TEACHING THE TIMES AND THE LIFE

Jane Eyre and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

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In chapter 12 of *Jane Eyre*, when Jane reflects on the sense of confinement she had felt ten years earlier as she assumed her governess duties at Thornfield Hall, it seems almost as if the spirit of Mary Wollstonecraft has taken control of her pen:

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (96; ch. 12)

Recent criticism has been sensitive to the ways in which the novel embodies its narrator's rebellion against confining custom (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*; Moglen; Rich). No attempt has been made, however, to link the language of passages such as this one, and indeed the terms of the novel's

feminism in general, to a tradition of feminist discourse that originated fifty-five years before *Jane Eyre* appeared, when Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft was not the first eighteenth-century woman writer to analyze the causes and lament the consequences of sexual inequality, of course. Both Mary Wortley Montagu and Catharine Macaulay had earlier attributed women's inferior social status to nurture rather than nature, and both had enumerated the many social benefits that would result from granting women a wider sphere of influence. Much of the argument in *A Vindication*, in fact, is indebted to Macaulay's *Letters on Education*, which Wollstonecraft reviewed for the *Analytical Review* in 1790. Wollstonecraft's essay is more philosophical in approach than a mere treatise on educational reform would be and far more ambitious in its analysis of culturally determined gender differences than the work of Montagu or Macaulay is. It is a radical critique of prevailing social structures, inspired by the egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution.

Wollstonecraft's radicalism, both in her personal life and in her writing, contributed to the precipitous fall of her reputation following her death. The tide of anti-Jacobin sentiment that swept across England once the war against France began had something to do with this decline; so did the posthumous publication, by William Godwin, of some of Wollstonecraft's works and his own scrupulously honest *A Memoir of the Author of* A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. The critical backlash changed feminist discourse for the next half century. The polemical zeal with which Wollstonecraft had engaged the "women's issue" gave way, in her successors, to more indirect critiques of sexual inequality. Writers like Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, and, later, the Brontës addressed some of the same concerns that *A Vindication* did but in oblique, fictional terms. Indeed, *Jane Eyre* can be read and taught as a fictional counterpart to Wollstonecraft's manifesto, with the heroine dramatizing women's struggles against the very social constraints Wollstonecraft forcefully analyzes in her essay. Pairing these two works in women's literature courses or in period or historical surveys can help illuminate the early history of feminism, the role fiction played in this history, and some of the ways in which feminism was transformed in the wake of Romanticism.[1]

Wollstonecraft's provocative radicalism is apparent from the first pages of *A Vindication*. In her introduction, she says that all who view women with a "philosophic eye" must, like her, wish that women "may every day grow more and more masculine" (8). By "masculine" Wollstonecraft of course means "rational," and central to her argument is the demonstration that the cultivation of reason in women has been systematically suppressed by cultural conditioning, with pervasively degrading results. Like Jane Eyre in the passage quoted above, Wollstonecraft flatly rejects the traditional "separation of virtues" doctrine that assumes different mental and moral capacities in men and in women. This doctrine received its fullest eighteenth-

century expression in Rousseau's *Emile*, which views women primarily as creatures of sensibility, not reason, who are thus necessarily subject to the instruction and guidance of men: "Researches into abstract and speculative truths, the principles and axioms of science, in short, every thing which tends to generalize our ideas, is not the proper province of women . . ." (349). Much of *A Vindication* is a direct challenge to Rousseau's presumptions; apart from physical differences, Wollstonecraft insists, every distinction between men and women is culturally determined: "[N]ot only the virtue, but the *knowledge* of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree, and . . . women, considered not only as moral, but rational creatures, ought to endeavour to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the *same* means as men . . ." (39). An effective way to engage students in exploring the many affinities between *A Vindication* and *Jane Eyre* (as well as some crucial differences) is to have them consider the extent to which Jane herself, in the course of her story, fulfills Wollstonecraft's wish that women "may every day grow more and more masculine." This approach provides many opportunities for discussion and writing, as the following paragraphs reveal.

