

# DILEMMAS OF REPRESENTATION

Mary Wollstonecraft and Germaine de Staël on the French Revolution and Sexual Difference

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### Abbreviations

The following is a list of the short titles of Mary Wollstonecraft's and Germaine de Staël's works cited in this dissertation.

|     |   |
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| VRM | <i>A Vindication of the Rights of Men</i>   |
| VRW | <i>A Vindication of the Rights of Woman</i>   |
| HMV | <i>An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe</i>  |
| MWW | <i>Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman</i>   |
| RPR | <i>Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine, par une femme</i>  |
| DCA | <i>Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des principes qui doivent fonder la République en France</i> |

## 1. Introduction

The French Revolution exerted an immense influence on the reconfiguration of the contemporary political order in France and Britain. Similarly, its impact was equally immediate within the sphere of female authorship. During the late eighteenth century, women writers commented on the democratic theories that were prompted by the Revolution and the events in France inspired them to enter into public debate and voice their demands for greater gender equality. Two prominent female voices that left an indelible mark are Mary Wollstonecraft and Germaine de Staël. The Revolution in France operated increasingly within the works of these political thinkers and their distinct accounts of this historical moment called forth dilemmas of representation that were bound up with contemporary debates on sexual difference<sup>1</sup>. By establishing the content, importance, and context of their works on the Revolution, this dissertation will explore some of the connections between Staël's and Wollstonecraft's representations of the Revolution and their views on women's enfranchisement. Furthermore, this study will also examine how these writers strategically employed the rhetoric of Sensibility to argue for greater equality between the sexes.

The challenges that Staël and Wollstonecraft encountered in effectively managing the language of Sensibility are explored in Lori Jo Marso's article "Defending the Queen: Wollstonecraft and Staël on the Politics of Sensibility and Feminine Difference". In its analysis of these female sentimentalists' writings on Marie-Antoinette, Marso's article foregrounds the idea that, although both women sought to challenge firmly fixed notions of womanhood, they employed different rhetorical strategies (*Wollstonecraft and Staël* 51). Whereas Wollstonecraft

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between the categories of 'sex' and 'gender' was in no way explicit during the late eighteenth century, but I will distinguish between them as follows. In this dissertation, sex is a biological category, referring to the anatomical and physiological characteristics that define men and women. Gender, on the other hand, is construed here as a culturally constructed category, referring to the social and cultural distinctions between the sexes.

opposed Sensibility to expose the ideology of sexual difference as a precarious social fiction, Staël valorised it as a model of femininity in the interests of urging her female readers to consider their similarity in sharing a single fate (Marso, *Defending the Queen* 51). These substantial differences in rhetorical stance were informed by the double potential of Sensibility to either subjugate or empower women (Marso, *Defending the Queen* 44).

Marso's article already hints at how the polemical writings of Staël and Wollstonecraft problematised the traditional belief in sexual difference by focusing on their separate accounts of two political events centred around Marie-Antoinette. I will use this research as a starting point for a broader discussion of how these writers' representations of the Revolution were connected to their views on gender equality. I will look more closely into how their revisions of the significance of the Revolution evolved over time and how these rewritings exerted an influence on their relationship with the language of Sensibility. Although a number of scholars have already examined some of the more striking differences between the political works of these two authors, there has been little discussion of how their views on the need for greater gender equality feed into their self-representation as women writers. This dissertation will, therefore, add to previous research by examining to what extent Staël and Wollstonecraft employed Sensibility as an instrument of authorial self-representation.

To gain insight into how the French Revolution operated within both French and British textual discourse, it is useful to consider it in separate phases rather than as one momentous historical event: an initial phase (1789-92) ranging from the storming of the Bastille until the abolition of the French monarchy, which was followed by the September Massacres; a second phase (1792-94) from September 1792 until the execution of Robespierre, marking the formal end of the Reign of Terror; and a third phase (1794-1804) in which Bonaparte's coronation as Emperor Napoleon I put an official end to the Revolution.

In my comparison of these two authors, I am concerned with Wollstonecraft's earlier responses to the Revolution—i.e. her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). I will also include her *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe* (1794). As for Staël, I will consider her *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine, par une femme* (1793) and *Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des principes qui doivent fonder la République en France*<sup>2</sup>. To provide a more exhaustive analysis of the connections between political history and female authorship, this dissertation will also discuss Wollstonecraft's posthumously published novel *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) and Staël's *Delphine* (1802). Whereas questions of political legitimacy and the condition of women were given a new turn in their political and philosophical works, the conflicts of female agency and oppressive social institutions were articulated more forcefully in their fiction.

Writing within their own historical moment, it remains important to consider that Staël and Wollstonecraft were the products of very different backgrounds. Whereas Staël was a French *salonnière* of noble birth, Wollstonecraft was a woman writer of the English lower-middle classes. Aside from these differences at a personal level, there also existed considerable differences between the two nations in which these women lived. The political culture of pre-Revolutionary France was that of an absolute monarchy clouded in secrecy, while England was blessed with a public sphere that could be considered unique in fundamental ways (Melton 67). Institutionalised after the Glorious Revolution, England's public sphere depended on a vibrant print market that tolerated the public circulation of political pamphlets, journals, and newspapers (Melton 126). Because of its relatively free press, English political culture enjoyed

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<sup>2</sup> Although *Des circonstances* remained unpublished during Staël's lifetime, it was "seemingly drafted between May and October 1798 and revised—with the assistance of Benjamin Constant—in the course of 1799" (Fontana, *Thermidorian Republic* 119).

a measure of transparency that did not exist in France where there were significantly fewer ways of discussing whether the monarchy truly represented the will of its subjects and not its own private interests (Melton 67). Apart from this burgeoning print culture, England's system of electoral politics was equally vital to the transparency of its political culture (Melton 24). Contrary to France, Britain was a mixed monarchy which depended on institutionalised bodies of public opinion through the existence of Parliament (Melton 45). Although many disagreed on whether or not Parliament adequately represented the interests of the nation, "[i]n theory at least, public opinion had an institutional locus, and for this reason the concept was less vexatious in British political discourse than it was in France" (Melton 62).

In the months leading up to the Revolution, French subjects became increasingly preoccupied with the notion of public opinion (Melton 59). The absence of institutions of representative government through which opposition to government policies could be legitimately expressed led to high levels of public distrust (Melton 73). Whereas England's party structure produced a regular flow of communication between those in power and the public, secrecy had become a normative principle of government in France (Melton 70). Although French political culture did possess something of a national representative organ in the form of the Estates-General, "its very structure reinforced the particularism and privilege upon which French society was built" (Melton 47). Because of royal restrictions on the dissemination of political information, no institution apart from the Crown could speak, or act, for the political community as a whole (Melton 63).

By the end of the eighteenth century, it was generally accepted in France that its political culture must somehow be accommodated with representative institutions (Lottes 81). When it transpired that Louis XVI was unwilling to give up his personal sovereignty, the situation in France exploded (Lottes 87). Because of the differences in terms of how French and British subjects viewed their respective governments, the problems on which each nation focused



during the Revolutionary decade were radically different. During the 1790s, the levels of popular antagonism against the French monarchy culminated in the emergence of a political culture that was no longer receptive to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. As a result, “French radicalism was [...] inevitably driven towards republicanism” (Lottes 87). In Britain, on the other hand, few radicals proposed the abolition of the monarchy in favour of the creation of a republic. What the Revolution did do for British politics, however, was trigger an elite and popular interest in parliamentary reform (Lottes 86). In that sense, English radicalism existed, of course, but “the English radicals assumed that the seed of the democratic revolution had already been sown in 1688-9 [...] [just as they] took account of the sovereignty of the very Parliament they criticized” (Lottes 89). In this way, it becomes evident that although the language of French republicanism was certainly present in English textual discourse, it was always tied to “aspirations for reform [that were] firmly linked to existing institutional practices and traditions” (Philip 259).

This does not mean that the political culture of late-eighteenth-century Britain was not sharply divided between ideological extremes. From its inception, the meaning of the French Revolution for Britain remained heavily contested and the heated discussions over its significance profoundly transformed the nation. From the events occurring in France flowed the emergence of debates about natural rights and social reform and Britain witnessed the polarisation of its population into sympathisers and opponents of the Revolution. With the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in 1790, Mary Wollstonecraft joined what is commonly termed the Revolution Controversy—i.e. an explosion of books and pamphlets written in response to the French Revolution and triggered by Richard Price’s sermon *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* (1789). Lauding the French uprising, Price claimed that it would become a source of inspiration for Britain to carry through the reforms begun with the Glorious Revolution (Claeys 13). Price’s celebration of the recent events in France as catalysts

that would encourage far-reaching changes throughout Europe prompted Edmund Burke to write his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Contrary to Price, Burke denied any parallels between the French Revolution and the events of 1688-9 and he condemned French developments by arguing that the revolutionaries' contempt for their government's time-honoured institutions could only end in social ruin (Claeys 14). Written less than a month after his *Reflections* were published, Wollstonecraft's reply to Burke countered his arguments in favour of tradition, propagating the use of Reason as a desirable alternative to custom as a guarantee of liberty (Claeys 51). Capitalising on French efforts to reduce arbitrary privileges, Wollstonecraft was amongst those who heralded the events of 1789 as the eradication of tyranny and superstition.

Over the next few years, hundreds of contributions to the Revolution Controversy were published. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* constituted her second reaction to the intellectual battle over the importance of the Revolution and the validity of Britain's forms of government. In her first *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft had defended the principles of the Revolution, expressing a vivid desire to import those principles into Britain. Because conditions in the two nations were dissimilar, however, Wollstonecraft's main motivation was not to seek identical reforms in Britain as those welcomed in France. Responding to the British situation by linking her own causes to the enthusiasm sparked by the Revolution was far more important to her. In her second *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft attempted to refocus the dominant political debates of the period alongside the axis of gender. Propagating a highly progressive critique of the contemporary conditions of female education, Wollstonecraft argued that the envisioned successes of the Revolution were held back by women's lack of educational possibilities (Weiss 3). During the eighteenth century, women's supposed intellectual inferiority was believed to be innate and immutable as it was commonly naturalised on the basis of their finer sensibilities (Barker-Benfield 3). Wollstonecraft, however,

sought to provide an alternative answer by exposing the socially instituted oppression of women through categories of gender. Raising awareness of the ways in which the prevailing gender associations of the period have held back women's intellectual development, Wollstonecraft emphasised how women's reason was in reality open to change and improvement. As we will see, this idea of the social constructedness of gender would become the basis of her claim for improved conditions of female education.

Wollstonecraft's two *Vindications* appeared at a time in which women writers from various political positions were weighing in on the different sides of the Revolution debate. Despite the fact that female authors were intensely involved in public issues during the 1790s, the intellectual contributions of women were met with persistent criticism (Weiss 14). Because different types of literature were believed to be better adapted to each sex (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 108), the question of women's access to masculine forms of cultural production produced intense anxieties about political unrest and cultural effeminacy. As a result of these anxieties that attended female writing, Wollstonecraft struggled to assume a sense of authority that would support her writing on the French Revolution. Because politics was defined as a site of knowledge that was felt to be inappropriate for women (Kelly, *English Fiction* 25), female authors of the period were compelled to consider the problem of finding the appropriate genre for their responses to the Revolution. Accordingly, they either "[encoded] subversive arguments about sexual politics within accepted literary genres and styles" or they "explicitly confronted those asymmetries of power which inhered in the literary conventions of their day" (Keen 173-174).

In spite of the sharp gender differentiations that subsisted in late-eighteenth-century cultural conventions, it remains important to be aware of the possibilities for female activism that were opened up by the French Revolution. For Britain, the events occurring in France created a politicised environment initially tolerant of ideas of social reform. Because of the

government's liberal censorship regime in the early-1790s (Melton 126), the centrality of print culture to England's public sphere offered women a productive setting for female intellectualism. In France, on the contrary, print culture had been susceptible to strict royal censorship ever since the seventeenth century (Melton 64). The monarchy's containment of political publications gave French authors—whether male or female—significantly fewer opportunities of debating domestic politics in print (Melton 67). French subjects, however, had other sources of political information besides printed materials. During the Enlightenment, print culture was only one aspect of the virtual space of the public sphere enabling the critical discussion of new ideas. Although they never acquired the importance in English culture that they did in France, the salons of French high society offered many upper-class subjects a way of debating literary and philosophical affairs as well as disseminating political news.

The salon emerged in seventeenth-century France as a form of elite sociability that allowed for regular interaction between men and women on relatively equal terms (Pekacz 86). It was hosted by an upper-class woman and although conversation was an indispensable part of salon culture, it was also a place of distraction as well as a centre of literary production. Towards the end of the Old Regime, female-governed salons had become well-established cultural institutions of upper-class life (Kale 28). Although they became increasingly politicised after 1789, the salon survived the repressive climate of the French Revolution (Kale 76). During the years of Jacobin rule, salons were closed temporarily because of increasing hostility towards private sociability (Kale 58), but they slowly reopened after Thermidor and under the Directory (Kale 69).

The hostess, or *salonnière*, constituted the communicative heart of the salon because she performed a mediating function by presiding over and participating in intellectually stimulating discussions. In contrast to other institutions of the public sphere, the salon was exceptional for according women such a degree of influence and authority. Linked in the public

mind to widely accepted feminine characteristics, “the salon created a unique opportunity for [...] upper-class women to function outside the strictly domestic sphere [...] without violating traditional feminine social roles” (Pekacz 86). *Salonnières*, in fact, “typified notions of female beauty, sociability, and charm central to the aristocratic definitions of the female gender as rooted in Sensibility” (Marso, *Defending the Queen* 46).

Daughter to the finance minister of the king of France and wife to the ambassador of the king of Sweden, Germaine de Staël was brought up near political power. An established woman of letters, Staël became involved in French Revolutionary politics by opening her own influential salon at the Swedish embassy on the *Rue de Bac*. Staël actively participated in the conversations that were held in her salon, always seeking to influence the general orientation of politics. By having her salon function as a forum for discussion about domestic affairs as well as a site of reconciliation between moderate republicans and constitutional monarchists, it provided her with the opportunity to play an active role in an ever-expanding public sphere. During the 1790s, Staël, in fact, struggled with roughly the same associations of gender and genre that continued to pervade the literary sphere in Britain (Melton 156). Debarred from intellectual and public activity by her sex, Staël believed salon sociability could prove favourable to women’s participation in the political realm. Contemporary gender conventions, in fact, attributed to women a singular ability to civilise men (Taylor 156). According to conventional ideas about their devotion to propriety, women were believed to be capable of subduing the destructive impulses of men (Taylor 156). For Staël, this notion of women as moral and civilising agents was seen “not merely as a feminine attribute but as a social and political responsibility” (Kale 13). As we will see when discussing her novel *Delphine*, Staël maintained that women were necessary for the preservation of public virtue because they were able to guarantee that the public actions of men would always be informed by an unconditional commitment to the common good of the people.

Although female-governed salons fostered a certain aristocratic feminism, many eighteenth-century *salonnières* lacked physical access to either power or the public sphere. It is important to bear in mind that “[t]he identity of a *salonnière* was inextricably tied to that of her male guests. Although they submitted to her authority and governance, her position ultimately rested on their approval” (Melton 213). Additionally, even if the desire to participate in a male-dominated world of letters was precisely what had compelled many upper-class women to host a salon, the salons of the *Ancien Régime* proved relatively unfavourable to female authorship (Hesse 42). It seems, then, that because of their ultimate exclusion from the public sphere by the French Civil Code, “[t]he power of women in the eighteenth century is something of an optical illusion that magnified and made remarkable what was simply an aristocratic alternative to the dissipation of court life and the servitude of the Victorian private sphere” (Kale 40).

The decade of the 1790s, by contrast, “witnessed a dramatic expansion of female participation in public cultural life and political discourse” (Hesse 42). It was, in fact, the liberalised publishing world that was introduced by the Jacobins after the abolishment of royal regulation that fostered female cultural participation (Hesse 42). During the 1790s, women from all sides of the political spectrum sought to enter into debates about national politics in order to remedy what they admitted to be injustices by the authorities. Staël was one of these voices and she came to the defense of Marie-Antoinette in spite of political differences. In her *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine*, Staël publicly defended the queen against the charges of corruption and licentiousness. Although the queen was far from popular with her subjects at the time of her trial, Staël attempted to evoke her female readers’ sympathy by indulging in Sensibility and by reminding her readership of their vulnerable position in the social order. For Staël, the execution of Marie-Antoinette seemed to mark a juncture in Revolutionary history after which all possibilities for women’s participation in the public sphere would be closed off (Sheriff 64).

Although Staël was right in predicting that the French Revolution would ultimately fail to grant women legal and political equality, the Revolution had still opened up significant opportunities for women to take part in political discourse both in France and in Britain. As the Revolution developed, however, Britain's initial receptiveness to the public discussion of new ideas soon diminished. The government grew increasingly intolerant of both radical and reformist voices and by the middle of the decade, several developments had changed the terms of the debate in ways that did not serve the cause of British radicalism. Although political repression existed throughout the Revolutionary decade, the government's proceedings for seditious and treasonable practices caused many British radicals to move away from radicalism or become ever more ambiguous in constructing their partisanship (Johnston 7).

