

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

The Evolving Views on Women's Education in Eighteenth-Century British Literature

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SPRING 2024

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in English and Comparative Literature
with honors in English

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ABSTRACT

Early eighteenth-century Britain offered limited opportunities for education and civic engagement for women, regarding the academic and political spheres as belonging to men. As the century progressed, however, opinions about women's education and social standing evolved. When women authors began to gain popularity, they also gained control over the literary narrative surrounding women and presented the British public with a much more capable portrayal of women. I consider three works in this project: Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest*, and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The three written works serve as a chronological exploration of societal perspectives, discussing women's equal rights to education and civic participation from a period when it was unfathomable to when it was beginning to be realized. With Richardson's novel serving as a baseline for the early eighteenth-century views of women and Radcliffe and Wollstonecraft's works as examples of the efforts to shift those views, I analyze Britain's transforming attitudes about women's role and education.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
Introduction	1
Women's Lives	3
Women's Education.....	6
Changing Times	9
Chapter 1 Richardson's <i>Pamela</i> and Society's Expectations of Women	12
Chapter 2 Radcliffe's <i>The Romance of the Forest</i> and the Rational Heroine.....	20
Chapter 3 Wollstonecraft on Women's Education, Rights, and Independence	30
Conclusion	39

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Carla J. Mulford, for her continued support, encouragement, and collaboration throughout the creation of this project. My thesis sprouted from an honors-option paper I wrote during my sophomore year for English 448, a class taught by Dr. Mulford. In that paper, I argued that Richardson's *Pamela* displayed support for women's education. Over the course of the last year of research, writing, and editing, I have found the opposite to be true in the novel. This drastic change in my analysis is representative of the elevated scholarly research spurred on both by the honors thesis process and Dr. Mulford's guidance.

I would like to thank my parents, Jeff and Cindy Dougherty, for always keeping my bookshelf stocked and my imagination bigger than the whole sky. Without your encouragement of my endless daydreaming, I would not be the reader or the writer that I am today. Without your love and support, I would not be the woman that I am today.

Additionally, I would like to thank each and every person I love who has endured my unsolicited rambling about eighteenth-century writers and literature these past few semesters. I know I bored you, but I appreciate you for listening and providing your support, nonetheless.

Lastly, I would like to leave readers with a quotation by Mary Wollstonecraft that inspired me throughout the making of this project:

“Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience.”

Introduction

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest*, and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* all reflect the shifting opinions about women's social standing and education held by the British public across the century.

Functioning as a chronological representation of general opinion, the three pieces of written work deliberate women's equal right to education from the time it was a feared concept to the time it was becoming a reality. This timeline cannot be fully understood without considering the significance of all forms and perspectives of writing as well as the conditions that inspired them. For this reason, this thesis will analyze the changing ideals as seen in the written works of the time, focusing on both fiction and nonfiction as well as both male and female authors in order to evaluate how approaches to women's education and potential social power changed over time.

In early eighteenth-century England, the highest forms of learning were often reserved for the highest-level citizens: rich, white men. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* reflects this educational power dynamic as the novel's young, servant class namesake is frequently described as having "qualifications above [her] degree."¹ Pamela, a servant originally employed by a wealthy woman named Lady B., only has this elevated education because of her mistress's fondness for her. Those high-status teachings give Pamela an almost aristocratic aura, which complicates the nature of her role as a servant after the death of Lady B.

¹ Samuel Richardson, *Pamela or, Virtue Rewarded*, ed. Thomas Keymer, and Alice Wakely (1740; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25. All annotations hereafter will be to this edition.

puts her son in charge. Despite having a higher quality education, Pamela is still considered low status and therefore cannot gain any real power over her own situation. Instead, she becomes more susceptible to losing her virtue at the hand of her master's predatory sexual advances, which he makes only out of his need for sexual gratification. Eventually, Mr. B. becomes enamored with Pamela because of her high-status demeanor, which of (all his servants) she alone possesses. Pamela's training has blurred the boundaries between Mr. B. and herself. Through this dynamic, Richardson's story encapsulates England's early eighteenth-century ideas about education, which did not envision women as independent beings. Lessons that would elevate women's minds, ones that go beyond grammar and etiquette, were reserved for wealthy men. As one of the most popular male authors of his time, Richardson's characters represent the ideals and the fears of the general British public in the first half of the century: women's inferiority to men and the troubles that would ensue if they were over-educated. This public opinion however, evolved over the century and the shift can be seen through the emerging voices of female writers.

