated beyond their means of support. The emphasis on motherhood that was so striking to the nineteenth-century reader received almost no direct attention from contemporaries. Motherhood was one of the duties to be performed by women in their endeavor to be respectable and useful; it was not yet an object of adoration. The element that came disturbingly close to men's bosoms was the attack on the sexual character of women, the denial that a peculiarly feminine cast of mind was desirable. Men who were glad to agree that mind is of no sex were not pleased to acknowledge that manners ought to be of no sex. The shift in the treatment of feminist works between 1792 and 1798 indicates the continuing approbation of improved education for women and the solidifying opposition to works that seemed to threaten the established relations between the sexes.

Compared to her followers, Wollstonecraft's particular contribution was to state and to enact the major topics of feminist discourse. In the positions she articulated and the life she led, she touched upon almost every topic that has since been raised. Everything is there. Consequently, the reading of her work has varied directly with the concerns of that movement for which she was the first in England to speak. Modern readers light upon her specific proposals for social change and her insubordinate and combative tone. Those elements, dimly discomfortingly visible and politely ignored at the end of the eighteenth century, have been spotlighted by changes in the condition of women. Wollstonecraft's emphases on education and character (the latter might, however, be construed as an early demand for "assertiveness" training) have faded into the background as those demands have been met by actual social change. Although the needs and interests of her audience have determined the reading of her book, there is no discrepancy between the purposes of the work in its original context and the uses to which it has been put. While the work's shape has been distorted, its intent has not been violated. One effect of the revival of the work, however, has been to distort the image present to its first viewers. Had Wollstonecraft argued specifically for the franchise, equal access to professions, equal treatment under the law, abolition of discrimination on the basis of sex, positions consistent with the book's argument but not developed, not central, or not present, her first readers might justly have thought her mad. Such recommendations would have borne no useful relation to the actual condition of women and the opportunities available to them. Instead, Wollstonecraft's abstract and general rhetoric provided for a variety of specific recommendations, and her specific recommendations were firmly in the forefront of eighteenth-century educational discussion, with some brief sorties to more dangerous terrain. Those elements of the work that modern readers tend to ignore ensured the work a respectful reception when it first appeared, and those elements that disturbed the work's first readers account for the continuing hospitality of its modern audience.

Skidmore College.

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21 Mary Anne Radcliffe's Female Advocate (London, 1799) suggested restricting certain employments, such as toy and perfume sales, to women and establishing a magdalen to receive women; it was universally well received, though the Critical thought the style bad and the issues commonplace; N. S. 27(1799), 479.