The silencing and increasing ambiguity of radical and reformist writers, however, was not simply the result of government repression. During the ideologically driven war with France, British writers could no longer publicly show their support for the Revolution considering that such signs of solidarity were vilified as unpatriotic, and even treacherous, behaviour. In addition to these political concerns, an upsurge of loyalist and conservative voices emerged in response to radical publications. Because of loyalist agitation, British radicals became increasingly identified with the Jacobin philosophical tradition. This equation of British sympathisers with extremist republican enthusiasts involved a rhetorical ploy on the loyalists' part and the term was used indiscriminately against anyone seeking reform or questioning the established order (Philip 257).

It was within this context that Wollstonecraft published *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*. Presenting herself as an objective historiographer of the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft purported to explain the Terror by looking back on the beginnings of Revolutionary history. In doing so, she was able to represent the Revolution as inherently flawed from the beginning. In arguing that the Terror occurred

because of the corruption that attends arbitrary hereditary government, Wollstonecraft wished to reclaim Revolutionary optimism for those in Britain. Unlike many English supporters of the Revolution in its early stages, Wollstonecraft did not renounce her faith in the Revolution as an event that would regenerate the world. Because of its many failings, however, Wollstonecraft was compelled to revise her earlier representations, explaining rather than celebrating French developments. Living in France during the Terror, the direct experience of the Revolution made her conclude that political reform needed to be more gradual in order for it to be an effective liberalising force.

Like Wollstonecraft, Staël needed to integrate the parameter of the Terror into her political thought. Initially a constitutional monarchist, the complexity and volatility of the Revolution made her turn towards conservative republicanism. In *Des circonstances*, Staël sketched the outlines of a peaceful future for the republican government at a time when French political history was in full transition. Written during the politically unstable context after Thermidor, Staël provided a retrospective assessment of Revolutionary history while arguing in favour of the consolidation of the republic for the sake of peace and stability (Fontana, *Thermidorian Republic* 121). Taking into consideration socio-economic factors alongside the nation's hopes, fears, and expectations in the aftermath of the Terror, Staël went out of her way to distance the current government from the horrors brought about by the Jacobin regime. In *Des circonstances*, Staël, in fact, identified the nation as a community produced and established by print and conversation, emphasising the unifying role that imaginative literature might play. From there, she was able to draw attention to the ways in which women could play a vital role in producing social unity. Ultimately, her pamphlet remained unpublished, however, considering that "in the few months Staël spent drafting her text circumstances had changed too dramatically to allow for its publication" (Fontana, *Thermidorian Republic* 136).



The changing course of the Revolution made it overtly clear that women would be excluded from its gender-specific conception of citizenship (Hillman 234). In the feverish atmosphere of the late-1790s, both Staël and Wollstonecraft were forced to recognise that the Revolutionary project had from the outset been committed to a vision of democracy from which women were notably absent (Hillman 234). The works of Enlightenment philosophers, most notably those by political thinker and sentimental novelist Jean-Jacques Rousseau, had caused changing conceptions of the role of women to emerge during the late eighteenth century (McMillan 27). The ideal of the Republican mother, for instance, was partially based on Rousseau's idea that nature had made men and women for different, and above all complementary, social roles (McMillan 27). According to Rousseau, women had no business participating in public or political affairs, and so the republican ideals of feminine virtue and patriotic motherhood carefully reproduced this ideology of domesticity. As we will see, Staël and Wollstonecraft challenged these ideas by maintaining that women had specific duties prescribed to them by their domestic role and that they should be able to enter the polity as wives and mothers.

Wollstonecraft's criticisms of Rousseau were not only articulated in her political writings but also in her novel *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman*. At first, Wollstonecraft opposed sentimental fiction as a literary system because it reified a false ideology of sexual difference through its valorisation of Sensibility. In Wollstonecraft's view, novels of Sensibility were flawed because of their consistent mistreatment of the female character. Traditional representations of women in sentimental novels were based on prevailing notions of sexual difference. According to the essentialised images of femininity as disseminated through sentimental novels, women were commonly characterised as excessively emotional or irrational. Wollstonecraft's disgust for novels of Sensibility thus specifically originated in the fact that "[such] literature both [reflected] and [influenced] social and political arrangements

and, with few exceptions, [sanctioned] the oppression of women” (Carlson 322). In spite of these criticisms, however, Wollstonecraft recognised the political efficacy of pre-Revolutionary sentimental fiction and she turned to imaginative literature to have the novel serve her political radicalism. Fiction, “in its guise as ‘mere’ entertainment, [...] was ideally suited for the role of ideological communication [during the 1790s]” (Kelly, *English Fiction* 11). With *Wrongs*, Wollstonecraft primarily sought to authenticate her novel’s progressive message upon emotional grounds by evoking sympathy in her readers instead of merely advocating possible change as she did in her pamphlets on the Revolution. The literary developments into the area of Jacobin fiction distinctly illustrate the existence of such an inextricable relationship between political activism and affective cultural production. Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs* can, in fact, be argued to fit into this trend for Jacobin novels. Gary Kelly in *The English Jacobin Novel: 1780-1805* argues that “the English Jacobin novelists wished to do more than imitate Richardson’s portrayal of the relation between individual psychology and action; they wished to show the relationship between individual feelings and actions, and society at large” (Kelly, *English Jacobin Novel* 118). It is this specific concern for the interplay between plot and character which informed Wollstonecraft’s novel. As we will see, *Wrongs* presented the reader with a study of the corruption of its heroine’s understanding at the hands of a corrupt society that subordinates women by denying them access to education.

By the same token, Staël published an epistolary novel entitled *Delphine* to render the truth of women’s subordination in French society transparent for her readership. Because the sentimental novel was predominantly read by women in the eighteenth century (Ty 44), Staël was able to reach out to a wider female audience. Significantly, the story of her novel takes place in Paris between April 1790 and September 1792 while some of the letters hint at the larger parliamentary debates on the legalisation of divorce. In thus having the Revolution function as the novel’s background, Staël was able to have *Delphine* serve her arguments in

favour of women's inclusion in the political realm. In doing so, she was also able to formulate an implicit critique of the contemporary consular regime.

This dissertation is divided into two parts, both of them drawing on Staël's and Wollstonecraft's oeuvre dating from 1789 until 1804. The first part, "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Revolution Controversy", begins with an opening discussion of the intellectual and political background to Wollstonecraft's progressive politics. This section goes on to explore the ways in which her arguments for women's rights informed her different representations of the French Revolution. The second part, "Germaine de Staël and the French Revolution", begins with an introductory discussion of Staël's career as a *salonnière* and as a literary professional. This section will adopt a linear perspective on Staël's literary and non-literary writings, drawing particular attention to her gendered responses to the French Revolution. Each chapter of these two parts will provide a separate treatment of one of Staël's or Wollstonecraft's works. These chapters will be partitioned into (1) a background section commenting on the larger socio-political context; (2) a content-related section discussing the author's representation of the Revolution while establishing a link with their views on sexual difference; and finally, (3) a section reflecting on the relationship between the form of publication, the intended target audience, and the rhetorical strategies used in defense of the Revolution.

## 2. Mary Wollstonecraft and the Revolution Controversy

### 2.1 From *Rights of Men* (1790) to “A Revolution in Female Manners”

The collapse of royal authority in France during the summer of 1789 raised important questions about the nature of political authority that were international in scope. These were not questions that Britain could steer clear of, and the Revolution in France was followed and debated intensely by British subjects. As writers from across the political spectrum were either asserting or denying the importance of the Revolution for domestic politics, England's public sphere soon became a site of ideological contestation. Political pamphlets on the events occurring in France circulated in large numbers during the early stages of the Revolution Controversy, but it should be noted that British writers mobilised multiple genres to control the textual representation of the Revolution. Although there was a wide array of newspapers, pamphlets, and political journals published during the 1790s, the centrality of literary publications to the Controversy should not be underestimated. The large-scale cultural response that was triggered by the Revolution not only consisted of the proliferation of poems, moral tales, and novels but also the strategic inclusion of literary traits in non-fictional publications.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* is indicative of how political writers deployed literary conventions to sway public affections. In much the same way as other writers of the period, Wollstonecraft both reconstructed and incorporated elements of pre-Revolutionary Gothic-sentimental fiction into her political discourse. Written during the first phase of the Revolution Controversy, Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Men* was published as a reply to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In his *Reflections*, Burke denied the importance of the Revolution for Britain on the grounds that the British polity was already properly organised (Claeys 15). According to Burke, the traditional framework of society should not be subjected to far-reaching reform because it was both sanctioned by history and inextricably interwoven with people's affections and personal interests (Claeys 15). For this

reason, any attempt to rebuild political society on the basis of abstract theorising would necessarily upset tradition and ultimately lead to anarchy (Claeys 15).

By the same token, Burke maintained that the English constitution should not be subjected to human interference. His assessment of the dangers of unrestrained enquiry compelled him to compare the constitution to a mansion altered over generations. In light of his theory of the Sublime as expounded in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the importance of Burke's comparison becomes readily apparent. In his *Enquiry*, Burke attempted to systematise a connection between the Sublime and the concept of Terror. To this end, he identified Terror as the governing principle that determines our emotional response to sublime phenomena. In turn, the Sublime came to be associated with power—more specifically, a kind of power which overwhelms and suspends our reasoning faculty (O'Neill 195). To justify his defense of the established order in his *Reflections*, Burke represented the English constitution as a source of the Sublime. In his view, the constitution was a long-established institutional form which commanded loyalty because it embodied the inherited knowledge of previous generations. Due to its ancient origin, the constitution was productive of a passion similar to Terror, and so it evoked awe, reverence, and respect in its subjects. As Chaplin affirms, “Burke sought to mystify the authority of the constitution and to cast its origin far back in time in order to render its power all the more awesome” (116).

The rhetorical strategies through which Burke defended the established order were not lost on Wollstonecraft. Burke's obsession with the past and his defense of the English constitution provided her with an opportunity to discredit his counterrevolutionary project. Already in her *Rights of Men* did Wollstonecraft unearth the political significance of Burke's Gothic-inspired rhetoric, and she turned to her own political purposes his comparison of the English constitution to an ancient and noble structure. Drawing upon the Gothic as an

established functionalised discursive practice, Wollstonecraft linked the political status quo that Burke defended to feudalism and barbarism. By asking “why [it was considered] a duty to repair an ancient castle, built in barbarous ages, [and] of Gothic materials” (*VRM* 41), Wollstonecraft reworked Burke’s representation of the constitution by problematising its Gothic heritage. Whereas Burke argued that the English constitution should be regularly repaired and maintained rather than destroyed, Wollstonecraft essentially compared his time-honoured castle to a decayed structure in dire need of replacement (Davison 121). The dialectic between Reason and Gothic irrationality informed Wollstonecraft’s appropriation of Burke’s rhetoric up to the point where she called for the abandonment of the Gothic structures of the past. This, in turn, allowed her to advocate for the building of newer structures based upon reasonable experience.

Aside from effectively making the realm of the aesthetic the medium of his counterrevolutionary project, Burke also utilised the affective power of Sensibility to propagate his political ideas. In his representation of the fate of Marie-Antoinette in his *Reflections*, for instance, Burke played on the sensibilities of his readership to convince them of the moral bankruptcy of the French Revolution. In the hopes of encouraging his readership to the queen’s defense—and thereby to the defense of the established order—Burke recounted his apprehension before the downfall of Marie-Antoinette at the hands of the Revolutionary crowd on 5-6 October 1789. By drawing attention to how Marie-Antoinette’s suffering activated his own Sensibility, Burke attempted to elicit a response of communal pity and outrage in his readership. According to contemporary understandings of the basis of morality, Burke’s display of sympathy in the face of the queen’s suffering would be “implicitly understood [...] [as] a natural expression of an irreducibly human Sensibility” (McCann 36). As a result, the contrast with the Revolutionaries’ violent treatment of Marie-Antoinette would become even greater, and so Burke was able to launch “an attack on the perverse unnatural morals and attendant social manners of the Revolutionaries” (O’Neill 210). In emphasising their lack of compassion

the way he did, Burke represented the Revolution as “a revolt against [the] natural moral order and the world of hierarchy affectively intuited from it and built upon it” (O’Neill 210).

Although Burke’s account of Marie-Antoinette was supposed to elicit sympathy in his readership, Wollstonecraft soon recognised that it was especially the queen’s exceptional beauty that affected Burke and compelled him to publicly defend her. It is useful here to consider how in Burke’s *Enquiry* the Sublime was not only opposed to, but also privileged over, the Beautiful. Burke’s distinction between these aesthetic categories, in fact, centred on the traditional differences between the sexes: “the masculine ideal [was] constructed as useful, moral, and awe-inspiring in accordance with the Sublime, while woman [was] described as ornamental, pleasing, and subordinate in accordance with the Beautiful” (Skolnik 217). In the hands of Burke and Wollstonecraft, the war over the Revolution’s meaning simultaneously became a war over the cultural language of masculinity and femininity. Burke’s political categories in his *Reflections* were his own aesthetic ones in the *Enquiry* (O’Neill 208), and Wollstonecraft attempted to expose and refute the patriarchal values that they propagated.

To counter Burke’s assessment of the Revolution, Wollstonecraft, for instance, attempted to discredit his representation of Marie-Antoinette by exposing his Sensibility as discriminatory. In Wollstonecraft’s view, “Burke’s conspicuously selective feeling in the *Reflections*—[i.e.] his identification with and chivalric defense of Marie-Antoinette in contrast to his repulsion from Jacobin women [...]—[...] [undermined] [...] the essentialist notion of Sensibility as a moral instinct” (Skolnik 214). It follows that “it [was] the affectation of Sensibility, rather than feeling itself, which she [criticised] in him” (Bell 53) and thus Wollstonecraft “[suggested] that Burke [was] effeminate rather than possessing the feminine virtues of sympathy and Sensibility he [claimed]” (Gary Kelly qtd in Schulman 46). To align Burke’s assessment of the Revolution with all the weaknesses of the conventionally effeminate, Wollstonecraft drew attention to their contrasting forms of morality: whereas his was unduly

fixed on Sensibility, hers was based on Reason (Bell 24). At the time when these pamphlets were written, Reason was gendered masculine whereas Sensibility was gendered feminine. Although these concepts had no intrinsic political alignment, they became increasingly politicised over the course of the Revolutionary decade. The divided ideological reactions to the Revolution sharpened the existing dichotomy up to the point where Reason came to be associated with challenging the status quo while Sensibility was thought of as harnessing more conservative views (Bell 52). Within the context of the gendered politics of Reason and Sensibility, Wollstonecraft ridiculed Burke for his “pampered Sensibility” (*VRM* 6) to accentuate his use of conventionally feminine rhetorical strategies. Maintaining that Burke’s excessive capacity for Sensibility left him susceptible to flights of passion that inflamed his imagination and impaired his understanding, Wollstonecraft represented herself as the masculine voice of Reason (Bell 53). Avowedly unburdened by the erroneous influences of Sensibility, Wollstonecraft—unlike Burke—was able to recognise the cause of justice embodied by the Revolution (Schulman 43). In thus ridiculing Burke’s excessively emotional language, it appears that Wollstonecraft implicitly reproduced the same conventional stereotypes she sought to denounce. In representing Burke as the feminine voice of Sensibility, Wollstonecraft “[employed] a rhetorical device that had been [...] used to explain or excuse the exclusion of women from the public sphere—that is, the idea that the female pollutes rational debate by allowing a heightened emotionality to get the better of good judgment” (Schulman 43). As mentioned before, however, Wollstonecraft primarily criticised Burke for his affected and artificial style (Bell 53). In reality, then, “Wollstonecraft’s primary aesthetic and moral distinction [was] between truth and artifice, and [thus] her critique of Burke’s distinction between the sublime and beautiful [...] [accorded] with her questioning of essentialist, binary oppositions” (Skolnik 213).



Sentimental conventions could be used to convey social visions, and Wollstonecraft soon recognised the danger posed by Burke's identification of the Beautiful with pleasure and weakness. Wollstonecraft not only appropriated Burke's aesthetic categories to oppose his assessment of the Revolution but also to demystify the ideology behind his language that locked women into identifying with hyper-feminine stereotypes. Her objective, however, was not to eradicate the category of the Beautiful but "to reconstitute [it] as a radical aesthetic mode synonymous with virtue and equally attainable by men and women" (Tom Furniss as qtd in Hinnant 22). To do so, Wollstonecraft "[combined] pairs of traits that Burke was inclined to keep separate: pleasure and pain, love and admiration" (Hinnant 22). Additionally, Wollstonecraft not only used what her contemporaries would see as a masculine voice. Her rhetorical position, in fact, changed constantly throughout the *Rights of Men*, rendering the representation of her gender identity as a writer all the more ambiguous (Skolnik 212). Despite denouncing Burke for his excessive exhibitions of emotionality, Wollstonecraft at times displayed her own equally ornamental capacity for Sensibility, imitating his feminine rhetorical strategies. Admonishing him for "[mourning] for the idle tapestry that decorated a gothic pile" and for the "pangs [he] felt for insulted nobility" (*VRM* 60), Wollstonecraft described her own indignation at Burke's selective account of French developments in similarly hyper-sentimental terms: "[s]uch misery demands more than tears—I pause to recollect myself; and smother the contempt I feel rising for your rhetorical flourishes and infantine Sensibility-----  
-----" (*VRM* 60). At times, then, Wollstonecraft enacted rhetorically the same criticisms she directed at Burke. In doing so, the categories of the ordinarily feminine and the traditionally masculine were no longer understood in stable terms. In this way, "the stylistic dislocation of sex and gender in the *Rights of Men* performatively [anticipated] the argument about gender construction in the *Rights of Woman*" (Skolnik 208).

