

of English, American, and European expatriates sympathetic to the Revolution fell in love with Gilbert Imlay, a personable American who had briefly been an officer in the American Revolutionary Army and was the author of a widely read book on the Kentucky backwoods, where he had been an explorer. He played the part of an American frontiersman and child of nature, but was in fact an adventurer who had left America to avoid prosecution for debt and for free-wheeling speculations in Kentucky land. He was also unscrupulous in his relations with women. The two became lovers, and their daughter, Fanny Imlay, was born in 1794. Imlay, who was often absent on mysterious business deals, left mother and daughter for a visit to London that he kept protracting. After the publication of his book *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794), Wollstonecraft followed Imlay to London, where, convinced that he longer loved her, she tried to commit suicide. The attempt, however, was discovered and prevented by Imlay. To get her out of the way, he persuaded her to take a business envoy to the Scandinavian countries. Although this was then a time of poor or impassible roads and primitive accommodations, the intrepid Wollstonecraft traveled there for four months, sometimes in the wilds, accompanied by a year-old Fanny and a French nursemaid.

Back in London, Wollstonecraft discovered that Imlay was living with a mistress, an actress. Finally convinced he was lost to her, she hurled herself from a bridge into the Thames but was rescued by a passerby. Imlay departed with his actress. Wollstonecraft, resourceful as always, used the letters she had written to him to compose a book, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), full of sharp observations of politics, the lives of Scandinavian women, and the austere northern landscape.

In the same year Wollstonecraft renewed an earlier acquaintance with the philosopher William Godwin. His *Inquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), the most radical proposal for restructuring the political and social order yet published in England together with his novel of terror, *Caleb Williams* (1794), which embodies his views, had made him the most famed radical writer of his time. The austere, utilitarian philosopher, then forty years of age, had an unexpected capacity for feeling, and what began as a flirtation soon ripened into affection and (as their relationship shows) passionate physical love. She wrote Godwin, with what was for the remarkable outspokenness on the part of a woman: "Now by these presents [the document] let me assure you that you are not only in my heart, but my veins morning. I turn from you half abashed—yet you haunt me, and some look, and touch thrills through my whole frame. . . . When the heart and reason accord, there is no flying from voluptuous sensations, do what a woman can." Wollstonecraft soon pregnant once more, and Godwin (who had in his *Inquiry* attacked the institution of marriage as a base form of property rights in human beings) braved the censure of his radical friends and conservative enemies by marrying her.

They set up a household together, but Godwin also kept separate quarters in which to do his writing, and they further salvaged their principles by agreeing to separate social lives. Wollstonecraft was able to enjoy this arrangement for only a few months. She began writing *The Wrongs of Woman*, a novel about marriage and motherhood that uses its Gothic setting inside a dilapidated madhouse to explore how women are confined both by unjust marriage laws and by their own romantic illusions. On August 30, 1797, she gave birth to a daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, later the author of *Frankenstein* and wife of Percy Shelley. The delivery was not difficult, but resulted in massive blood poisoning. After ten days of agonizing pain, she lapsed into a coma and died. Her last whispered words were about her husband: "I am the kindest, best man in the world." Godwin wrote to a friend, announcing her death: "I firmly believe that there does not exist her equal in the world. I know from experience we were formed to make each other happy."

guided himself, of her affairs with Imlay and himself, her attempts at suicide, and her freethinking in matters of religion and sexual relationships. In four volumes of her *Posthumous Works*, he indiscreetly included her love letters to Imlay along with the unfinished *Wrongs of Woman*. The reaction to these letters was immediate and ugly. The conservative satirist the Reverend Richard Dodsley Langens, remarked gloatingly on how it appeared to him providential that a prominent of sexual equality Wollstonecraft should have died in childbirth that strongly marked the distinction of the sexes, by pointing out the "diseases to which they are liable." The unintended consequence of Langens's candor was that Wollstonecraft came to be saddled with a reputation so enduring that through the Victorian era advocates of the rights of women circumspcctly avoided explicit reference to her *Vindication*. Even John Mill, in his *Subjection of Women* (1869), neglected to mention the work. It was not until the twentieth century, and especially in the later decades, that *Wollstonecraft's Vindication* gained recognition as a classic in the literature not only of the rights but of social analysis as well.

From A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

From *The Dedication to M. Talleyrand-Périgord*¹

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What is the object of the present inquiry? Is it to ascertain whether the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be known to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she be taught to be virtuous? unless freedom strengthen her reason till she comprehend her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her conduct? If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of liberty, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by consideration of the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman at present, shuts her out from such investigations.

In this work I have produced many arguments, which to me were conclusive to prove that the prevailing notion respecting a sexual² character was false; that of morality, and I have contended, that to render the human body more perfect, chastity must more universally prevail, and that chastity should never be respected in the male world till the person of a woman is not, in appearance, idealized, when little virtue or sense embellish it with the grandeur of mental beauty, or the interesting simplicity of affection.

It is to be observed, that these observations—for a glimpse of this kind of perfection, I have opened to you before you observed, 'that to see one half of the human race excluded by the other from all participation of government, is a political phenomenon that, according to abstract principles, it was impossible to explain.' If so, on what does your constitution rest?³ If the

¹ Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, a report on public education

² "gender-specific."

³ In France's Constitution of 1791 only males