

Barbara Taylor

Mary Wollstonecraft and the feminist imagination

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Taylor's ambitiousness of scope, handled with dexterity and winning confidence, is thus admirably attuned to Wollstonecraft's own voice. When reading Taylor, one gains an overriding sense of encountering someone who really understands Mary Wollstonecraft—someone who accurately estimates Wollstonecraft's strengths and weaknesses both as a person and as a writer, but who does not judge her for them.

With the explosion of Wollstonecraft scholarship spawned by second-wave feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft's life and works have been subject to unprecedented scrutiny over the last three decades from political theorists, literary critics, historians, and even, in recent years, philosophers. Wollstonecraft is now proudly touted as the champion of causes so diverse as frequently to be contradictory: she is simultaneously the advocate of domesticity and the defender of free love, the proto-Marxist and the bourgeois liberal. In her impressively assured new study of Wollstonecraft, Barbara Taylor confronts these paradoxes head-on, correctly identifying as the source of many of these seeming contradictions the failure of recent Wollstonecraft scholarship to locate the mother of Western feminism in her Enlightenment context. In particular, Taylor argues, as she has done elsewhere (Yeo, 1997; Johnson, 2002), that modern critics have consistently overlooked and thus misunderstood the significance of religion to Wollstonecraft's thought. By resurrecting the discourses within which Wollstonecraft placed herself—rational dissent, Rousseauvianism, British and French radicalisms, natural rights philosophy, pre-1790s feminisms—Taylor exposes the multiple provenances of Wollstonecraft's feminist thought, forcefully demonstrating that Wollstonecraft's paradoxes are sites of meaning to be embraced, not shied away from with embarrassment.

Refusing to be fettered by the constraints of convention acting upon the historian, the political scientist, or the literary critic, Taylor defiantly steers a middle course between the disciplines, blending her readings of Wollstonecraft's works with readings of her biography and the culture in which she wrote. In so doing, Taylor employs a variety of methodological tools including psychoanalysis, Marxism, and, of course, feminism. The boldness of her approach is striking, a feature that is reflected in her style, which launches from the formality of high academic prose to the excessive informality of *zeitgeist* conversation with formidable athleticism. The effect can be disarming; but then, so could the prose of Wollstonecraft herself. Taylor's ambitiousness of scope, handled with dexterity and winning confidence, is thus admirably attuned to Wollstonecraft's own voice. When reading Taylor, one gains an overriding sense of encountering someone who really understands Mary Wollstonecraft—someone who accurately estimates Wollstonecraft's strengths and weaknesses both as a person and as a writer, but who does not judge her for them, unlike the myriad Wollstonecraft readers over the past two hundred years who have been unable to refrain from so doing.

The central aim of Taylor's book is to uncover Wollstonecraft's "religiously inspired utopian radicalism," which has, she argues, been displaced by "secular, class-partisan reformism as alien to Wollstonecraft's political project as her dream of a divinely promised age of universal happiness is to our own." Moreover, she seeks to reverse "the imposition on Wollstonecraft of a heroic-individualist brand of politics utterly at odds with her own ethically driven case for women's emancipation" (12). Taylor is right to stress the extent to which the religious conviction infusing Wollstonecraft's work has been ignored by most Wollstonecraft scholars. However, she does not pause for long to consider why this has been the case, nor to observe that Wollstonecraft is not alone in this respect. The ideas of many of her contemporaries (Burke, Hays, Inchbald) are similarly bound-up with a religious faith that has largely been dismissed by modern scholars either because it is taken for granted or because it is deemed irrelevant. Taylor's claims for Wollstonecraft skirt around a wider question of the reluctance of modern scholars to attend to the importance of religion in late eighteenth century political fervor—a question that Taylor does not take on here, but it would have been illuminating if she had.

However, the case Taylor makes for Wollstonecraft's "religiously inspired utopian radicalism" is immensely persuasive. The key term for Taylor is "imagination," which she uses as a means of encompassing both conscious and unconscious fantasy. By tracing the history of the role of the imagination in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century psychology, Taylor shows that for Wollstonecraft, the "imagination" represented a "psychic pathway between humanity and the divine" (60). Taylor deftly applies psychoanalytic theory to Wollstonecraft's utopianism, locating in Wollstonecraft's devotion to God an erotic yearning for a father-figure: "For Wollstonecraft, *eros* was the core of the religious experience" (108). Here, Taylor is heavily reliant on biographical information about Wollstonecraft, drawn mostly from her private letters, but also, more problematically, from her fiction and the controversial *Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman,'* penned by her husband Godwin after her death. Whilst Taylor's use of these different media is always judicious, on occasions she elides the difference between them, sometimes treating Wollstonecraft's fiction as though it were straightforward autobiography. And it is tempting to see why, since the heroines of Wollstonecraft's two novellas, *Mary: A Fiction* and *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria*, are self-consciously based on herself. However, in turning to fiction, Wollstonecraft was also exploring alternative ways of conceptualizing subjectivity, and both of her fictions engage, albeit not entirely successfully, with the possibilities afforded by the literary mode rather more than Taylor always credits.

Taylor's discussion of the eroticism behind Wollstonecraft's religion is compelling, and it provides a novel and fruitful way of understanding Wollstonecraft's utopianism. The psychoanalytic push behind Taylor's argument is rendered clear and accessible, partly due to the fact that she sensibly avoids using overly technical vocabulary, and relies instead on extensive quotation from Wollstonecraft's own works. Indeed, the ease with which Taylor intersperses Wollstonecraft's words with her own is remarkable, and is testament to how fully Taylor has absorbed and considered her material. Her use of psychoanalysis equips her with a means of avoiding the potential pitfall that such reliance on vocabulary from the past can present, namely that key terms such as "virtue" and "genius" remain unprobed. By appropriating terms yielded by post eighteenth-century discourses of psychoanalysis, feminism, and socialism, Taylor penetrates Wollstonecraft's prose, laying bare the ways in which so many of her ideas are

familiar to us, whilst, crucially, exposing those points at which Wollstonecraft's thought is alien to modern-day feminist sensibilities.