Although less known than her *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft's first *Vindication* contained important clues as to its central themes for it was as much about the ideological construction of sexual identity as it was a defense of the Revolution. The theme of the relations between the public and the private sphere had already been hinted at in the *Rights of Men* where Wollstonecraft asserted that private morality is the principal source of public virtue: "[t]he happiness of the whole must arise from the happiness of the constituent parts, or the essence of justice is sacrificed to a supposed grand arrangement" (*VRM* 53). In her *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft went even further by exposing how male tyranny in the private sphere inhibits public morality: "the private or public virtue of women is very problematical; for Rousseau, and a numerous list of male writers, insist that she should all her life, be subjected to a severe restraint, that of propriety" (*VRW* 225). In Wollstonecraft's view, female education should become a national concern because improved conditions of women's educational opportunities would result in the moral progression of society as a whole. By imposing a confined and limited education upon girls who are destined to become the mothers of future citizens, the progress of public virtue is inhibited. In dedicating her *Rights of Woman* to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, whose proposal regarding national education in France had disappointed her, Wollstonecraft made a point about gender and education that she believed had important ramifications for Britain. In his pamphlet, Talleyrand argued that women should only receive a domestic education, and so Wollstonecraft wrote an elaborate response in which she argued for an intellectual and functional education for women. In thus demanding equality of education, Wollstonecraft attempted to include women's rights as citizens into the Revolutionary project.

To understand Wollstonecraft's philosophy of education which centred on the active encouragement of the development of reason in women, it is useful to first consider her relationship with the concept of Sensibility. Throughout her career, Wollstonecraft condemned women's subordination in society and the contribution to it through a culture of Sensibility

which upheld prevailing notions of sexual difference. The gendering of education, amongst other things, was a result of this belief in natural differences between the sexes. To denounce society's insistence on the cultivation of feminine charms and accomplishments for women, Wollstonecraft dedicated a considerable amount of space to criticising Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophical opinions concerning women's education in his *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (1762).

Versions of Wollstonecraft's theoretical ideas on the conditions of female education had already been articulated four years earlier in her first novel *Mary: A Fiction* (1788). *Mary* not only prefigured Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* in its maintaining that the root of the problem of women's subordination was the gendering of education. It also powerfully complemented her non-fictional writing in its implicit rewriting of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's didactic programme for *Émile* in the interests of women. The most evident aspects of her disagreement with Rousseau in the *Rights of Woman* were, first, his description of the education of Sophie and, second, his conception of female virtue as founded in modesty. Rousseau's insistence on the cultivation of modesty in women was essentially a reference to the ideas of earlier authors such as David Hume who claimed that women should receive "a more restrictive education than men" (Battersby 49). Hume essentially argued for the necessity of female purity because of patrilineal social constructions of power (Roberts and Snow 52). From this perspective, virtues such as modesty and chastity were politically useful because "civil society [had] an interest in knowing that family bloodlines [were] pure and intact" (Roberts and Snow 52). Women who engaged in pre- or extramarital relationships threatened the social system which rested on family descent, and so restrictive female virtues could "act as useful social controls" (Battersby 49).

In her criticisms of Rousseau's philosophy of education, Wollstonecraft also discussed Staël's appraisal of Book V of *Émile* in her *Lettres sur les écrits et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau* (1788). Wollstonecraft here represented Staël as a naïve, uncritical reader of

Rousseau's writings, whose "misty reason [...] [was] employed rather to burnish than to snap her chains" (VRW 176). It should be noted, however, that Staël's and Wollstonecraft's views on women and on Rousseau were not as different as these criticisms might imply (Trouille 235). In spite of her scathing remarks on Staël's valorisation of women's natural sensibilities, Wollstonecraft also drew upon some of the period's patriarchal myths surrounding femininity to argue for women's rights. As we will see, Wollstonecraft herself also accepted certain aspects of contemporary gender definitions to be able to get her message across to the widest possible audience.

Although Wollstonecraft adopted Rousseau's empiricist standard of education developed throughout *Émile*, she relentlessly attacked him for limiting such an education to boys. Rousseau's philosophy of education was, in fact, "explicitly derived from a conception of the female mind as entirely different from the male mind" (Cohen 327). As a result, *Émile* was entitled to an elaborate education whereas Sophie was to be trained only as a wife to *Émile* and as a mother to his children. By recuperating Rousseau's educational programme for the interests of women, Wollstonecraft intended to counter his view that men and women were fundamentally different and, therefore, in need of different educational programmes. In doing so, Wollstonecraft attempted to expose the ways in which women's intellectual weaknesses are not produced by nature but by education. Due to the imprinting of essentialised definitions of womanhood through the acquirement of superficial accomplishments, "women [became] slaves not just to men but to unconscious mental patterns imposed on them in youth" (Taylor 88). Wollstonecraft's attacks on Sophie, therefore, "[were] directed not at her plausibility but at her genesis" (Taylor 85). Wollstonecraft never suggested that women like Sophie did not exist. She merely sought to expose the process whereby girls are *made* women in early childhood.

Wollstonecraft not only intended to counter Rousseau's narrative of Sophie's education, but also his conception of women's virtue as founded in modesty. Rousseau contended that

women's behaviour had to be governed by restrictive feminine virtues, such as modesty, "because their desires [were] raised by the imagination and [were] thus limitless" (Reuter 929). Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, argued that virtue should be founded on reason because the cultivation of modesty was more likely to corrupt the female character than improve it. Wollstonecraft explicitly criticised Rousseau's instructional programme for Sophie by observing how it promoted the acquirement of exterior accomplishments at the expense of internal virtue. Only targeted at rendering women more desirable for men, Wollstonecraft argued that the cultural conditions of women's education degraded them to objects of male desire, incapable of independent thought: "how could Rousseau expect [women] to be virtuous and constant when reason is neither allowed to be the foundation of their virtue, nor truth the object of their inquiries?" (VRW 164). In place of such specifically feminine virtues, Wollstonecraft even went as far as to insist that modesty should be cultivated by both sexes. By claiming that "all the causes of female weakness, as well as depravity [...] branch out of one grand cause—want of chastity in men" (VRW 131), Wollstonecraft essentially argued for a less sexualised application of such conventionally feminine virtues as modesty because she wanted men and women to be educated similarly. Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* can, therefore, be read as "a sustained attempt to redefine the terms of conservative Sensibility [...] in ways which suggest equality, self-respect, and independence, rather than following the code of feminine propriety, and in ways which are applicable to men as well" (Jones 106).

As mentioned before, Wollstonecraft opposed Sensibility because she recognised it as a cultural and discursive formation that endorsed patriarchal myths of femininity (Barker-Benfield 3). On the other hand, it provided her with a literary discourse that positively valued feminine qualities (Barker-Benfield 361). Wollstonecraft's ambivalent relationship towards Sensibility has attracted attention from a wide range of academic interests and multiple scholars during the 1980s and 1990s have debated and condemned Wollstonecraft's contrasting uses of

Sensibility. As Thomas Ford demonstrates in “Mary Wollstonecraft and the Motherhood of Feminism”, Susan Gubar’s reappraisal of Wollstonecraft in 1994 culminated in the creation of the term ‘feminist misogyny’—i.e. a term referring to a general pattern whereby “a speech that seeks to vindicate the rights of woman [...] undermines the conditions of its own enunciation, and by doing so places in question the possibility of any feminist speech at all” (191). In these interpretations, scholars have often concurred with the statement that it is precisely where Wollstonecraft appears to be at her most progressive—in eradicating the distinction between public and private forms of virtue—that she also seems most traditional—in reinforcing the view that marriage and motherhood remain the principal occupations for most women. In the *Rights of Woman*, for instance, Wollstonecraft argued that women should be better educated because they had a duty to be patriot mothers, instilling in their children a love of their country and rewarding their husbands for their efforts in the political realm: “[w]ould men but generously snap our chains, [...] they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers” (*VRM* 231). Because of her insistence on how improved conditions of female education might improve the lives of men, Wollstonecraft’s writings have often been regarded as unwittingly reproducing the logic of the patriarchal ideology she sought to denounce.

Although more recent readings during the 1990s and 2000s have undermined the historical understanding of Wollstonecraft’s works, “echoes of the charge of feminist misogyny can still be heard” (Ford 191). Aside from Ford’s suggestion that Wollstonecraft consciously thematised this paradox in her writings, a closer look at her rhetoric challenges these accusations of feminist misogyny. To account for some of the contradictions underlying Wollstonecraft’s oeuvre, it is useful to bear in mind the different audiences to which she addressed her works. By acknowledging that Wollstonecraft articulated the same discourse

differently in keeping with her intended target audience, we are invited to consider some of the contextual conditions which helped shape the strategic choices she was forced to make.

First of all, it remains important to recognise the limitations imposed on women writers during the 1790s. In the *Rights of Men*, for instance, Wollstonecraft effectively appropriated the rhetoric of the masculine sublime as a stylistic mode to challenge the prevailing gender categories of the period (Skolnik 208). Needless to say, Wollstonecraft's marginalised position as a woman "enabled her to recognise that culture, language, discourse and identity were not free spaces for the natural play of individuality but structured by power relations of several kinds" (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 21). As a result, Wollstonecraft was compelled "to adhere to established rhetorical conventions in order to [...] constitute her authority as a political philosopher and writer" (Skolnik 209). Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft also had to write in a way that would reach the widest possible readership if she wanted to politicise both men and women. For this reason, Wollstonecraft also had to identify with her own sex in order to represent the female ideal (Skolnik 219). For this reason, Wollstonecraft, of course, fell back on the use of Sensibility at appropriate moments in her text. The apparent contradictions in Wollstonecraft's writings, then, do not originate from personal uncertainties, but they are the result of the challenges that a woman writer participating in a male-dominated rhetorical culture was undoubtedly faced with (Skolnik 207).

Such conjectures about Wollstonecraft's projected readership help us reach a better understanding of how she may have hoped her texts would function within the Revolution Controversy. Since "all forms of writing were already strongly associated with either 'masculine' or 'feminine' culture" (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 108), Wollstonecraft combined existing discourses to empower her political radicalism. The specifically masculine form of the *Vindications*, for instance, was geared towards a predominantly male audience in order to mobilise change. Her message was controversial, and Wollstonecraft recognised that

she needed to find a balance between advancing progressive arguments in writing and showing that what she proposed did not require a radical reversal of the established order. As a result, Wollstonecraft argued for improved conditions of female education by asserting that even if women would not themselves be active citizens, they were still the mothers of future citizens. Hence, the terms put forth for educational change were almost purely social because it helped mitigate the radicalism inherent in her progressive demands. Wollstonecraft, in fact, anticipated the charge that too much education would ‘masculinise’ women which, on a large scale, could potentially invert the natural gender order (Weiss 16). She even went as far as to reassure her male audience that “[she did] not wish [women] to have power over men; but over themselves” (VRW 133).

In thus emphasising how men might benefit from improved conditions of female education, Wollstonecraft attempted to challenge the subordination of women through urging a revised conception of their domestic role as wives and mothers. The ideal of the patriot mother, therefore, was one to which even Wollstonecraft was willing to subscribe because she recognised its possibilities to furnish a language of empowerment for women. By considering such authorial motivation and the inevitability of ideology in a male-dominated public sphere, it becomes apparent why it is unfair to accuse Wollstonecraft of endorsing a gender conservatism that defined women exclusively in relation to motherhood.

## ***2.2 An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe (1794)***

With the publication of her two *Vindications*, Wollstonecraft helped shape the public debate on the impact of the French Revolution for Britain. As we have seen, Wollstonecraft continually interpreted and re-interpreted French developments according to a reformist agenda to call for widespread social change. By September 1792, however, the state of affairs in



Revolutionary Paris compelled Wollstonecraft to explain rather than celebrate the events in France. Whereas her two *Vindications* had been authored in England before the Revolution had degenerated into the Reign of Terror, *An Historical and Moral View* was published in 1794 after she had gone to France to experience the Revolution for herself. Wollstonecraft stayed in Paris from December 1792 to June 1793 and the climate of violence of the Terror compelled her to revise her previous representations of the Revolution. Like many of the radical expatriates who went to Paris during the Revolutionary decade, Wollstonecraft was confronted with Jacobin hostility towards English émigrés and she barely escaped arrest by the French government. Plagued by this bloody reversal of events, Wollstonecraft wrote a *View* to explain the Revolution's alarming deterioration.

It was within this context that Wollstonecraft “helped formulate many of the classic explanations for the failure of a revolution that was supposed to regenerate the world” (Blakemore 89). Although a *View* was clearly informed by the knowledge of later events of the Jacobin period, Wollstonecraft dealt exclusively with the Revolution's first six months. Although published after the September Massacres, the execution of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette and the declaration of war between France and Britain, Wollstonecraft's *View* never pointed to the significance of these events for Britain. Perhaps a sense of personal danger at being in Revolutionary France during the Terror compelled Wollstonecraft to contain her narrative, or perhaps she was aware that she had to differentiate her account of the Revolution from other English interpretations of the period (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 153). Although she wrote a *View* while she was staying in France, it is important to observe that Wollstonecraft only had it published by 1794. By then, the British government's repressive measures against political radicalism had caused the tolerance of its political culture to disappear. Although Pitt's ‘Gagging Acts’ were only enforced in 1795, political repression already existed when Wollstonecraft started writing her *View* (Johnston 7). Additionally, as the French Revolution

developed, counterrevolutionary propaganda intensified, stigmatising all radicals—regardless of political coloration—as extremists (Philip 257). Despite the fact that Wollstonecraft did not lose her faith in the Revolution, the political situation in Britain compelled her to become ever more cautious in expressing her reformist views.

Even if she never referred to the Terror explicitly, Wollstonecraft's *View* still showed an increasing awareness that something had gone terribly wrong with the Revolution. Contrary to her previous representations, Wollstonecraft tried to represent the Revolution as “genetically flawed from the beginning” (Blakemore 90). In maintaining that the Revolution's failings occurred because of structural weaknesses produced by the *Ancien Régime*, Wollstonecraft argued that the Terror had become inevitable because the *Ancien Régime* had failed to reform itself voluntarily (Blakemore 95). The past of oppression had degraded the character of the French, and this in turn had produced an extreme reaction. In tracing the effects of absolutism on French culture in Book I of a *View*, Wollstonecraft “[argued] that court government [was] theatrical because it [had] to dazzle those it [ruled]; [and] thus the whole of French society [had become] theatrical, more concerned with display and appearance than with ‘reality’” (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 158). This cultural legacy, which had started in the age of Louis XIV, had continued down to the present and caused the French character to decline into the feminine. In her *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft already associated Burke's sentimentality with a degenerate effeminacy. In a *View*, Wollstonecraft went as far as to describe France as “a nation of women” (*HMV* 89) while attributing to the French negative feminine traits depicting them as vain, superficial, and only concerned with the pleasures of the moment:

More ingenious than profound in their researches; more tender than impassioned in their affections; [...] they seem to work only to escape from work, and to reflect merely how they shall avoid reflection [...]. Every thing, in short, shows [...] their attention to present enjoyment. (*HMV* 89)

To substantiate her argument that the aristocratic performances of courtly chivalry had emasculated and corrupted the French, Wollstonecraft adopted a disease metaphor to interpret recent events in France. In the final paragraph to a *View*, Wollstonecraft reaffirmed that “France had grown up, [...] sickened on the corruption of a state diseased” (*HMV* 182). By establishing a link between politics and medicine, Wollstonecraft was able to represent the Terror as a necessary evil: “as in medicine there is a species of complaint in the bowels which works its own cure, and, leaving the body healthy, gives an invigorated tone to the system, so there is in politics (*HMV* 182). In thus representing the Revolution as infected with the errors inherited from the *Ancien Régime*, Wollstonecraft expressed her hope in the regeneration of the realm of politics. The Terror, of course, constituted a clear sign of degeneracy amongst the Revolutionary promise, and so it had unmistakably damaged many British radicals’ faith in the Revolution’s socially transformative potential. In a *View*, Wollstonecraft attempted to reclaim Revolutionary optimism by arguing that evil could serve as a stimulus to progress, “causing fluctuation between extremes that [would] eventually be modified into rational government” (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 166).

Despite her unwavering belief in the Revolution, Wollstonecraft argued in favour of moderation. At the end of the second chapter of Book II, for instance, Wollstonecraft introduced a note of Sensibility: “How silent is now Versailles!—The solitary foot, that mounts the sumptuous staircase, rests on each landing-place, whilst the eye traverses the void, almost expecting to see the strong images of fancy burst into life” (*HMV* 60). Up to that point, Wollstonecraft’s *View* had been written entirely in the third person. Suddenly, however, “[i]n a fascinating reversal of scene and manipulation of spectatorial dynamics, Wollstonecraft [shifted] from a record of events on the street to a scene where she herself [was] visitor to the palace at Versailles” (Crafton 97). Although Wollstonecraft never explicitly discussed the events of the Terror, it is important to remember that “[she was] writing as the Revolution [was]

still unfolding” (Blakemore 93). To a contemporary audience, “Wollstonecraft’s weeping remembrance of France’s former oppression [...] [would link] it with the present oppression of the Terror” (Blakemore 108). Her explicit mentioning of the silence at Versailles, therefore, would cause her readership to reflect on the king’s execution. In expressing her fears that the Revolutionaries’ violence would eventually lead to the downfall of the French nation, Wollstonecraft essentially argued for the necessity of the Revolution to occur at a more gradual pace: “Weeping—scarcely conscious that I weep, O France! over the vestiges of thy former oppression [...]. Down fell the temple of despotism; but—despotism has not been buried in its ruins!—Unhappy country!—when will thy children cease to tear thy bosom?” (*HMV* 60). Although she never abandoned her criticisms of the French monarchy, this apostrophe to Versailles invoked the image of a country whose destiny would inevitably result in ruin if it remained on its present course. The language of Sensibility, however, not only allowed Wollstonecraft to argue in favour of moderation. It also allowed her to address her own divided reaction to the Terror. Wollstonecraft’s implicit meditation on the king’s death as well as her expression of hesitant hopefulness were, in fact, calculated rhetorical strategies to gain her audience’s sympathy. As Crafton affirms, “[r]ather than a cold, philosophical discussion about the complexities of violence [...], Wollstonecraft [staged] herself in the site of contests, an embodied performance that [enabled] her to connect with all sides of the controversy” (97). In thus incorporating sentimentalism in her writings, Wollstonecraft wished to have her readers participate in her sufferings, convincing them of the validity of her political opinions.