Ann Radcliffe and Mary Wollstonecraft were two of the more prominent women authors of the later part of the century. These particular women writers wrote in ways that enhanced the idea that women could become their own agents. Radcliffe's influence over gothic fiction presented interesting portrayals of nature and womanhood, specifically in her 1791 novel, *The Romance of the Forest*. By writing characters or storylines in a way that compares to, or contrasts, the conversations being had in the real world, fiction writers like Radcliffe made social and political statements through those portrayals. In *The Romance of the Forest*, Radcliffe utilizes the power of the written word to subtly challenge the realities of the outside world. Instead of submitting to the fears held by the British public about educating women too much, Radcliffe highlighted the potential positives of having intelligent women in society. She wrote

the character Adeline to be a smart young woman with unexpected common sense and confidence that aid her in conflicts with men. Adeline has a natural sympathy for others, intellectual gifts, and a love for nature, all of which help her and her companions in her story. Between investigating a dark abbey for clues about a dead man and, in turn dealing with her own treacherous situation and confronting quacks on their poor medical judgement, Radcliffe's heroine displays the courage and logic that was not expected of women at the time.

Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, wrote nonfiction. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792 in response to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord's report to the French National Assembly, was one of Wollstonecraft's most widely read works. Instead of portraying certain beliefs through a character, as one might do in fiction, Wollstonecraft was able to express her views through argumentative literary devices to make change. In her tract, Wollstonecraft asserts her beliefs that women are educated to be frivolous and dependent, providing a simple solution: alter women's education, and society might thereby improve the lives and conditions of both men and women. She blatantly challenged the societal standards for women's station and education, making a call to action and laying out her entire argument plainly.

Women's Lives

For a woman in eighteenth-century England, lifestyle options were considerably confined by class, status, and local traditions. Women of a certain level of wealth could secure a safe and comfortable future through marriage. The expression "marry up" comes to mind when the situation for eighteenth-century women is described. Instead of marrying for love, women of this

time often had to search for the highest income and, with the help of their well-off parents, provide a promising dowry to any man of equal or higher station.² Some brides of mercantile families could even save up and offer a large dowry to a man of higher station, like a peer, to move both herself and her family up socially. Not only could marrying up improve the family's status, but it could also allow them to network, essentially, with others of that higher station. Social climbing was plausible for women of lower station, but for the most part, it was those who were already relatively well-off that sought out higher status. For women of lower station, the only financial advantage of marriage was the family wealth of her suitor, which was most likely not much.

As it frequently happened, women experienced loveless marriages. Added to their financial dependence (often a situation over which they had no control), women sometimes conceived that marriage was a necessity they begrudged. Any instances of adultery committed in response to these frequently unhappy marriages were blamed on the wife, no matter who had committed adultery. It was considered the woman's job to please a man enough to secure his fidelity, and seeking legal action would only result in shame and, if the couple were to separate, a potential threat to her financial security. As a result, most women stayed silent in situations of infidelity, because marriage was their source of stability. Women were barely tolerated in, if not excluded from, what were considered the professions of men, like civil employment, the clergy, and liberal professions. Without a husband, earning enough to live was much more difficult.

² Kirstin Olsen, *Daily Life in 18th-Century England*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2017). Much of the information offered regarding eighteenth-century life is extrapolated from this helpful resource.

Women were especially susceptible to poverty because of their already limited career options, and their diminishing job opportunities in the eighteenth century only added to their struggles. So-called honorable work for women included midwifery, millinery, hairdressing, and teaching, among others. These occupations became gradually overtaken by men, pushing middle-status women out of respectable work, and leaving them with only hobbies for jobs. Few new occupations became available to compensate for the competition, but writing was one job that women could turn to. Some women profited greatly off writing novels and poetry or editing newspapers, like Radcliffe, while others could only write for the passion of it, like Wollstonecraft.

The difficult parameters of being a working woman pushed a large population of single, British women to take up jobs in domestic service, acting, and prostitution. While trade or shopkeeping jobs like midwifery and millinery existed, the competition was already fierce among women, let alone the men creeping into the fields. Profits from these jobs were not sufficient without the cushion of a husband's wages, so the more respected occupations were reserved for married women.³ As most women only worked in service until they got married, female servants were often young and sent away by their families to work. Consequently, these young, female servants were vulnerable to the male authorities of the household. While chastity and virtue before marriage were highly valued, the physical and social power that masters had over servants made it difficult for young women to preserve themselves. Because servants usually had unlockable and isolated bedchambers, they were often subjected to unwanted sexual advances from predatory males in the household.

³ Amy Louise Erickson, "Married Women's Occupations in Eighteenth-Century London," *Continuity and Change* 23, (2008): 267–307.

A domestic service job was hard to find and even harder to keep, that is, if keeping it was even worth the trouble. Fireable offenses for servant jobs ranged from theft to merely being too sick to work for a day. With wages as low as £4 (only enough to buy a hawking license), women sometimes quit service jobs when punishments or workloads became too much to handle. But for most, unemployment was a fate far worse than maltreatment. Unless a woman had another job lined up after she quit, she could be searching for better work for months. Women's work was challenging in many ways, and it made for a life of hard work for those attempting to support themselves and their families.