In a brilliant rhetorical move, Wollstonecraft acquits God of the charges of misogyny she levels against her culture and enlists his authority in seeking to transcend it. She locates one culturally enshrined source of this misogyny in *Paradise Lost*. Eve tells Adam, "God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no more / Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise" (4.637–38), and Adam, when he looks at Eve "in delight / Both of her Beauty and submissive Charms / Smil'd with superior Love" (4.497–99). For her part, Wollstonecraft says that if men wish women to be more than "the brutes who are dependent on the reason of man," men must let women "attain conscious dignity by feeling themselves only dependent on God" (36). Expressing thanks, she writes, "[God] gave me sufficient strength of mind to dare to exert my own reason, till, becoming dependent only on him for the support of my virtue, I view, with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex" (37). For Wollstonecraft, God becomes nearly synonymous with the exercise of reason and individual conscience. In the quasi-providential world of *Jane Eyre*, God seems to intervene in Jane's life repeatedly, whether to aid her in her quest for fulfillment (the fairy that suggests she advertise for a governess position, the voice of Rochester calling her back to him after Bertha's death) or to protect her moral integrity. But this spirit comes more and more to resemble Jane's own higher reason. When Rochester urges Jane to stay with him despite his marriage to Bertha, the voice of feeling within her asks, "Who in the world cares for *you*? or who will be injured by what you do?" A deeper voice answers, "*I* care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God . . ." (279; ch. 27). In both texts, God empowers women to exercise their own moral judgment apart from male expectations.

But *Jane Eyre* contains other evocations of God as well. The patriarchal God who guides Brocklehurst and St. John is both socially determined and determining. Brocklehurst has appropriated God for the purposes of social control and class oppression. Although extreme, his practice reflects a historical reality: the subordination of the emotional and spiritual energies of Methodism to the utilitarian needs of nineteenth-century English society (Thompson 37). St. John is more complicated; he is not a hypocrite, but his belief in Pauline theology makes him fear his own sexuality and view female sexuality as a threat to his purity of vision. One result is his attempt to succeed where Brocklehurst failed and render Jane submissive; his selective praise of her as "docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant" expresses his desire to subdue her to his needs (355; ch. 34). But by the time she confronts St. John, she has in one important sense achieved Wollstonecraft's wish. When he proposes that she accompany him to India as his wife, her reason tells her, "He prizes me as a soldier would a good weapon; and that is all" (356; ch. 34).

The eloquent indignation with which Jane rejects St. John's marriage proposal ("I scorn your idea of love . . . and I scorn you when you offer it" [359; ch. 34]) points to another crucial link between Wollstonecraft's essay and Brontë's novel. Both writers recognize that by restricting the definition of the feminine to those qualities St. John ascribes to Jane, society seeks to prevent women from fully exercising their reason and their developing virtue. Like Jane, Wollstonecraft is well aware that "women are supposed to be very calm generally": "Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are . . . recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex . . ." (34). Yet the effect of this kind of cultural conditioning is pernicious, since "women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue" (19). Instead, Wollstonecraft argues:

> Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives. (19)

Both Adèle Varens and Blanche Ingram are products, or rather victims, of this kind of teaching. When Jane first meets her, Adèle is a coquette in training, while Blanche flaunts her mastery of the art: "Whenever I marry . . . I am resolved my husband shall not be a rival, but a foil to me. I will suffer no competitor near the throne; I shall exact an undivided homage; his devotions shall not be shared between me and the shape he sees in his mirror" (158; ch. 17).

Rather than submit to these subterfuges of the enslaved, Wollstonecraft

counsels rebellion against the conditions that give rise to them. Though elsewhere she is all too eager to denigrate the passions, Wollstonecraft consistently validates women's anger and indignation when they are expressions of reason in revolt against injustice, when they are "spurs to action, and open the mind" (30). Jane Eyre, whose last name hints at the ire that often overwhelms her as a child but becomes her ally as she matures, is repeatedly admonished, by the people and institutions she encounters, to suppress her rage, but this same anger helps her to escape from Gateshead, reform Lowood, and stand up to both Rochester and St. John. Her fury at St. John for demanding that she sacrifice all her desires to his missionary ambition enables her to see him clearly for the first time: "The veil fell from his hardness and despotism. Having felt in him the presence of these qualities, I felt his imperfection, and took courage. I was with an equal—one with whom I might argue—one whom, if I saw good, I might resist" (358; ch. 34).