Wollstonecraft’s engagement with Enlightenment thought did not remain limited to her use of the language of Sensibility. In her discussion of the momentary failings of the Revolutionary project, she also capitalised on the familiar Enlightenment myth that identified civilised corruption with effeminacy (Taylor 158). As mentioned before, Wollstonecraft conceded that the effeminacy of the French was responsible for the derailment of the

Revolution, just as she maintained that this moral degradation of the French character had been caused by the oppression of the *Ancien Régime* (Blakemore 97). In her description of the corrupting effects of the *Ancien Régime* as feminising, Wollstonecraft drew upon widely accepted cultural myths surrounding femininity. During the eighteenth century, contemporary gender conventions attributed to women the exceptional ability to civilise men (Taylor 156). This notion of women as civilising agents was related to their celebrated capacity for sympathy and their natural sociability (Taylor 156). It should be noted, however, that this cultural myth of civilised femininity had a downside to it as well. Because of cultural anxieties aroused by what Wollstonecraft's contemporaries knew as commercial society, women were simultaneously exalted for their self-sacrificing sensibilities as well as condemned for their consumerist excesses (Taylor 158). Eighteenth-century gender expectations, in fact, ascribed to women a natural fondness for luxury which degraded their character, and so they were believed to grow increasingly vain, deceitful, and artificial (Taylor 158). Because the debilitating effects of consumerism led to mannerly artifice and moral degradation in women, "men polished into politeness by feminine hands might be emasculated by the process, [...] [and thus] [w]omanliness as the civilising influence could all too easily tip over [...] into a feminising corruption" (Taylor 158).

In her description of the corrupting effects of the *Ancien Régime* as emasculating, Wollstonecraft thus reproduced the myth that identified cultural effeminacy with moral degradation. The myth's strong appeal, however, was not only apparent in Wollstonecraft's attacks on *Ancien Régime* France. She also used it to her advantage in her representation of Marie-Antoinette. In a *View*, Wollstonecraft provided her readership with a grotesque caricature of the French queen who was portrayed as wicked, licentious, insincere, and selfish:

Lost then in the most luxurious pleasures, or managing court intrigues, the queen became a profound dissembler; and her heart hardened by sensual enjoyments to such a

degree, that when her family and favourites stood on the brink of ruin, her little portion of mind was employed only to preserve herself from danger. (*HMV* 51)

Locked in her frivolous existence at the feminised French court, Marie-Antoinette exploited her sexual charms to achieve illicit power with devastating consequences for the welfare of the nation. According to Wollstonecraft's representation, the queen, amongst other things, was responsible for France's deficit: "the state had been fleeced, to support the unremitting demands of the queen; who would have dismembered France, to aggrandize Austria, and pamper her favourites" (*HMV* 20). The violence of these accusations against Marie-Antoinette was strongly informed by the political pamphlets on the queen that circulated well before but also during the Revolutionary period:

The first pamphlets denounced the queen's act of imprudence, her taste for gambling, her lack of respect for etiquette, and above all her coquetry. [...] But the libels against Marie-Antoinette did not become serious [...] until the time of her first pregnancy (in 1778), and above all after 1781, the year the dauphin was born. [...] From 1789 on, with the liberty of the press, the political and fantastic accusations against the *Autrichienne* maintained and animated Revolutionary beliefs. (Thomas 105)

In emphasising the queen's hypocrisy and false sentimentality the way she did, Wollstonecraft drew on these representations to "scapegoat Marie Antoinette as a bad mother, a dissimulator, an enemy of the people, and the prime example of disorderly femininity" (Marso, *Defending the Queen* 49). Based on this account of Marie-Antoinette, Katherine Binhammer even went as far as to argue that "[t]o Wollstonecraft, Marie-Antoinette represented the disease of being a woman, the illness of femininity, and the reason why women needed to break out of the chains of their sex and be more masculine" ("Marie Antoinette" 247).

It should be noted, however, that Wollstonecraft also included a more sympathetic account of the queen in which she represented her as a young and innocent woman arriving at

a French court whose “general depravation of manners” (*HMV* 18) would necessarily corrupt her. Contrary to what we have seen before, Wollstonecraft here represented Marie-Antoinette as driven towards bad behaviour because circumstances pushed her in that direction:

The unfortunate queen of France, beside the advantages of birth and station, possessed a very fine person [...]. But her opening faculties were poisoned in the bud; for before she came to Paris, she had already been prepared, by a corrupt, supple *abbé*, for the part she was to play [...]. Is it then surprizing [...] that an empty mind should be employed only to vary the pleasures, which emasculated her circean court? (*HMV* 50-51).

Wollstonecraft here attempted to shield Marie-Antoinette from blame by representing her as the victim of her own privilege, turning her attention specifically to how the exaggerated femininity of her behaviour had been produced by education. Trained “in all the arts of coquetry that debauch the mind” (Wollstonecraft, *HMV* 51), Marie-Antoinette had been *made* a woman by the gender-based educational programme that she had been offered before she was sent to France. Wollstonecraft, in fact, sided with the queen to represent the feminised French court as well as the education that she had received as the causes of her moral degradation.

In spite of this second, more forgiving, representation of Marie-Antoinette, Katherine Binhammer asserts that “[t]he feminist misogyny that Gubar sees in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* wildly erupts in the descriptions of Marie Antoinette found in *An Historical and Moral View* [...]” (“Marie Antoinette” 247). Arguably, in representing the queen the way she did, Wollstonecraft reaffirmed eighteenth-century beliefs about sexual difference. Her initial representation of the queen’s degenerate femininity, in fact, powerfully reinforced sexual difference as a binary system, thus reproducing the artificial hierarchies that oppressed and subordinated women. Beneath the surface, however, it becomes clear that Wollstonecraft’s feminist misogyny did not originate from these representations of Marie-Antoinette. As we have seen when discussing the *Rights of Woman*, it is important to recognise the challenges that

women writers, like Wollstonecraft, were faced with during the eighteenth century (Skolnik 208). Even if Wollstonecraft to some extent reiterated established patriarchal prejudices by adhering to such cultural myths surrounding femininity, her analysis of the conditions that helped shape the female ideal also undermined those same prejudices. The supplementary comments on Marie-Antoinette's education, for instance, were intended to qualify her hyperbolic descriptions of the queen, and so they effectively supported Wollstonecraft's aim to minimise gender difference.

The myth that identified civilised corruption with effeminacy also allowed Wollstonecraft to establish a new understanding of female oppression—i.e. one that did not blame women for their transgressive behaviour. As mentioned before, Wollstonecraft argued that the French had become effeminate because the chivalrous politics of the *Ancien Régime* persisted even after that old order had been swept away (Blakemore 97). In thus exposing French effeminacy as a product of *Ancien Régime* culture, Wollstonecraft attempted to describe the moral degeneracy of Marie-Antoinette in similar terms. According to prevailing gender associations, the exaggerated femininity of Marie-Antoinette would not be conceptualised as the result of a corrupting process. Because women's weaknesses were commonly attributed to innate inferiority, Marie-Antoinette would be regarded as “a woman whose essential femininity aligned her [...] with a corrupt female sexual power” responsible for the emasculation of the French (Binhammer, “Marie Antoinette” 234). Wollstonecraft, however, ascribed the corruption of the French to the persistent oppression of *Ancien Régime* ideology. Additionally, she maintained that the problem with Marie-Antoinette was not her exaggerated femininity but the fact that she had been taught to become a woman because of the patriarchal politics of the *Ancien Régime*. In doing so, Wollstonecraft contended that Marie-Antoinette—just like the effeminate Frenchmen—had been perverted into exaggerated femininity by those debilitating circumstances that attend arbitrary hereditary government. From this perspective,



Wollstonecraft argued that until the advances of the Revolution would be extended to women, the Revolution would not have fulfilled its promise.

In this pamphlet, as in her *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft recuperated patriarchal myths surrounding femininity for reformist ends. As we will see, Staël adopted a similar yet different strategy in her representation of Marie-Antoinette in her *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine*. Recognising the implications that the trial might have for the future prospects of the French nation, Staël rejected the relentless campaign of allegations and rumours towards Marie-Antoinette and she presented her readership with an idealised image of the queen as a mother devoted to her children and as a wife loyal to her husband. In thus representing the queen as a blameless domestic woman, Staël “[sought] to forge a female community across class and political boundaries upon emotional grounds suggesting the ‘hearts’ of all women would recognize the queen’s plight” (Marso, *Defending the Queen* 57). At the same time, it provided her with “a means of shifting the argument away from the question of Marie-Antoinette’s personal responsibility to the general question of the human costs of the Revolution” (Fontana, *Political Portrait* 68). Staël, therefore, also reproduced patriarchal myths about femininity in order to argue for greater gender equality. In stark contrast to Wollstonecraft, however, Staël valorised Sensibility as a model of femininity, thereby endorsing a politics of sexual difference (Marso, *Defending the Queen* 51).

### **2.3 *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798)**

Whereas a *View* was written during the second phase of the Revolution Controversy, Wollstonecraft only started writing *The Wrongs of Woman* in the context of the late Revolution debate. Before 1789, Britain’s relatively free press fostered the existence of a political culture in which subjects had the opportunity to discuss political affairs in print (Melton 67). By the end of the Revolutionary decade, however, there had been a significant increase in the coercive

powers of the British government and plurality of opinion was no longer tolerated to the same extent as before. As “[w]ar and the political and social crisis [...] were being used to justify greater control of dissenting social groups” (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 206), the British government launched a campaign of repressive legislation to ward off pro-Revolutionary publications. Pitt’s ‘Gagging Acts’ of 1795 included the Seditious Meetings Act and the Treasonable Practices Act which intended to suppress radicalism by making political meetings unlikely and republican ideals treasonous (Keen 54). Because of these measures, speculative writing was defined increasingly in relation to seditious writing, and so many political thinkers played down their reformist and democratic ambitions (Keen 61). Additionally, writers from the loyalist side used the term ‘Jacobin’ as a pejorative for radical politics (Philip 257). Because the writings of British radicals were portrayed as having far more sinister intentions, it was necessary for them to disassociate themselves from the excesses in France. As a result of this counterrevolutionary effort, many of the British voices that had initially argued in favour of the Revolution had either been silenced or they had for themselves decided to turn their backs on the world of politics.

Although Wollstonecraft did not stop writing on the Revolution, a significant shift in her perspective took place by the end of the 1790s. Written against a background of internal unrest and political repression, *Wrongs* testified to her loss of faith in the emancipatory promise of the Revolution for Britain. The persistent lack of reform on the part of the British government convinced Wollstonecraft of the futility of expecting rapid and widespread social change. John Bugg in *Five Long Winters: The Trials of British Romanticism* even goes as far as to categorise *Wrongs* as “a Gagging Acts novel” (111). In Bugg’s view, the trials of the Pitt era encouraged Wollstonecraft to “develop strategies for depicting both how communication [was] curtailed [in Britain at the time] and the consequences of that curtailment for the social life of the nation” (110). In differentiating the Gagging Acts novel from the Jacobin mode, Bugg was able to draw

attention to how Wollstonecraft in *Wrongs* “again turned to the national political climate, this time marshalling the tropes in circulation during the era of Pittite repression” (126). The emphasis in this dissertation, however, will be less on Wollstonecraft’s formal exploration of the pains of political repression than the rhetorical strategies employed in service of the dissemination of her political thought.

At the same time as women writers, such as Wollstonecraft, used the French Revolution as a means of introducing sexual politics into public discourse, their feminist demands were discredited by the panic over the meaning of the Revolution for British politics. Because the Revolution “was often represented as the ultimate corruption of an illicitly sexualized nation, the events in France [...] provided a direct rationale for women’s exclusion from public and political life” (Binhammer, “Sex Panic” 413). Republican virility could only exist alongside domestic womanhood, and so women had been progressively excluded from the Revolution’s conception of citizenship (Hillman 234). As a result, the initial enthusiasm with which Wollstonecraft had greeted the Revolution as a liberation from sexual prejudices had unmistakably been damaged. In spite of the disappointment of her political hopes, however, Wollstonecraft still published a novel that, as we will see, fictionalised many of the central ideas of her philosophy of education as expounded in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Wollstonecraft’s novel opens *in medias res* with its female protagonist’s unjust incarceration at the hands of her husband, George Venables. Cruelly separated from her infant daughter, Maria has been condemned by her husband to live in a mental asylum. After convincing one of her attendants that she has been imprisoned on false charges, Maria manages to befriend her guard, a lower-class woman named Jemima. Although initially suspicious of Maria’s intentions, Jemima eventually sympathises with her and she even agrees to bring her a few books to distract her from her suffering. Some of the books that she procures for Maria have notes scribbled in their margins by another inmate, Henry Darnford. Maria soon falls in

love with him and she persuades Jemima to help her reach out to Darnford to get to know him better. Eventually, the two begin to communicate and Jemima even manages to set up a meeting between them. Over the course of one of their subsequent visits, Jemima recounts her life story to Darnford and Maria, explaining how she was born a bastard who was forced to live on the streets and become a prostitute. In chapters seven to fourteen, Maria, in turn, tells her life story in a letter that she writes for her daughter.

In it, she explains how her parents always preferred her older brother to her because he was to inherit the family estate according to the laws of primogeniture. Growing up with little to no education, Maria turned to novels of Sensibility to escape her unhappy situation at home. Longing for affection, she ultimately married her neighbour's son, George Venables, who struck her as a respectable and honourable young man. In reality, however, Venables led a life of debauchery and deception. Disgusted with her husband's true character, Maria at first tried to put up with him, but after Venables paid one of his friends to sleep with her, she ran away. Initially managing to escape and outrun her husband, Maria lived in several different locations. On her travels, she met with several other women who had also been wronged by their husbands and she relates all of these encounters in the memoir she writes for her daughter. When Maria ultimately tried to leave England with her new-born child, her husband found them and he confined Maria to the asylum.

The memoirs end where Wollstonecraft's novel began, and the narrative returns to Maria's present situation. After having read her memoirs, Darnford consoles Maria and she eventually ends up having sex with him. One morning, the master of the asylum mysteriously disappears and Jemima helps Maria to escape. The completed manuscript ends after this point in the narrative and the fragmentary notes for the ending of the novel specify two different courses of events. In both major conclusions, George Venables wins a lawsuit against Darnford for having seduced his wife, after which Darnford abandons Maria and takes on another

mistress. In one ending, when Maria discovers Darnford's treachery, she commits suicide. In another ending, Maria is prevented from committing suicide by Jemima who has found the daughter she had by Venables and the three of them form a new family.

As mentioned before, Wollstonecraft used fiction to popularise many of the philosophical ideas that appeared in her polemical prose. In light of Wollstonecraft's argument that the intellectual inferiority of women was a product of social conditioning, it is interesting to look at her attacks on sentimental literature. By the end of the eighteenth century, Wollstonecraft was merely one of the many voices arguing against the dangers of sentimental fiction. Defenders of the novel were in a minority because "[n]ovels were condemned for corrupting the morals, taste, and intellect of their readers" (Kelly, *English Fiction* 8). Such vehement critiques of the degrading effects of novels on both men and women were testimony to the power fiction was perceived to have in shaping the inner self of the reader. Wollstonecraft, in fact, primarily cautioned against novel-reading because it caused women to identify with the sentimental heroines depicted in them which made them "[succumb] not just to the seduction of the text but to the images of femininity inscribed in them" (Taylor 72).

If, however, it had been firmly established that women's consumption of novels was considered dangerous, the question arises why Wollstonecraft decided to pursue writing *The Wrongs of Woman*—a novel that not only drew on fashionable styles of the period but also seemed to advocate Sensibility in its readership. In light of formulating a possible answer to this question, it is interesting to have a look at the distinction between active and passive female readers that Katherine Binhammer introduces in her article "The Persistence of Reading: Governing Female Novel-Reading in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*". According to Binhammer, the main difference between active and passive female readers "involves two contrasting understandings of the interaction between the text, the self, and the world" (*Persistence of Reading* 2). Whilst "[t]he model of a passive reader equates

the self with the text, [...] [t]he active female reader [...] distinguishes between real and fictive worlds and by reading with her mind creates a critical distance that allows interpretive thinking” (Binhammer, *Persistence of Reading* 2). From these observations, Wollstonecraft’s Maria can be categorised as a passive female reader who “collapses reality with imaginative fiction [...] [up to the point where] the words simultaneously become sensations she feels” (Binhammer, *Persistence of Reading* 2).