Wollstonecraft's "feminist imagination" is thus considered in its various different guises. In Part I, "Imagining Women," Taylor outlines Wollstonecraft's career from lady's companion to professional writer and philosopher, stressing the fact that, contrary to her own belief, Wollstonecraft's position as female writer was not unique, although certainly unconventional. Taylor then goes on to situate Wollstonecraft's views on sexual difference within the eighteenth-century debates around her, in particular identifying the complexity of Wollstonecraft's simultaneous devotion to and repudiation of Rousseau, whose writings on sexual difference were still so influential in the 1780s and 1790s. Taylor explores Wollstonecraft's complicated debt to Rousseau with sensitivity and playfulness, analyzing those moments in her *oeuvre* that have prompted critics to accuse her of blindly inheriting Rousseau's misogyny. By bringing out the erotic religiosity underpinning Wollstonecraft's feminist imagination, Taylor restores to Wollstonecraft's feminism the "ethical" dimension that accusations of misogyny fail to take into account. She defends Wollstonecraft from these unsympathetic charges by reiterating that Wollstonecraft's plea for the rights of woman was first and foremost based on a desire to see women more virtuous. In effect, Wollstonecraft's feminism was rooted, Taylor suggests, in a desire to see women more godly.

Therefore, while Wollstonecraft, in part following Rousseau, was scathing in her criticism of many of the women she observed around her, especially women of the idle classes, her woman-detracting was motivated, Taylor shows, not by despair at the possibility for the improvement of the female sex (like Rousseau), but on the contrary, by her fervent belief in the potential for women to behave like rational creatures. With characteristic cogency, Taylor traces Wollstonecraft's brand of rational faith back to her involvement with Unitarianism in the late 1780s, highlighting the ways in which Wollstonecraft borrowed from, although ultimately rejected, rational dissent. Wollstonecraft, as Taylor subtly illustrates, was thus greatly influenced by Rousseau, often more than she herself acknowledged; but, crucially, she departed from him in her refusal to subscribe to his deeply held belief that women were made to be the playthings of men. It was not for men, Wollstonecraft insisted, again betraying the extent to which her feminism was at root intertwined with worship, to come between women and God.

In Part II, "Feminism and Revolution," Taylor establishes Wollstonecraft firmly in the context of the various different radicalisms of the late eighteenth century. Taylor's mastery of the period is noteworthy, and she moves from discussions of British radicalism to French revolutionary thought, from natural rights discourse to egalitarianism, with aplomb. The density of material packed into this section is great, but never overwhelming, as Taylor takes pains to render intelligible the differently nuanced lines of thought she refers to, illuminating the late eighteenth century for the specialist and non-specialist alike. By peppering her studied analysis of the intellectual arguments of the day with anecdotes about the personal lives of the actors on her stage, Taylor ensures that the discussion is always lively. In the jaunty section, "Gallic Philosophesses," Taylor relishes the private lives of the female authors whose contribution to feminism she outlines, and the section makes as enjoyable reading as it clearly did writing. Indeed, Taylor's enthusiasm for the private and biographical is central to her thesis in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. "This split between public-political thought and

the private self is an orthodoxy seldom questioned by intellectual historians; to Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries, however, it would have seemed nonsensical. To the eighteenth-century mind, reason and imagination, public professions and private emotions were inseparably (if often problematically) conjoined” (18-19). Taylor’s unashamed refusal to forsake the private in favor of the public in her reassessment of Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries enforces this credo with vigor. The book triumphantly recreates the terms by which Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries would have judged themselves, and calls to be judged by these terms itself.

There is a danger that relocating a notoriously adventurous thinker back in the context of the intellectual climate that nurtured his/her thoughts can serve to undermine the achievement for which he/she is celebrated. Indeed, it is consistent with Taylor’s stated aim that she release Wollstonecraft from some of the misguided tributes that have been laid at her door. However, by examining the extent to which Wollstonecraft was influenced by her contemporaries and by her predecessors, Taylor in fact serves to highlight the uniqueness of Wollstonecraft’s contribution. Although, as she makes clear, Wollstonecraft was not alone either in her feminism or in her particular brand of feminism (Mary Hays and Mary Robinson held and expressed very similar religiously inspired utopian beliefs) it is not just an accident of history that has established Wollstonecraft’s preeminence in the history of feminism. As Taylor’s book incontrovertibly demonstrates, Wollstonecraft’s fearlessness as a person and insight as a writer were extraordinary for her time. It is not without good reason that she has been seized upon as the feminist icon of the pre-Suffragette era. And yet Taylor succeeds in reasserting Wollstonecraft’s significance without succumbing to sentimentalism or fanaticism. Her treatment of Wollstonecraft’s reception since her death in 1797 is authoritative and refreshingly dispassionate, although consistently acute: “Wollstonecraft, a lover of paradoxes, plunged straight into the paradox that was to characterise all subsequent feminisms: the simultaneous affirmation and denial of the ‘peculiarity’, the feminine specificity, of women’s destiny” (226).

*Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* ends with a beguilingly Wollstonecraftian wild wish that it “would be good to be able to bury Mary Wollstonecraft at last; to consign her and her ideas to history” (253). Whilst to do so would indeed represent a victory for Western feminism, one cannot help thinking that the burial of Wollstonecraft would deprive us of an enduringly fertile ground for scholarship, of which, as Taylor’s exemplary book testifies, there is still much to come.

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