In their treatment of anger, Wollstonecraft and Brontë both demonstrate that reason and passion are not necessarily antithetical. But elsewhere in her essay, Wollstonecraft mercilessly opposes the two. One of the most troublesome aspects of *A Vindication*, and a likely source of student resistance to other aspects of Wollstonecraft's argument, is her persistent derogation of feelings in general and love and sexual passion in particular. As she frames her argument, those feelings are the enemies of reason and virtue. Her prescription to married couples makes this clear: "[A] master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion. I mean to say, that they ought not to indulge those emotions which disturb the order of society, and engross the thoughts that should be otherwise employed" (30). Here Wollstonecraft sounds like no one so much as St. John, whose own sexual feelings threaten his religious ambition. Significantly, Wollstonecraft's treatment of feelings in *A Vindication* is not consistent with her own personal attitudes. Her letters to Gilbert Imlay and William Godwin suggest that she saw no contradiction between reason and feeling, intelligence and femininity (*Letters*). Reading some of these letters to students who are struggling with the severe, ascetic voice of *A Vindication* may help humanize the woman behind the rhetorical persona. So may a reminder that exaggeration, designed to counter Rousseau's distorted conception of women, is one of Wollstonecraft's strategies in the essay. According to Rousseau, not only are women primarily creatures of feeling rather than reason, they are also fundamentally sexual beings: "[A] male is only a male now and again, the female is always a female . . . ; everything reminds her of her sex" (324). He also implies that women are constitutionally predisposed to please men—that their coquettishness is innate. Women educated in these assumptions, Wollstonecraft argues, become victims of sensibility, victims of sexuality: "Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling" (61). In resisting these assumptions, as Mary Poovey has shown, Wollstonecraft virtually denies women any sexual feelings at all ("*A Vindication*" 348).

Not so with Brontë. By the time she came to write *Jane Eyre*, the Romantic movement had elevated the expression and exploration of feelings to a culturally privileged position. Describing Austen's limits as a novelist, Brontë also defines her own province: "What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study; but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death—that Miss Austen ignores" (*Jane Eyre*, ed. Leavis, 10). Virtually the entire realm of the nonrational is valorized in *Jane Eyre*—dreams, visions, the supernatural, all forms of desire, including sexual desire. Jane is frank and unapologetic in expressing her attraction to Rochester: "I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking,—a precious, yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steelly point of agony . . ." (153; ch. 17). Unlike Wollstonecraft, she does not oppose sexuality and virtue. In her characterization of St. John, in fact, Brontë dramatizes the destructive consequences of the kind of sexual repression Wollstonecraft implicitly advocates. Jane's marriage to a chastened Rochester may in one sense represent a "domestication" of sexuality but not its disavowal.

In teaching *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* alongside *Jane Eyre*, I point students toward not only the striking parallels but also the differences between the two texts. This approach can help students better understand the two works and the cultural conditions that influenced them. In the essays my students write about the extent to which Jane becomes "more and more masculine," I ask them to explain how Wollstonecraft defines "masculine"; to examine both writers' treatment of reason and feeling; to analyze Jane's development and relationships throughout the course of the narrative; and to pay particular attention to the penultimate chapter of the novel, where Jane becomes Rochester's "prop and guide" in an ironic reversal of Adam and Eve's departure from Eden in *Paradise Lost*. I also encourage them to consider some "prewriting" questions, each of which could form the basis of a separate essay, before they develop a thesis: When and for what reasons do Wollstonecraft and Jane Eyre evoke the name of God? What is the connection between feeling and reason in Jane's relationship to Rochester? to St. John? How would you compare Wollstonecraft's and St. John's attitudes toward sexuality? What is the role of anger in Jane's life, and how does it relate to Wollstonecraft's critique of "gentleness"? In what ways are Adèle Varens and Blanche Ingram products of the kind of feminine education Wollstonecraft decries? These questions involve students in the two writers' struggles with questions that continue to concern us all. Reader, consider them.[2]