In thus constructing a passive female reader, Wollstonecraft enabled herself to thematise some of her *Vindication*’s central arguments about the detrimental effects of novels on the female imagination. It is interesting here to draw attention to Wollstonecraft’s explicit mentioning of one of the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Due to the reference in *Wrongs* to Rousseau’s *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), Wollstonecraft’s portrayal of the blossoming love between Darnford and Maria became emblematic of the theme of the dangers of sentimental fiction. During the 1790s, “no one novel [appeared] to epitomize the genre’s dangerously seductive character so well as [...] [Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*] with its articulation of female sexuality and desire through Julie’s willing participation in a sexual relationship with her tutor, St Preux” (Grogan 460). It is important here to observe that Maria falls in love with Darnford only after he lends her *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Wollstonecraft here tried to make a serious point about the instability of the language of Sensibility, explicitly mentioning Rousseau as a prime example of its pernicious effects. Inflamed by rapturous readings in Rousseau’s novel, Maria “enters a dangerously delusive state, one that ensures her sexual vulnerability” (Binhammer, *Persistence of Reading* 2). The thoughts and feelings depicted in the novel correspond to her own desires, and Maria imaginatively reconstructs Darnford because “her overwrought mind immediately plunges her into a romantic scenario with Darnford as St Preux and she as the adored Julie” (Taylor 135).

Although Wollstonecraft here seemingly displayed a certain hostility towards the female imagination, it is important to realise that the problem with Maria's imagination is not the fact that she actively acknowledges her own sexual agency through her romantic feelings for Darnford; it is the "projective capacity" (O'Quinn 771) of Maria's imagination which causes her downfall. The key element which Wollstonecraft examined through Maria's relationship with Darnford is the role of the unregulated imagination in women's feelings of romantic love. By referring to Rousseau's *Julie*, Wollstonecraft was able to affirm, modify, and challenge established views about women's intellectual capacities. In her *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argued that women were rendered susceptible to the seduction of novels because of their limited educational capabilities, all the while claiming that such weaknesses should be remedied not by censorship but by knowledge. From this perspective, it becomes apparent that Wollstonecraft depicted the harrowing consequences of Maria's errant imagination to draw attention to the educational confinement of her heroine. Due to her inadequate education, Maria unwittingly allows her excessive Sensibility to dictate her romantic expectations up to the point where she deludes herself about Darnford's character by projecting her model of ideal Sensibility upon him. Rousseau's novel, "through its depiction of an ideal lover, prompts the heroine to seduce herself" (Grogan 470), which is exactly what happens in *Wrongs*, as Maria "[donates] all of St Preux's sentiments and feelings, culled to gratify her own" to Darnford (Wollstonecraft, *MWW* 81). According to *Wrongs*, then, sentimental fiction was not the root of the problem of Maria's vulnerability to men's act of seduction. It is, in fact, due to miseducation that Maria transforms fiction into reality, and her readings of sentimental fiction merely enforce these illusions.

Capitalising on the power of literature as an engine of social critique, Wollstonecraft strategically employed the conventions of Gothic-sentimental fiction. In *Wrongs*, the foremost Gothic setting was the "mansion of despair" in which Maria had been incarcerated at the

beginning of the novel (Wollstonecraft, *MWW* 69). The metaphorical significance of this setting for the condition of women is made explicit near the end of the first chapter as Maria exclaims: “Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?” (Wollstonecraft, *MWW* 73). Wollstonecraft here reveals this metaphorical significance to have the reader recognise that “Maria’s chronicle demonstrates that the hardships of women bereft of legal and economic rights are the rule rather than the exception” (Meyers 30). In *Wrongs*, then, Wollstonecraft strove for inclusiveness which is why “[her] descriptive project [was] accomplished by having a number of different women tell of their personal wrongs in inset narratives of different length” (Kelly, *English Fiction* 38). By including the chapter which detailed the history of Jemima’s lower-class experiences, the novel illustrated what Debora Weiss refers to as “the commonality of female experience”: regardless of social class, all of the women Maria meets on her travels represent the experiences Wollstonecraft believed all women had in common (78).

Although both the *Vindication* and *Wrongs* attempted to render the political truth of women’s oppression transparent, the most immediate difference between these works was rhetorical in nature. With the publication of her political pamphlet, Wollstonecraft challenged the boundaries of female publication, participating in those fields of textual production conventionally reserved for men. With the publication of her novel, however, Wollstonecraft adopted a different strategy by encoding subversive arguments about women’s enfranchisement within accepted literary styles and genres. Because the novel of *Sensibility* was seen as a suitable mode for female self-expression (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 108), Wollstonecraft to all appearances abided by the eighteenth-century laws of genre and gender.

In her attempt to find a place in an ever-changing public sphere from which women were increasingly excluded, Wollstonecraft recognised that fiction could illustrate the general philosophical arguments that she wanted to get across while simultaneously appealing to the affective interests of her readers. Rather than abstracted in a philosophical treatise or pamphlet,



Wollstonecraft's novel detailed the private consequences of social injustice by restructuring some of the central arguments of her *Vindication* in fictional narrative form. Polemical prose was ideally suited for the delineation of a philosophical project primarily targeted at an intellectual elite inclined to read reformist pamphlets. Literature's appeal to Sensibility, on the other hand, made it more appropriate for a depiction of the deplorable condition of women in eighteenth-century Britain. Because the sentimental novel was predominantly read by women at the time (Ty 44), Wollstonecraft also enabled herself to extend her influence beyond the narrow circle of intelligentsia and reach out to a largely female audience in an attempt to convince them of the necessity of social reform.

The novel's depiction of the wrongs from women suffered was intended to elicit a strong emotional response on the part of the reader. Wollstonecraft's vindication of inner identity and subjective experience through Maria's narrative of victimisation was vital to her project of politicisation. Through the emotive descriptions of the sufferings of its heroine, *Wrongs* not only appealed to the reader's emotions; it also engaged the reader's mind. These descriptions and their appeal to Sensibility allowed the reader to imagine Maria's misfortunes and to participate in her sufferings. This experience of another's perspective, in turn, invited reflection, facilitating moral insight. With *Wrongs*, Wollstonecraft attempted to instigate an internal revolution in the hearts and minds of her readers. Ideally, the female reader—in much the same way as Maria herself—would acquire feminist consciousness because her own oppression caused her to recognise the oppression of all women.

On the surface, then, it might seem as though Wollstonecraft's theoretical ideas on female education in *Wrongs* did not move far from their starting point in the *Vindication*. The transplanting of her philosophical ideas from her pamphlet to *Wrongs*, however, inevitably resulted in their transformation, because there, they are presented in a different light from that in which they appeared in the *Vindication*. The early Wollstonecraft in the *Vindication* believed

that once the educational practices of women were to take on a new form, it would serve as a means to instil virtue in both men and women. In this way, the transformation of the cultural conditions of female education constituted the key to the moral progression of society as a whole. The later Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, expressed little to no hope in the possibility of political reforms succeeding because the system of female education—alongside other ideological mechanisms of the state—had already managed to corrupt society to its core. In *Wrongs*, the system of women's education was represented as a patriarchal power structure that pressured women into subordination with no hope of escape. Whereas the early Wollstonecraft expressed her belief in the fundamental equality of men and women, the later Wollstonecraft recognised that the oppression of women was based on social practices and historical beliefs that rendered women so powerless that it had become impossible to rise above them.

Wollstonecraft's change in stance on the effectiveness of political reform was inseparable from French Revolutionary activity. Whereas the optimistic tone of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* underscored that it was written at the height of her optimism about the Revolution, the pessimistic ending to *Wrongs* signalled a significant shift in Wollstonecraft's perspective. In the courtroom scene at the end of the novel, Venables sues Darnford for adultery and Maria decides to take on herself "the task of conducting Darnford's defence" (Wollstonecraft, *MWW* 170). Through written testimony, Maria provides a detailed description of her financial exploitation and unlawful imprisonment at the hands of her husband. At the end, Maria proceeds to demand recognition of the right to divorce her husband while she claims her sexual agency in her relationship with Darnford by stating that "[she] voluntarily gave [herself]" to him (Wollstonecraft, *MWW* 172). Maria, here, essentially fights for the acknowledgment of her right to love the man of her own choosing while targeting Britain's legal system in exposing it as a patriarchal injustice system. The ending to this scene, however, is anything but optimistic and Maria's freedom of expression is eventually denied with the

judge declaring that “the fallacy of letting women plead their feelings” would signal “[the] opening of a flood-gate for immorality” (Wollstonecraft, *MWW* 174). Wollstonecraft, here, attempted to demonstrate that British society did not allow women to have an autonomous legal identity. As we will see, Staël also discussed the disparity between the advances of the Revolution and the conservatism of contemporary society in her novel *Delphine*.

The catastrophic ending to Maria’s story of private intellectual enfranchisement already hinted at Wollstonecraft’s disillusionment with the imagined successes of her project as expounded in the *Vindication*. For Wollstonecraft, the decisive factor that made her reconsider her assessment of the Revolution “[was] less the state of affairs in France than the British political scene” (Bugg 126). Bearing in mind her disappointment with Britain’s internal war against reformist writers as the background to *Wrongs*, it becomes apparent that the novel’s ending “[depicted] the near impossibility of the development and expression of female resistance at this time” (Bugg 133). A sense of futility and powerlessness haunts the pages of Wollstonecraft’s novel as Maria’s moment of feminist consciousness is terminated by the law preventing her from obtaining a divorce from her husband. The only glimmer of hope is explored within one of the possible endings of the novel—i.e. the ending in which Maria is saved from an attempted suicide by Jemima, declaring that she will live for her child. Although the later Wollstonecraft argued that there was an insurmountable barrier separating women from freedom and equality, there remained a small possibility that future generations of women might escape ideological entrapment. Although she had lost faith in direct political reform, Wollstonecraft retained some residual hope in the socially transformative power of domestic education. Even if radical politics could no longer save women, perhaps the parenting of mothers would be able to cause moderate yet significant changes in social expectations, thereby revolutionising the system of female education from the inside.

The novel's seriousness about the possibility of change through the instructing of children was emphasised by its frame narrative in which Maria writes her life story to her daughter. In the section organised as a memoir, Maria essentially writes a conduct manual but one that "indicts patriarchy and undermines an adherence to feminine behaviour and the idealization of marriage" (Davison 150). In a desperate attempt to educate her daughter, Maria warns her—much like Wollstonecraft warns the female reader—of the wrongs from which women suffer. Maria's memoir is primarily concerned with the issue of women's rights—or rather, the lack thereof—and she shares her grievous story in the hopes of preventing her daughter from making the same mistakes she did. For the later Wollstonecraft, then, the solution to women's subordination lied in motherhood itself since mothers were able to instruct their daughters of their past experiences to help them avoid social constraints.

### **3. Germaine de Staël and the French Revolution**

#### **3.1 *Réflexions sur le procès de la Reine, par une femme* (1793)**

Germaine de Staël's *Réflexions* were written a few weeks before the trial and execution of Marie-Antoinette on 16 October 1793. This was a period of political insecurity and personal anxiety for Staël considering that she had been forced to flee Paris at the time of the September Massacres in 1792. By the end of the following year, she was still being kept away from Paris and Staël desperately tried to maintain contacts to assist her circle of friends and acquaintances in these dangerous times. Many if not all of her aristocratic friends had been forced to go into hiding while others were sent to prison, if they were not already dead. Unlike Wollstonecraft, who remained impervious to French Revolutionary politics as a foreigner, Staël was involved in them as an active political figure, convincing men in power first by way of her salon and later also through her writing. The physical exposure to the Terror, however, forced Staël to

reconsider the political and philosophical implications of the Revolution not only within the context of gender equality but also for the future of France as a whole.

Staël's pamphlet in defense of Marie-Antoinette was initially published anonymously as authored by a woman. This explicit affirmation of her female identity in both the title and advertisement to her essay was significant. As we will see, Staël's self-representation as an author writing from a distinctly female perspective was, in fact, intimately connected to her representation of the Revolution. Published as an appeal to the Jacobin government to spare the life of Marie-Antoinette, Staël's pamphlet had broader political implications for the condition of women in Revolutionary France (Sheriff 64). As mentioned before, the French Revolution set in motion changing interpretations of femininity. During the 1790s, "growing Jacobin hostility towards pluralism [...] and the participation of women in public affairs" gave a powerful boost to the ideology of domestic womanhood (Kale 46). The republican ideal of femininity was, in fact, built on a gendered conception of the social order that valued the maternal and conjugal role considered natural to women (McMillan 29). In this highly politicised climate, Staël published her *Réflexions* to offer an interpretation of the events of the Terror and the role that the ideals of femininity played within them.

As we have seen, upper-class women like Staël were able to join the French public sphere by presiding over salons where they were accorded with an exceptional degree of influence and leadership (Pekacz 86). Enlightenment salons fostered female intellectualism because they functioned as centres of literary and philosophical discussion. More importantly, however, these salons "inhabited a sphere of unofficial politics from which women were never fully excluded" (Kale 7). By the middle of the eighteenth century, hosting a salon had become an actual career and its rewards for women were both intellectual and social in nature. As salon hostesses, women were able to play an active role in an ever-expanding public sphere while simultaneously being provided with educational opportunities otherwise denied to them (Kale

20). By the 1780s, however, the controversies and disputes over the political order in France exacerbated, and so the informal political influence of salon hostesses weakened considerably. Although Staël presided over a salon of her own, she soon recognised the prominent role a female author might play in the formation of public opinion, and thus she also turned to publishing for a wider European audience.

Gender, of course, constituted an important dimension to how Staël experienced Revolutionary politics. In her writings, she (re)produced and negotiated contemporary ideals of femininity to argue for women's potential role in politics. With the publication of her *Réflexions*, for instance, Staël wanted to change the direction in which the Revolution was increasingly headed. As mentioned before, Marie-Antoinette was the victim of relentless attacks in the press (Thomas 105). Significantly, “[she] was accused of crimes mostly on account of her sex” (Lynn Hunt as qtd in Marso, *Defending the Queen* 44)—the most severe of these crimes being that of a bad mother and those aimed at her allegedly voracious sexual appetite. According to Staël, Marie-Antoinette was punished not on the basis of her royalty to further the cause of the Revolution but because she was a public woman—i.e. a figure completely at odds with the dominant male conception of appropriate femininity (Marso, *Defending the Queen* 53). To warn women that the slander used to ruin Marie-Antoinette could be used to discredit any woman, Staël tried to have women see how the fate of the queen interested them, regardless of political affiliation or social class (Marso, *Defending the Queen* 53).

The connection that Staël established between the fate of the queen and that of women more generally already suggests that she wished to warn against a larger, more unsettling, phenomenon than the execution of the queen—i.e. the permanent exclusion of feminine power from the nascent French republic (Sheriff 64). For Staël, it was important for upper-class women to reclaim and assume their role as civilising agents to influence the world of politics.

To do so, women had to retain the power of shaping public opinion that had fallen to them in the *Ancien Régime*. The eighteenth-century salon, in fact, constituted a site of political sociability and it played a substantial role in shaping public opinion (Kale 173). As we will see when discussing Staël's other works, the notion of public opinion gained great currency in France in the months leading up to the Revolution (Melton 59), and thus it also constituted an important aspect of Staël's political thought that even managed to make its way into her fiction.

Both in France and in Britain, the French Revolution marked the rise of a reformist culture of Sensibility to the field of politics and government. Staël's representation of Marie-Antoinette, in fact, demonstrated a distinct awareness of the ideals of femininity being pivotal to triggering political consciousness in upper-class women. In her *Réflexions*, Staël made intelligent use of her reading of Rousseau and other sentimentalist writers of the period to contend for women's inclusion in the Revolutionary project. It was, in fact, the sentimental mode that constituted the dominant inspiration for her descriptions of Marie-Antoinette. The sentimentalism in these representations drew on an eighteenth-century culture of Sensibility that, as we have seen, clearly differentiated masculine from feminine virtues. Staël consciously reproduced this ideology of gendered virtues because she believed that women's mission to civilise men should not stay limited to the domestic sphere. It should be extended to the political domain as well because, to her, women's finer sensibilities translated directly into the capacity to intuitively recognise and recommend a just and sensible conduct in men (Marso, *Defending the Queen* 53). In embracing the domestic affections that formed the basis for widely accepted ideals of feminine virtue, "[Staël emphasised] that women [could] empower men within the private sphere as wives and mothers" (Takeda 50). In developing such an ideal of female virtue based on moral education, Staël strategically embraced republican discourse on domestic femininity to argue for women's inclusion in politics.

The larger political goal of the *Réflexions* was thus to stress women's common cause with Marie-Antoinette, exhorting the former to become active citizens. In the advertisement to her essay, for instance, Staël went on to explain that she saw it as her responsibility to document and interpret what had happened during the Revolution to offer an allegedly unbiased representation of the queen. In much the same way as Wollstonecraft cannot be said to be an objective historiographer of the French Revolution, Staël did not offer an impartial representation of the queen. Already in the first paragraph of her *Réflexions* did Staël display her capacity for Sensibility in an apostrophe to all women: “Ô vous, femmes de tous les pays, de toutes les classes de la société, écoutez-moi avec l'émotion que j'éprouve ! la destinée de Marie-Antoinette renferme tout ce qui peut toucher votre cœur si vous êtes heureuses” (*RPR* 4). Staël's goal of uniting all women was thwarted, however, by the fact that “[t]o many women who supported the Revolution, hatred of Marie Antoinette came to symbolize their loyalty to the Revolution” (Marso, *Defending the Queen* 55). Because she feared that all possibilities for women's formal participation in politics would be closed off with the execution of Marie-Antoinette (Sheriff 64), Staël longed to reverse these feelings of hostility. In her discussion of the formal start of the Revolution, Staël drew attention to the republican sympathies of the queen in an attempt to represent her as favourable to the Revolutionary project. With the dismissal of M. de Calonne, the queen had played a significant part in the formal start of the Revolution through her appointment of the archbishop of Sens:

[L]a reine sortant tout à coup du cercle habituel de ses devoirs et de ses amis, attaqua ce ministre élégant [M. de Calonne] avec l'austérité de la morale et de la raison, décida le roi à le renvoyer, et signala par cet acte, et par la nomination de l'archevêque de Sens, sa première influence sur les affaires publiques. (Staël, *RPR* 7)



The man who had been appointed to become the archbishop of Sens could be considered the instigator of the Revolution, and thus “Staël preferred for Marie-Antoinette the improbable role of republican heroine” (Fontana, *Political Portrait* 68).

The sentimental conventions that Staël deployed in her representation of Marie-Antoinette were rhetorical devices intended to capture the sympathy of her readership. In representing Marie-Antoinette as a suffering sentimental heroine unjustly persecuted by the French people, Staël attempted to incite her readers to the queen’s defense:

Comment peut-on parvenir à renouveler sans cesse dans le même peuple cette inépuisable fureur ? [...] Vous qui l’avez vue regarder ses enfants, vous qui savez que nul péril ne put la résoudre à se séparer de son époux, alors que tant de fois les chemins lui furent ouverts pour retourner dans sa patrie, croyez-vous que son cœur était barbare ou tyrannique ? (*RPR* 9-10)

In her *Réflexions*, Staël went out of her way to represent Marie-Antoinette not as a visible woman but as a loving mother and a dutiful wife suffering a terrible fate. In doing so, Staël urged her female readers to consider their similarity in sharing a single fate with the queen. Whereas Wollstonecraft denounced Burke for his sentimentalised image of the suffering Marie-Antoinette, Staël valorised sentimental sympathy in her representation of the queen. It should be noted, however, that “while Burke’s queen inhabited a medieval fantasy of royal heritage and chivalry, Staël chose to turn her into [a] timeless symbol of vulnerable womanhood” (Fontana, *Political Portrait* 67). In thus basing her defense of Marie-Antoinette on her maternity, Staël hoped to transform her female readership’s hostility towards the queen into feelings of identification.

Additionally, Staël also “played on the contrast between the enthusiastic reception accorded to the dauphine at the time of her marriage, in 1770, and the fury of the mob of which she had become the target some twenty years later” (Fontana, *Political Portrait* 65). In thus

questioning the sudden change of opinion towards Marie-Antoinette, Staël attempted to have her readers reflect on whether their feelings of aversion were well-founded: “[l]’ivresse des Français en la voyant fut inexprimable ; le peuple la reçut [...] comme une reine adorée [...] il n’y a pas cinq ans, et j’ai vu tout Paris se précipiter sur ses pas avec transport” (*RPR* 5). More importantly, however, she wished to draw attention to the abrupt derailment of the Revolution. Staël primarily alluded to the ruthless campaign of allegations and rumours towards Marie-Antoinette in an attempt to expose the influence of successive stages of Jacobin government on popular sentiment (Fontana, *Political Portrait* 76). Although the public campaigns against the queen had started well before the Revolution (Thomas 105), Staël wished to represent the sudden yet persistent adversity to the queen as a product of the aggressive propaganda of the Jacobin government: “[c]ependant, pour exciter la multitude, on n’a cessé de répéter que la reine était l’ennemie des Français, et l’on a donné à cette inculpation les formes les plus féroces” (*RPR* 9).

This reversal of popular sentiment towards Marie-Antoinette was not the only consequence of the strategic manipulations undertaken by the Jacobin government. In bombarding the public with relentless propaganda, they excited the passions of the masses to such a degree that it led to a profound perversion of the social affections. In Staël’s view, “[t]he excess of excitement created by the Jacobin propaganda [as well as] the constant artificial stimulation, in the people, of violent instincts, had resulted [...] in a condition of apathy that engulfed leaders and ordinary people alike” (Fontana, *Political Portrait* 76). In the *Réflexions*, Staël identified the spirit of party as the most destructive component raised by the Jacobin Revolution. To Staël, “the spirit of party [was] the degeneration of a political, religious, or philosophical ideal into an absolute truth” (Takeda 66). In particular, Staël emphasised how the spirit of party had become a vital obstacle to the happiness of both individuals and political communities. During the Terror, political dogmas reigned, and so the Revolutionaries had lost

all sense of humanity. In their attempts to create a republic of virtue in which citizens would subordinate their private interests to the public good, the Revolutionaries had made the fatal mistake of allowing fanaticism to corrupt their project. The Terror, in fact, seemed to be a complete denial of the Revolution's initial ambitions to throw off the yoke of absolutism in the name of liberty and equality, primarily because the irrational dimensions of party allegiance undermined such ideals.

In relation to the analysis that Staël made of the significance of the trial of Marie-Antoinette for women, it becomes apparent how we can interpret the representation that she offered of the Terror. The Jacobin Revolution of 1793 was treated by Staël as a masculinisation of the Revolution that swept away the domestic affections by wrongly excluding women from the Revolutionary project. Because women had been excluded from the political future of the republic, the domestic affections that they embodied had been suppressed as well. This, in turn, had led to a desensitisation of the public: “on est tellement accoutumé à l'idée de la mort, les oppresseurs comme les opprimés sont tellement familiarisés avec elle, que la prodiguer encore n'exciterait plus aucun genre d'émotion (Staël, *RPR* 13). In thus blaming the violent excesses of the Jacobin government, Staël represented Revolutionary France as a country in dire need of compassion. Her appeal to such distinctive feminine qualities as pity and generosity allowed her to draw attention to the ways in which these could be understood in terms of the potential role of women in politics. During the 1790s, there existed widespread cultural anxieties about the stability of the natural gender order and women's disastrous influence on politics (McMillan 27). Staël, here, attempted to minimise and discredit these fears by claiming that such specifically feminine emotions were needed to stabilise the political situation in France.

Strategically invoking the cultural myths surrounding femininity as associated with Sensibility, “Staël [emphasised] what she [saw] as women's special political talent of persuading men to act within a more compassionate model of reason” (Marso, *Defending the*

*Queen* 53). The sentimental language in which she couched her defense of Marie-Antoinette, therefore, was supposed to embody such a specifically feminine political consciousness. In Staël's view, feminine Sensibility, as opposed to masculine passion, offered a guiding principle of political behaviour. Women were different from men because of their maternal and sensitive nature, and it was because, not in spite of, this affective nature that they were able to play a vital role in the world of politics. The defense of Marie-Antoinette set forth in the *Réflexions*, therefore, was a means of insisting on the possibilities for women's participation in politics. From this perspective, Staël was able to apply the rhetoric of Sensibility to a sustained feminisation of early Revolutionary politics as differentiated from the masculine politics of the Jacobin regime. She even went as far as to conclude her defense of the queen with a call to action directed at her female readership, encouraging them to act in reaction to Jacobin fanaticism:

Je reviens à vous, femmes immolées toutes dans une mère si tendre, immolées toutes par l'attentat qui serait commis sur la faiblesse, par l'anéantissement de la pitié ; c'est en fait de votre empire si la férocité règne [...]. Défendez la reine par toutes les armes de la nature [...]. (Staël, *RPR* 19)

Like Wollstonecraft, then, Staël wrote primarily to contend for women's inclusion in Revolutionary politics. As we have seen, both of them wrote to question women's assigned social roles and to challenge deeply rooted prejudices about their capabilities. Even if they shared a similar aim, however, Wollstonecraft's vision contrasted strongly with Staël's position which used Sensibility as a jumping-off point for the potential role of women in politics. The *Réflexions*, in fact, diverged from Wollstonecraft's rhetorical position in celebrating Revolutionary politics as an affective enterprise. Staël recognised the language of Sensibility as a language of empowerment for women, promising equality in difference. Her strategy of invoking traditional notions of femininity allowed her to discuss women's cultural roles in the

new republican order. Even if Staël allocated women to the private domain of the emotions, she only did so to exhort them to become active citizens and to restore upper-class women's exceptional role as governors of male opinion. Contrary to Staël, Wollstonecraft never suggested that women possessed different virtues than men. She even went as far as to denounce Sensibility as a system of social conditioning aimed entirely at women's subjection. For Staël, however, women's compassionate understanding and moral intuition arising from their greater capacity for Sensibility were valorised as deeply rational (Marso, *Defending the Queen* 55). Staël, in other words, attempted to depolarise the dichotomy between Reason and sentiment. As Le Coat observes, however, by basing her defense of women's potential relationship to politics on Sensibility, "Staël risked falling into an essentialist argument whereby women are fundamentally emotional and performative beings rather than persons capable of being motivated by reason and transparency" (47). Additionally, Staël's strategy of asserting a politics of sexual difference was not without its contradictions. As Hillman affirms, "[t]hough [...] purporting to speak on behalf of all women, for the most part [Staël's] reflections [were] limited to the few exceptional women who, in her view, genuinely affected society" (236). Staël's works, in fact, primarily emphasised upper-class women's roles as civilising agents. How much, after all, did lower-class women have in common with Marie-Antoinette? Much as in Wollstonecraft's case, however, it is important to bear in mind the limitations imposed on women writers during the 1790s. Staël's strategy of invoking stereotyped feminine qualities to argue for equality between the sexes was born in a crucial moment, and thus she tended to uphold clichés regarding women's affective nature to make her writings more acceptable to male readers.

### ***3.2 Des circonstances actuelles qui peuvent terminer la Révolution et des principes qui doivent fonder la République en France***

In the concluding pages of her pamphlet on Marie-Antoinette, Staël not only implored women to consider the fate of the queen; she also addressed the French government and its supporters. Urging them to bear in mind the impact of further bloodshed on the future of their regime as well as the future of their country, Staël's principal aim was to end the volatile circumstances of the Terror: "[s]i vous persistez dans votre cruauté, si vous immolez la reine, vos lauriers même se flétriront au milieu de vous" (*RPR* 16). Adopting the voice of reason rather than appealing to the hearts of her readers, Staël's pamphlet "carried a warning to the Jacobins, threatening them with the consequences of their actions, for which they must sooner or later be accountable, both at home and in the wider international arena" (Fontana, *Political Portrait* 64).

Staël's direct involvement in the events that followed the collapse of the monarchy and the death of many of her family's friends was decisive in her shift in political allegiance to conservative republicanism. Given that constitutional monarchy was no longer an option by the middle of the 1790s, Staël came to believe that the current republican government was the only viable option that remained open to the establishment of a stable regime (Fontana, *Thermidorian Republic* 121). A fervent admirer of the English constitutional tradition and its party system, Staël defended bicameral legislature while invoking the British House of Lords as a model for the Second Chamber (Takeda 8). Much like Wollstonecraft showed an interest in Revolutionary France to initiate reforms in England, Staël's admiration of English political culture remained active throughout her life. While Wollstonecraft was staying in France to witness the Revolution in close proximity, Staël was living in England as of January 1793, fleeing from the Terror. Although she returned to Switzerland in the summer of that same year, Staël remained well-informed of the current situation of English politics throughout the Revolutionary decade (Fontana, *Political Portrait* 95). Staël even somewhat surprisingly

identified William Pitt, head of the English government and fervent anti-Jacobin, as the arbiter of France's future in her *Réflexions sur la paix, adressées à M. Pitt et aux Français* (1795). To have the new French republic succeed, Staël placed her efforts in reaching a durable peace settlement between France and England to terminate the Revolution.

Already in her *Réflexions*, but even more so in *Des circonstances*, Staël felt compelled to discuss the Revolution's failings as well as its long-term consequences for the future of the nation. Written in the context of Thermidor, from the execution of Robespierre in July 1794 to the coup that brought Napoleon to power in November 1799, *Des circonstances* testified to Staël's traumatising experience of the Terror. Even if these reflections were written in a politically fragile situation, Staël adopted a hopeful tone to preserve the republic from the threats of a monarchical restoration or a return of Jacobinism. Staël recognised that a change of regime would be restored only by violent means, and so the primary aim of her pamphlet was to promote a peaceful future for the French nation. As a result, "[t]he central argument set forth in *Des circonstances* for maintaining the republican government in France was not that it was, in principle, better than any other, but that it was already in existence" (Fontana, *Thermidorian Republic* 121).

To persuade her readership of these particular observations on the political situation in France, it was necessary for Staël to distance the republican government from the horrors brought about by the Jacobin regime with which it had unmistakably become associated. The Terror had introduced incredible turbulence in French society for it had destroyed many of its traditions and institutions. A sense of social dissolution haunted the French people in the wake of the Terror, and thus Staël first acknowledged their fears and doubts, capitalising on their desire for peace and reconciliation before moving on to her theoretical considerations:

Hélas ! nous souffrons tous. Les uns sont agités, les autres sont aigris [...]. L'Univers entier semble jeté dans le creuset d'une création nouvelle, et tout ce qui existe est froissé

dans cette terrible opération [...]. Est-ce donc pour le cours entier de notre vie que nous serons infortunés ? (*DCA* 2)

Calling on republicans, constitutionalists, and monarchists alike, Staël emphasised the commonality of their experience to promote political rapprochement in the interests of stabilising the nation's political life. To substantiate this sympathetic link between herself and her readership, Staël insisted on their shared experience of the Terror: "Hélas ! si je n'avais pas autant souffert que vous, [...] je rougirais de vous parler d'espérances, mais bien qu'opposés dans nos principes politiques, nos infortunes se ressemblent" (*DCA* 28).

In *Des circonstances*, Staël thus not only paid attention to pressing political considerations but also to popular sentiment in light of what had happened. This is not surprising for an author who was primarily concerned with the relations between public passions and national government. According to Staël, "at the heart of any viable political regime [...] was the interdependence of public credit, trust, and popular consensus" (Fontana, *Political Portrait* 9). The government needed to act transparently in the people's best interests to secure and retain public confidence. In *Des circonstances*, Staël even went as far as to discuss how the difficult functioning of the contemporary political system pointed to the importance of the support of public opinion. In Staël's view, the political institutions of a nation should ever develop in keeping with the expectations of public opinion: "[o]n peut bien [...] oublier qu'elle existe, mais comme elle est la véritable puissance nationale, dès qu'on voudra fonder le gouvernement [...], il faudra que cette opinion soit raillée à la République, ou le gouvernement ne s'établira pas" (*DCA* 95).

As mentioned before, Britain was a mixed monarchy at the time which meant that the power of the executive branch of government was constrained by representative bodies (Melton 45). For a large part, the root of Britain's exceptional liberties laid in the existence of a political culture in which citizens had the opportunity to discuss political affairs and voice their opinion.



Because France lacked such a tradition, “[t]he term public opinion [appeared] much more frequently in French journalistic writing of the eighteenth century than in British political discourse” (Melton 62). Although public opinion is never a unitary phenomenon, it was virtually impossible to identify it in French political culture precisely because the nation lacked formal institutions for its expression. As a result, the notion of public opinion acquired increasing importance in France during the second half of the eighteenth century, and so it eventually became one of the main forces behind the Revolutionary movement (Melton 57).

In *Des circonstances*, Staël discussed how she regarded public opinion as the driving force behind any process of political change. Because it is the expression of the general will, or rather the true interests of the majority of the people, she identified it as one of the possible causes of the derailment of the Revolution: “[u]ne grande partie donc des horreurs de la Révolution sont venues de ce que l’esprit public était en arrière d’une institution dont le principe est démocratique” (Staël, *DCA* 35). According to Staël, the Revolutionary project failed in part because the republican government was not sanctioned by public opinion. Nevertheless, even if there was an existing gap between the government and its citizens, Staël argued that the republic should be consolidated for the sake of national reconciliation (Fontana, *Thermidorian Republic* 121). According to Staël’s logic, a national education system as well as other related cultural institutions could prove valuable connecting points between the governing and the governed classes. That is to say, if the state sufficiently educated public opinion in the practice of representative government, the consolidation of the republican government could be effected more easily. Even more important to the promotion of peaceful relation, however, was the power of literature to rekindle the spirit of the nation in the republic: “[i]l faut que les écrivains pressent les pas de l’esprit humain, pour lui faire rejoindre la République qui l’a devancé” (Staël, *DCA* 189).

This brings us to the question of gender. In Staël's view, the constitution alone was far from sufficient to secure the republic by general consent, and so she became increasingly interested in cultural factors to supplement political sociability between the government and its citizens. Over the next years, Staël would write her major treatise on the power of the writer and the literary imagination entitled *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800). In it, Staël would expand on what she had already hinted at in *Des circonstances*—i.e. that works of the imagination “[were] conducive to national attachment” (Hillman 238). After the Terror, nothing was more urgent than to rally the people behind the new republican government. Whereas military courage had been necessary to terminate the Terror, something more was needed to restore order and stability in France: “c’est de la raison philosophique réunie aux talents de l’écrivain que doit partir l’impulsion de l’esprit national en France” (Staël, *DCA* 202).

To ensure the durable foundation of the social affections, it was essential to have women serve as moral exemplars to men. In *De la littérature*, Staël lamented the terrible consequences arising from the ways in which the revolution had progressively eliminated women's role in politics (Hillman 238). In *Des circonstances*, much like in her *Réflexions*, Staël hinted at the ways in which women could redress the abuses of power and the radicalism to which the Revolution had led: “[c]ar si vous persistez à rendre l’existence des vaincus intolérable, la puissance du désespoir troublera du moins l’Etat [...] et jamais une guerre intestine ne finit que par l’équité des vainqueurs envers les vaincus. La générosité n’est que la justice au moment de la toute-puissance” (*DCA* 87). From this perspective, Staël maintained that feminine compassion rather than masculine virility could unite the nation. This implied that women, who were believed to be superior to men in the domain of natural feelings, should play a substantial role in politics. The particular strength of feminine sensibilities, to Staël, was that women could cope more easily in the political system than men because of their abilities to produce

harmonious social consensus (Hillman 232). Additionally, women were worthy of a public role in French society because they were far more able to achieve independence from public opinion than men. As Staël affirmed in *Des circonstances*, “[p]our moi, que n’ai rien à craindre ni à espérer dans la carrière politique, j’ai pensé que cette indépendance me faisait une loi d’exprimer les opinions que je crois utiles” (DCA 137). Contrary to women, men’s political decisions were inevitably informed by their obsession with public opinion and public approval. As we will see when discussing Staël’s *Delphine*, it was, in fact, the same power of public opinion that made it impossible for women to achieve the authenticity required for taking on their role as civilising agents to men.

### 3.3 *Delphine* (1802)

The year 1800 marked an important shift in Staël’s perspective from political and constitutional theory to imaginative literature. In its various phases the Revolution identified biological manhood as the sole criterium for citizenship in the new French republic (Hillman 234). As a result, “Staël’s optimism reserved for upper-class women’s active social and cultural roles [...] gradually [disappeared] after 1800” (Takeda 91). In contrast, she expressed her disappointment about the role of upper-class women in politics in her fiction. Staël’s renewed interest for literature signalled that she still felt called upon to challenge the prejudices of her day and to denounce the Revolution’s reductionist understanding of women’s role as citizens of their nation. In *Des circonstances*, Staël attempted to reconstruct a climate of conservative republicanism which would create space for the political participation of women. In *Delphine*, she once again pointed to the Revolution’s failure to produce a stable republic as evidence of the need to extend women’s influence to the political domain.

*Delphine* is a tragic love story set in the midst of the Revolution for some thirty months between April 1790 and September 1792. The novel tells the story of Delphine d’Albémar, a

young and beautiful widow, who forms a close relationship with her aunt, Mme de Vernon. Free to command her fortune as she pleases, Delphine helps her aunt's daughter, the austere and rigid Matilde de Vernon, to a marriage by the generous gift of an estate. When Matilde's fiancé, Léonce de Mondoville, arrives in Paris, he and Delphine fall desperately in love. Their relationship is put off, however, by the conflict between her tendency to disregard public opinion and his unwavering belief in the significance of honour. When Delphine becomes the subject of a scandal because of shameful rumours spread by Mme de Vernon, Léonce starts to have serious doubts about her. Eventually, Delphine is forced to leave Parisian society because of these rumours and she writes to Mme de Vernon to confess her love for Léonce while entreating her friend to inform him of the truth. Self-interest prevents Vernon from reconciling the lovers, and she tricks Léonce into marrying her daughter. It is only after his marriage to Matilde and the sudden death of Mme de Vernon that Léonce hears of Delphine's innocence. He immediately realises he has made a mistake in marrying Matilde, but unfortunately, there were few remedies to his problem in early-Revolutionary France—a lesson that would not be lost on Staël's contemporary readership.

Without strictly speaking being unfaithful to his wife, Léonce retreats to a country estate of Delphine in Bellerive where they spend almost every day together in private. As the Revolution progresses, the legalisation of divorce comes to represent the key solution for their predicament. Given that society is quite unforgiving of divorcing couples, however, the solution does not prove satisfactory for Léonce. Even away from Paris, Delphine's reputation is not safe from scandal. Rumours about her close relationship with Léonce start to spread and Delphine's reputation is eventually saved through the intervention of Matilde. Full of remorse, Delphine confesses her feelings for Léonce to her cousin and she flees to Switzerland where she stays in a convent. Unaware that Matilde's health is severely compromised after she gives birth to a son, Delphine takes religious vows and Léonce arrives a few days too late to prevent the

ceremony. On the suggestion of her friend, M. de Lebensei, a Protestant and moderate Revolutionary thinker, Delphine agrees to return to France. The Revolution once again affords opportunities for the two lovers to marry because of the abolition of monastic vows. Léonce, however, to whom his reputation has always been of considerable importance, cannot stand the thought of being judged by public opinion for marrying a former nun. Heartbroken, he travels to Verdun in mid-September where he is captured in a fight with republican guards and sentenced to death for being an enemy of the Revolution. Delphine follows him, but when her pleas for his life fail to save him, she takes poison to ensure that she will not survive him.

Published about a decade after the events it chronicled, *Delphine* was written when the power of the consulate was consolidated. The new regime operated a system of strict censorship and so “the space for political dissent [...] appeared increasingly reduced” (Fontana, *Political Portrait* 204). Writers of the period had little choice but to defend the new regime, to enter the opposition at their own risk, or to remain silent. Harking back to the nation’s past by situating her narrative against the backdrop of the Revolution allowed Staël to implicitly criticise the contemporary political system. In the preface to *Delphine*, Staël went out of her way to present her work as an apolitical novel, concerned only with domestic scenes of life. Drawing upon familiar literary conventions, such as the topos of the discovered manuscript, Staël presented her work as the transmission of an authentic, original text. In doing so, Staël emerged as nothing more than the editor of the text, and so she was able to distance herself from the views and ideas expressed in the novel. Additionally, even if she refused to eliminate the political context in its entirety, Staël confessed that she had been cautious enough to keep out the parts that were too political: “[l]es lettres que j’ai recueillies ont été écrites dans le commencement de la révolution ; j’ai mis du soin à retrancher de ces lettres [...] tout ce que pouvait avoir rapport aux événements politiques de ce temps-là” (*Delphine* 47). In thus coding her arguments, Staël was able to insert political commentary as well as observations on social attitudes in her fiction.

In Staël's view, contemporary Napoleonic society was guilty of the same crimes as *Ancien Régime* and Jacobin culture—i.e. the exclusion of female influence from politics and government.

In the preface to *Delphine*, Staël took note of the novel's subordinate cultural status amongst other literary genres of the period. Interestingly enough, her justification for writing a novel focused almost exclusively on the wisdom that could be extracted from such writings. Because novels commend to us moral attitudes while contributing to our knowledge of human nature, Staël proposed the study of fictional events as a means to reform society. In particular, she discussed how novels written in a realist vein could teach us about the world because they reveal it as it truly is by explaining things in such a way that readers recognise not only the characters but also the social background that reflects the usual customs of the contemporary world:

Je crois donc que les circonstances de la vie, passagères comme elles le sont, nous instruisent moins des vérités durables que les fictions fondées sur ces vérités ; et que les meilleures leçons [...] peuvent se trouver dans les romans, où les sentiments sont peints avec assez de naturel, pour que vous croyez assister à la vie réelle en les lisant. (Staël, *Delphine* 40)

Novels, in Staël's view, are educational tools that appeal to our minds in an affective way by capitalising on our passions and our imagination. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Staël's *Delphine* was an ostensibly apolitical novel with immense political significance. The novel's epigraph, which paraphrased Staël's mother's *Mélanges* (1798), already announced that this would be a text in which contemporary gender definitions would play a key role: “[u]n homme doit braver l'opinion, une femme s'y soumettre” (Staël, *Delphine* 35). Staël's use of this reference was deeply ironic, however, considering that her novel explored and ultimately challenged the same proposition. In the novel, the opposite happens: Delphine wants to speak

freely for herself under the guidance of her own conscience whereas Léonce wants to speak in accordance with public opinion in favour of social convention. In initiating such a role reversal between the behaviour of the two protagonists, *Delphine* “[opened] a literary space for an alternative discourse that [challenged] traditional norms about gender and sexuality” (Foerster 45). Through the contrasting behaviour of its characters, the novel attempted to expose the gender roles stated at the beginning of the text as dogmatic social constructs that entrap both men and women.

In much the same way as the question of woman’s role in society remained of critical importance to Staël’s political thought, the figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau continued to shadow her fictional works. Mary Seidman Trouille in fact maintains that “Staël’s first novel can be read as a response to [Rousseau’s] *Julie*” (206). Gregory Dart goes even further by arguing that “Julie was a highly positive role model for Staël [...] [because she represented] a Revolutionary version of the salon hostess” (126). Although Staël professed her novel was apolitical, she carefully provided dates for the Revolution’s major events, and so the struggles of the different characters were brought in line with a wider political context. Staël’s novel was as much about the conflicting interests of Delphine as a woman with private feelings and desires as the public fate of France as a nation riven by Revolutionary upheaval. In constructing the character of Delphine, an independent woman who defines her own terms for happiness, Staël showed that women, same as men, had a right to exert influence over politics. Her novel argued that pity—which Rousseau had previously identified as the sole natural virtue in his *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755)—was necessary to forestall despotic politics. According to Rousseau, “[p]ity, or the repugnance inspired by the suffering of one’s fellows, was the only impulse in natural man capable of countering his powerful instinct for self-conservation” (Le Coat 40). As mentioned before when discussing her *Réflexions*, Staël also considered that pity alone was capable of subduing one of the more

violent human inclinations inspired by the Revolution—i.e. the spirit of party. In Staël's view, compassion was stifled during the Revolution because of women's exclusion from the public sphere. As a result, its leaders had become so blinded by passion that the nation suffered in its wake. What the Revolutionaries lacked during the civil conflict and, more importantly, what was required to terminate the Revolution was women's softening influence on politics.

Staël went even further by explaining how men's lack of education in matters of the heart affected the kind of politics they practised (Marso, *Stories of Citizens* 455). As Marso continues, Staël “[linked] the construction of masculinity to a method of philosophical abstraction that dangerously disregards individual people, circumstances, and emotions” (*Stories of Citizens* 455). In thus linking the development of a masculine kind of politics to war and tyranny, Staël implicitly established a connection between the silencing of women and despotic politics. Whereas men tended towards ideological excess because of their education, women, on the other hand, “[were] taught a method of reasoning wherein emotions inform judgment” (Marso, *Stories of Citizens* 456). Women, therefore, possessed certain moral qualities that men did not, and thus society at large suffered when it forbade them from exercising their influence outside the domestic sphere.

Insisting upon the necessity of women's softening influence on masculine politics, Staël's political model clearly “[redefined] pity as a feminine, morally elevating passion” (Le Coat 47). As Marso affirms, “Staël [argued] that there [was] an essential link between emotion and good judgment: the ability to reason well stems from being able to feel emotion toward a concrete other and bring that emotion and knowledge of the perspective of others to bear on political reason” (*Stories of Citizens* 456). From this perspective, the novel's purposeful reclamation of Delphine's capacity for Sensibility should not be overlooked. Throughout the novel, Delphine exhibits a self-sacrificing generosity which Staël, much like her sentimentalist contemporaries, implicitly understood as an important instrument of social bonding. It is, in



fact, Delphine's reliance on her own sense of right and wrong that makes her an ideal citizen of the French republic. For Delphine, virtue is independent of the arbitrary and inflexible injunctions of aristocratic society. Unwilling to sacrifice her commitment to compassion in the face of personal slander, Delphine is far more able to achieve independence from public opinion than her male lover, Léonce. Corrupted by chivalrous notions of honour into overvaluing the viewpoint of others for his sense of selfhood, Léonce's enslavement to public opinion is fundamentally inimical to the common good. It is precisely because Léonce understands pity as a purely private emotion, easily sacrificed for the sake of public approval if necessary, that he often "disregards individual people, circumstances, and emotions" (Marso, *Stories of Citizens* 455).

Whereas Léonce consistently overlooks the feelings of others, Delphine follows her own moral code, exhibiting compassion for the suffering of others. On the one hand, Delphine's independence from public opinion translates directly into her willingness to sacrifice her own desires for those she loves and, by extension, the general good of society. Delphine shows this willingness to sacrifice her personal interest in her resolute refusal to become Léonce's mistress. The happiness of others—in this case Matilde's—must be placed before her own, and thus Delphine constantly checks Léonce's demands to become his mistress. Her determination in this regard offers compassion as an alternative practice of moral deliberation "wherein emotions inform judgment" (Marso, *Stories of Citizens* 456). On the other hand, Delphine shows that she is capable of imaging the suffering of those whose situation and experiences are radically different from her own. In the novel, it is shown how Mme de R, a woman whose sexual indiscretions have created a scandal, is ignored by the entire court when she appears in public. Delphine, willing to subject herself to the censure of public opinion out of pity for others, shows sympathy for Mme de R by crossing the room and sitting next to her. From this perspective, it becomes clear how "[p]ity's reliance on imagination [was] key to the way Staël [linked] private

experience with the happiness of the nation” (Le Coat 50). Throughout the narrative, “Delphine attempts to be loyal to her friends and family without neglecting the general good or denying the need to recognize the claims of others, especially those excluded from the dominant discourse” (Marso, *(Un)Manly Citizens* 86). In the new, political world that Staël envisaged, Delphine’s capacity for sympathy could serve as a check to men’s inclinations towards political fanaticism.

Aside from Delphine’s self-sacrificing generosity, Staël also stressed the inspirational power residing in the affective qualities of her speech. In *Des circonstances*, Staël maintained that imaginative literature had the power to bring about a sense of collective identity even where a nation did not yet completely exist (DCA 202). Suzanne Guerlac provides an insightful discussion of the ways in which feminine eloquence, according to Staël, fostered a sense of community (Guerlac 52). Conventionally endowed with an exceptional capacity for eloquence, women’s sociability was bound to regenerate post-Jacobin France in bringing about a community of shared feeling:

Women [...] are more eloquent than men. This is not unrelated to the fact that love is their chief passion. Since love, for women, implies loss, women’s hearts hold nothing but regrets. Yet this melancholy does not diminish women’s force. On the contrary, it enhances their rhetorical gifts and intensifies their influence. (Guerlac 53)

Eloquence, in Staël’s view, is a political category “because it touches both reason and the passions, thereby producing the social affections of admiration and enthusiasm required for love of the nation” (Guerlac 48).

Although the narrative ends before Robespierre’s rise to power, Staël’s novel still showed that the Jacobin policies pledged the Revolution to an increasingly extreme and violent course. The events of the final section of *Delphine* take place between August and September 1792, and thus the Revolutionary tribunal at Verdun before which Léonce has to appear can be

read as embodying Jacobin culture. The rise of the Jacobin regime witnessed the emergence of a terrorist politics which was fundamentally inimical to the emotional political commitment that Delphine supported. At the end of the novel, Léonce is arrested for counterrevolutionary activity on the grounds of taking up arms against his country. Delphine goes to his Jacobin judge to plead for his life, “[asking] the judge to consider Léonce as a fellow human being, in all his private and personal attributes, his likeness and difference from himself” (Marso, *Stories of Citizens* 457). Delphine here exhibits a feminine eloquence that attempts to overcome the distance between the administration of the Revolutionary Tribunal and Léonce and herself through identifying the vital connection between pity and politics: “ce n’est point une pitié commune que j’attends de vous, c’est une élévation d’âme qui suppose des vertus antiques, des vertus républicaines, des vertus qui honoreront mille fois davantage le parti que vous défendez que les plus illustres victoires” (Staël, *Delphine* 928-929). Delphine asks the judge to appeal to his emotions not only as a way of sympathising with Léonce but also to have him recognise that this particular question of justice affects the entire republican community. Contrary to Delphine, however, the judge proves incapable of sympathising with another’s situation irrespective of his own plight, and Delphine soon realises the futility of her attempt to authenticate a connection between intuitive sympathy and political deliberation. In response to the judge’s rejection, she decides to appeal to his concern for his own private interest in using the fact that his child is ill to argue for Léonce’s freedom: “si vous livrez Léonce au tribunal, votre enfant, cet objet de toute votre tendresse, il mourra ! il mourra !” (Staël, *Delphine* 930). This time, the effect is almost immediate: “[à] ces mots, la femme du juge, sans parler, suppliait son mari de ses regards, de ses mains élevées, et demandait ainsi la grâce de Léonce” (Staël, *Delphine* 930). The impact of Delphine’s speech is felt collectively by the judge and his wife, and so their emotions are brought to bear on the political consideration at hand. In their recognition of what it would feel like to lose their son, they become able to sympathise with

Delphine's cause (Marso, *(Un)Manly Citizens* 102). Delphine's ability to convince the judge can be understood as a process of imaginative understanding. The experience of another's perspective allows for a greater detachment of the self, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the individual and the community. In thus theorising a specifically feminine ethics of pity, Staël wished to warn against adopting a model of citizenship that gave meaning to the nation without considering the individual. No sooner has Léonce been exonerated from his crime than a second judge enters, condemning him to death. This time, Delphine's words fail to effect a difference, and so it becomes clear that her affective politics become worthless in the face of an oppressive regime which uses terrorist policies to ensure public virtue in its citizens. The courtroom scene at the end thus reveals the failures of the Jacobin system which work against the kind of softening political influence exercised by Delphine.

*Ancien Régime* culture, the same as Jacobin culture, is fundamentally inimical to the kind of emotive politics that Delphine supports. As we will see, pity soon becomes a trap for Delphine and her feminine Sensibility proves equally transgressive. Acting according to her own ideas often meant dismissing unwritten rules of conduct upon which women's reputation was dependent. This, of course, leaves her vulnerable to the attacks of *Ancien Régime* society, and so public opinion mobilises against Delphine for defying its social customs by way of her alternative morality. Aristocratic society, with its oppressive culture of dissimulation and rumour, in fact replaces authenticity with theatricality, thereby making it impossible for Delphine to adhere to her own sense of right and wrong.

The self-interest and cold political calculation of *Ancien Régime* society is embodied in the character of Mme de Vernon. In constructing the character of Vernon, Staël's novel was able to combine her previous discussions of female citizenship with incisive analyses of the deplorable condition of women in contemporary society. Throughout the novel, Vernon

conforms to the artificiality of society for the sake of appearances while using rumours as a weapon against others. Vernon, however, does not merely use her abilities to manipulate public opinion against her enemies. She also uses them against Delphine to arrange her daughter's marriage, initiated primarily as a business contract. Vernon, in fact, shamelessly exploits her friendship with Delphine to ensure Léonce's marriage to Matilde in order to be able to pay off her pressing debts while guaranteeing her daughter's happiness. In thus portraying the perfidy of Vernon, Staël was able to criticise the precariousness of women's position in society. The very fact that women were both socially and financially dependent on marriage fostered bitter rivalry among them. Because of their subordinate status in society, women were pitted against each other in the service of patriarchal interests, and so genuine friendship and solidarity between women was made difficult, if not impossible. In a letter Vernon writes on her deathbed, she suggests that women should recognise female rivalry for what it is: an inevitable consequence of their dependent position in society. Women's subordination induces them to become dishonest for their own protection in order to survive in society, and so the art of dissimulation, "*la fausseté*", is the last line of defense left to them (Staël, *Delphine* 373).

In the same letter, Vernon reveals to Delphine that her artificial character is the product of her education by a misogynist guardian: "[u]n parent très éloigné et très insouciant fut mon tuteur ; [...] il regardait d'ailleurs les femmes comme des jouets dans leur enfance, et dans leurs jeunesse comme des maîtresses plus ou moins jolies, que l'on ne peut jamais écouter sur rien de raisonnable" (Staël, *Delphine* 372). Growing up, Vernon soon realises that Parisian society compels women to obey to the dictates of public opinion, instructing them to concentrate on their personal attractions rather than their sensibilities. As a result, she ultimately chooses to instil in her daughter a respect for social convention instead of cultivating her capacity for Sensibility. By deliberately providing Matilde with an impoverished Catholic education, Vernon believes that she will enable her daughter to conform more easily to the external

demands placed on women, thereby diminishing the amount of suffering she will have to confront in life. Because of her education, Matilde grows up to become a religious fanatic whose adherence to public opinion arises from a total lack of inner life. In a letter she writes to Delphine, Matilde even goes as far as to advise her to conform to the dictates of public opinion: “je crois tellement essentiel pour une femme de ménager en tout point l’opinion, que je lui conseillerais de ne rien braver en aucun genre, ni superstitions [...], ni convenances, quelques puériles qu’elles puissent être” (Staël, *Delphine* 57).

The Vernons are emblematic of the common traps into which women are led because of their limited educational opportunities: first, to withhold education from girls becomes the chief cause for the development of calculated egotism; second, the traditional Catholic schooling leads to the loss of autonomous thought. Whereas Vernon constitutes an example of the destructive power of a society that thrives on the vulnerability of women, Matilde can be read as “an active promotor of the status quo, proud to defend as woman’s reality the warping sexist abstractions imposed on society by the word of men” (Swallow 69). Through these two characters, *Delphine* showed that unless women were better educated, they were only able to survive in a patriarchal society by educating themselves through the cultivation of vice or by discarding their natural sensibilities.

Through the character of Delphine, Staël seemed to redefine what should constitute the goals of women’s education. In contrast to the Vernons, Delphine had been taught by her husband to disregard the dictates of conventionality and to focus instead on developing her sensibilities:

La crainte de l’opinion rend tant de femmes dissimulées, que pour ne point exposer la sincérité de mon caractère, M. d’Albémar travaillait de tout son pouvoir à m’affranchir de ce joug. Il y a réussi ; je ne redoute rien sur la terre que je reproche juste de mon cœur, ou le reproche injuste de mes amis [...]. (Staël, *Delphine* 127)

In thus describing Delphine's alternative upbringing, Staël seemed to argue that women should receive an education that sought to cultivate an autonomous and independent form of selfhood. It should be noted, however, that Staël qualified her argument considerably, thereby expressing her lack of faith in the possibilities of such an education. The alternative upbringing enjoyed by the propertied Delphine cannot be read as an ideal meant to be accessible to all women. Delphine was an exceptional woman who, from early childhood, received a highly unconventional education at the hands of her husband. Orphaned, widowed, and with in-laws who respect her dead husband's wishes regarding her inheritance, Delphine is introduced as alone from the start. Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that the education of Delphine could not possibly bring women happiness considering that public opinion prohibited them from acting according to their own principles. According to Vernon, it was primarily due to her unconventional education that Delphine was inadequately equipped to confront the patriarchal system with its established values: "Madame d'Albémar [...] ne s'imagine pas qu'elle doive soumettre sa conduite à aucun genre de calcul, c'est ce qui fait qu'elle peut se nuire beaucoup à elle-même" (Staël, *Delphine* 90). Delphine's romantic naïveté leads her to consider herself free from the dictates of public opinion, which leaves her vulnerable to the relentless attacks of a self-serving society. Far from turning a blind eye to Delphine's unconventional behaviour, society shuns her, perceiving her as a threat to its ways of being. It is revealing in this regard that Delphine ultimately blames her own personality for her misery and unhappiness:

Je n'ai pas éprouvé une seule peine dont je ne doive m'accuser. [...] Je cède à des mouvements inconsidérés, mes qualités les meilleures m'entraînent beaucoup trop loin, ma raison arrive trop tard pour me retenir [...] ; je vous le dis, l'action de vivre m'agite trop, mon cœur est trop ému. (Staël, *Delphine* 829)

In thus staging a heroine actuated by a desire for happiness which was fundamentally incommensurate with the confines proscribed for women, Staël's novel criticised contemporary society as well as the impossible standards to which women were held.

Staël's novel, therefore, did not attempt to model for the female reader an idealised female education. On the contrary, in thus imagining the education of her heroine outside of society's grasp, Staël used Delphine's unconventional upbringing to demonstrate how the contemporary system of female education failed to serve as a means of instilling virtue in women. Because of the precariousness of women's position in society, it was dangerous for them to actively develop their natural sensibilities. Aristocratic society, in fact, compelled women to live artificial lives, and this produced a rigid social hierarchy from which there was no escape. In *Delphine*, Staël tried to show the psychological cost of fighting against such conventionality, especially for women, in order to politicise her readership. Her emphasis in this respect fell on the injustices suffered by women who were expected to devote themselves to their husbands even if they were more often than not disappointed or betrayed.

Divorce was an important point of contention in the novel and it remained a controversial issue until 1802, the year the novel was published. The sudden possibility of divorce in September 1792 had introduced incredible turmoil in society, for in "altering the composition of marriage [...] the Legislative Assembly had moved even farther toward banishing God and welcoming change" (Pasco 178). For Staël's contemporary readership, the new liberal attitude towards marriage constituted a tangible reality that in many respects represented enormous change. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the reform of the French divorce law inspired a wave of literary representations—both positive and negative (Pasco 178). In *Delphine*, divorce is usually mentioned in the midst of more momentous events. Because of their repetition, however, these hints still bring with them the controversies of the time. Despite the new ease in obtaining a divorce, Staël's novel demonstrated that divorced couples needed



to be unconcerned about public opinion to pursue such a controversial solution. Even if divorce was not considered acceptable behaviour, however, it comes to represent the solution before impossible choices and feelings of helplessness. In the novel, Delphine's friend, M. de Lebensei, even goes as far as to advocate legal divorce by condemning the adulterous behaviour arising from conjugal unhappiness. In his view, the legalisation of divorce will produce and establish a more virtuous society because it will counter the widespread adultery prevalent among the upper classes. He argues that in a society where divorce is prohibited illegitimate attachments are less a reaction to personal problems than the result of an unjust society in which there exists a considerable gap between true inner virtue and mere external conformity to social convention (Staël, *Delphine* 637-638).

Although Staël left no question about her favourable inclination, she was nonetheless aware of the problems associated with divorce. While Lebensei is portrayed as having some sensitivity to public censure, he remains relatively unaffected by his decision to marry a divorced woman. His wife Élise, on the other hand, although she has been able to find happiness in her new marriage, warns Delphine that defying public opinion while trying to remain in society is a difficult, if not impossible, task for women: “[c]’est un grand hasard à courir pour une femme que de braver l’opinion ; il faut, pour l’oser, [...] se rendre inaccessible aux traits de la calomnie, et concentrer en soi-même toute la chaleur de ses sentiments ; il faut avoir la force de renoncer au monde [...]” (Staël, *Delphine* 262). Contrary to her husband, Élise must pay the price for challenging convention, and so, much like Mme de R, she incurs the wrath of public opinion. In thus reflecting on the societal disapproval that Élise is confronted with, Staël wished to formulate a critique of the considerable gap between the advances of the Revolution and the conservatism of society.

In this way, the intrigue of Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs* and Staël's *Delphine* put forward the necessity of the legalisation of divorce. The scrutiny of unhappy marriages in their fiction

had the advantage of providing an easy transition to the controversial topic of divorce. Before the courtroom scene in *Wrongs*, for instance, Maria had already claimed her right to refuse sex with her husband whom she no longer desired by declaring that “personal intimacy without affection, seemed, to [her] the most degrading, as well as the most painful state in which a woman of any taste [...] could be placed” (Wollstonecraft, *MWW* 129). To give force to Maria’s subversive statement, Wollstonecraft exhibited her sexual repulsion from her husband through graphic physical description: “I think I now see him lolling in an arm-chair, in a dirty powdering gown, soiled linen, ungartered stockings, and tangled hair, yawning and stretching himself” (*MWW* 130). In thus appealing to the reader’s senses, Wollstonecraft tried to justify Maria’s right to divorce in an attempt to “overwhelm the reader into a sensational recognition that [she] had no moral choice but to flee” (Binhammer, *Seduction Narrative* 152).

Staël, on the other hand, took up the topic of divorce within a larger discussion of the rigid conservatism of French society. As of September 1792, divorce had been legalised in France, but it continued to be held in disrepute amongst the upper classes. As we have seen, the divorced women in Staël’s fiction are shunned by society because of their attempts to escape the ties of marriage to seek personal fulfilment. These women are found guilty of rebelling against the strict limitations set for them, and so they must be punished. In *Delphine*, the social attitudes towards divorce came to stand for a larger critique of the unjust treatment of women in society. Each of these women’s reputed crimes had, in fact, been committed in function of choices that were made for them by others—either their fathers, their husbands, or male-governed institutions that forced them into marriages of convenience. In this way, Staël invoked an image of female entrapment whereby those women who attempt to take control of their lives are those most victimised by society.

Through literary divorce, Staël and Wollstonecraft strove to prove the necessity and usefulness of divorce. In alluding to the recent legalisation of divorce in Revolutionary France

in *Wrongs*, Wollstonecraft was able to point to the need for amended divorce legislation in Britain. For Wollstonecraft, there could be no question about the importance of divorce to the general public because it concerned the happiness of individual citizens while it partially solved the injustices of marriage. As Staël's fiction demonstrated, however, the possibility of divorce notwithstanding, the ideology of a gender order based on sexual difference remained as pervasive at the beginning of the nineteenth century as it had been during the eighteenth century.

In representing divorce the way they did, both Staël and Wollstonecraft effectively denounced the panic surrounding the effects of female political resistance. This brings us back to Staël's main objective to contend for women's inclusion in politics. At the end of her novel, the world that Delphine leaves behind is one in ruins, a decisive statement on the halt of national progress that the suppression of feminine influence in politics represents. Inscribed on a tree beside the tomb of Delphine are the following words: "[o]n ne me répond pas, mais peut-être on m'entend" (Staël, *Delphine* 953). In this way, Delphine's struggle against the inauthenticity of the society in which she lives comes to represent a justification for her, and, by extension, women's reassignment to political action as arbiters of male opinion. Delphine was, in fact, the ideal republican citizen whose sentimental politics enabled her to navigate between the two extremes of Jacobin and *Ancien Régime* culture. In this way, Staël argued in favour of a political model that valued feminine Sensibility as a force tending towards social improvement. Women's softening influence was necessary to end the Terror, but both *Ancien Régime* and Jacobin society made it impossible for Delphine to pursue her authentic standards of right and wrong. From this perspective, Staël was able to formulate an implicit critique of the contemporary consular regime for imposing limitations upon women's expression. Published against the background of the Napoleonic era, Staël's second novel *Corinne* (1807) also took up the theme of the independent woman being irreconcilable with the patriarchal social order. The novel tells the story of the ill-fated love between Oswald and Corinne, who are separated

because of Oswald's inability to reconcile his passion for the independent-minded Corinne with the social demands of female domesticity.

#### 4. Conclusion

This dissertation has contrasted Mary Wollstonecraft's literary and non-literary writings on the Revolution with those by Germaine de Staël against the intellectual and political backdrop of the French Revolution. By contextualising these authors' changing perspectives on the events in France, this study has analysed how their representations of the Revolution were intimately connected with their views on the need for greater gender equality.

First of all, this dissertation has juxtaposed Wollstonecraft's political works on the Revolution with those by Staël in order to examine how their representations of this historical event were tied up with contemporary debates on sexual difference. By commenting on the larger socio-political context in which these works were created, their changing perspectives on the Revolution were brought in line with their different assessments of the usefulness of Sensibility as a model of femininity. Written in the context of the early Revolution debate, Wollstonecraft's *Vindications* recuperated the events in France for the interests of women to initiate and pursue reforms in Britain. Defending the Revolution in her earlier works, the volatility of the Terror compelled Wollstonecraft to revise her previous representations. Wollstonecraft's representation of the Revolution as bankrupt from the beginning combined with her double representation of Marie-Antoinette allowed her to argue that the Revolutionary project had gone wrong because it had allowed the gendered culture and politics of the *Ancien Régime* to persist into the new order. From this perspective, Wollstonecraft maintained that until equality would be extended to both sexes, the Revolution would not have fulfilled its promise. Staël, on the other hand, strategically described the Terror as a masculinisation of the Revolution. In her *Réflexions*, she contended that women's abrupt exclusion from public affairs had caused the Revolution to take the turn it did. In thus blaming the violent excesses of the Jacobin government, Staël argued for women's renewed access to the political sphere as moral exemplars to men. In *Des circonstances*, then, Staël increasingly defined the nation as a

community produced and established by print and conversation. Discussing how the Revolution had failed in part because the republican government was not sanctioned by public opinion, Staël argued that the power of literature might rekindle an affectionate relationship between the government and its citizens. This, in turn, allowed Staël to maintain that women's softening influence was needed to terminate the Revolution.

Next in order, this study has examined how these authors employed the rhetoric of Sensibility to engage with issues of sex and gender. Both Staël and Wollstonecraft were writing for women's inclusion in Revolutionary politics, challenging deeply rooted prejudices about women's social duties. Even if they shared a similar aim, however, Wollstonecraft's vision contrasted strongly with Staël's position which used Sensibility as a rhetoric of female empowerment. Both writers also employed the language of Sensibility to consciously represent themselves as authors writing from a distinctly female perspective. Whereas Wollstonecraft predominantly employed the hegemonic masculine system of authorial self-representation, Staël was more consistent in affirming her female identity as part of her strategic representation of the Revolution.

Aside from their political works, this dissertation has also examined Staël's and Wollstonecraft's fiction. Bearing in mind that their novels were written against a background of political repression, it becomes evident why they lost faith in the socially transformative power of the Revolution. Foreseeing only failure in their attempts to further social reform through politics, both writers turned to imaginative literature in the hopes of affecting change through politicising their respective readerships. Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs* fictionalised some of the central arguments of her *Rights of Woman*, seeking to authenticate its message upon emotional grounds. By depicting the wrongs from which women suffered, Wollstonecraft attempted to elicit sympathy in her readers, convincing them of the necessity of social reform. Likewise, Staël's *Delphine* also powerfully complemented her previous political writings in

arguing for the necessity of women's affective politics. The novel was not only a strong condemnation of a society that compelled women to conform to the arbitrary dictates of public opinion but also of the inadequate intellectual education they received. In depicting the fatal flaws of *Ancien Régime* and Jacobin society, Staël indirectly showed that the new consular regime was guilty of the same mistake—i.e. the exclusion of feminine influence from public affairs.

In juxtaposing these two women writers, this dissertation has broadened our understanding of the ways in which this particular moment in political history is tied to female authorship. By discussing their works in relation to the French Revolution, this study has not only elucidated the impact of the Revolution on Staël's and Wollstonecraft's political thought. It has also provided more general insights into its effect on their evolution as writers, including the development of their rhetorical strategies. Further research might explore the extent to which these women's representations of the Revolution inspired others to voice their opinions on women's enfranchisement. In particular, it might address the influence of Staël's and Wollstonecraft's rhetorical strategies on other writers of the period or even later feminist writers.

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