Women's Education

Education, despite the belief that it had beneficial outcomes for society, was rarely government-funded in the eighteenth century, with the only instance being for those in the military. There were debates about the morality of teaching poorer individuals, fueled by the fears of the wealthy that literacy would give the poor intelligence above their station. Correspondingly, most schools for the less fortunate were funded by charitable or religious ventures backed by the more generous middle and upper-status members of society, rather than by the government. While some lower-status families could afford the small fees to send their children to these day schools or dame schools, many children never attended formal school and instead learned from their parents and the world around them.

If a child's family could afford to send them to a more prestigious school, boys would attend an endowed grammar school, boarding school, dissenting academy, or be taught at home by a tutor or governess. There, young men would learn Latin and Greek, grammar and

composition, the works of great writers, mathematics, and modern languages like French and Italian. All these skills would prepare young boys for university, a higher level of education that only they could achieve. Upper-status girls, on the other hand, could attend boarding schools or be taught at home, but they could not attend the schools that their brothers did. Young girls typically learned domestic skills, musical talents, and the three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Girls were "educated for the purpose of educating others" and their studies were shrouded in religious and domestic undertones.⁴ Arithmetic, though often presumed to be the least widely valued of the three, was especially advantageous for women. Heightened skills in arithmetic and accounting allowed women to take charge of household budgeting and other financial affairs.⁵

Like the arguments about educating the poor, eighteenth-century Britain also disputed the parameters of women's education. To what extent women should be taught was a topic covered by many experts of the time, including Hannah More, a religious writer, and Mary Wollstonecraft. On one hand, people believed women should be taught, as Kirsten Olsen phrases it, "enough to be really useful, but not enough to give them ambition," while others believed that educated ambition was exactly what women needed to better society.⁶ Britain was a changing nation, with battling movements like the Enlightenment and Evangelicalism on the rise. These

⁴ Nicholas Hans, *New Trends in Education in the Eighteenth Century* (London, England: Routledge, 1951), 200. Hans's still useful analysis of education has provided a helpful understanding of what young men's and women's learning entailed.

⁵ Amy Froide, "Learning to Invest: Women's Education in Arithmetic and Accounting in Early Modern England," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 10, (September 1, 2015): 3–26.

⁶ Olsen, *Daily Life in 18th-Century England*, 167.

tensions were reflected in the discourse about educating women. In *Daily Life in 18th Century England*, Olsen writes of a saying commonly embroidered by young girls of the time:

Patience is a virtue

Virtue is a grace

Both put together

Make a pretty face.⁷

This common adage and other lessons taught by teachers and governesses placed importance on virtue, outward appearance, and obedience for young women. Women were taught reading and writing, sewing, religion, music or dance, and general etiquette. Although many women were educated in arithmetic and often took on financial management roles in the home, there were cultural anxieties about women's education. As quoted in an anonymously written late seventeenth-century pamphlet, "the objection may be this art is too high and mysterious for the weaker sex [I]t will make them proud: Women had better keep to their Needle-work."⁸ The author acknowledges that while she sees value in women's arithmetic skills, it was not a common belief at the turn of the century.

Women's education tended to emphasize appearance and the ability to teach one's children when the time came, and not everyone felt satisfied with it. Hannah More, for example, criticized the frivolity of women's education, but that was about the extent of her displeasure. Instead of pushing for a more academically fruitful lesson plan, More believed women's learning

⁷ As quoted in Olsen, *Daily Life in 18th-Century England*, 158.

⁸ Anon., *Advice to the Women and Maidens of London Shewing, that Instead of Their Usual Pastime, and Education in Needlework ... It Were Far More Necessary and Profitable to Apply Themselves to . . . Keeping Books of Account* (London: Benjamin Billingsley, 1678). Available in Early English Books Online: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A26473.0001.001?view=toc> Accessed March 20, 2024.

should focus even more closely on religion and domestic skills, leaving high-level reading and thinking to men. On the purpose of educating women, More said, “The great uses of study are to enable her to regulate her own mind, and to be useful to others.”⁹ In More’s mind, women should be taught to control or balance their minds to the liking and convenience of men.

Although More’s emphasis on domestic teaching was popular in practice, thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft felt differently. Wollstonecraft questioned the moral consequences on society if women continued to be “educated for dependence” and taught to “submit, right or wrong, to power.”¹⁰ Instead of bending to traditional ideals, Wollstonecraft looked to the individualism of the Enlightenment and proposed that a properly educated woman could add to society rather than taint it. The Blue Stockings Society, a social and educational movement founded by Elizabeth Montagu and Elizabeth Vesey in the middle of the century, felt similarly. This group valued female intellect and conversation rather than fashion and the other trivial topics that were expected of women, hence the group’s name. Individuals like these brought the topic of women’s education to light and began the conversation that evolved across the century.

Changing Times

Eighteenth-century Britain was an era of change. Opinions about the self were shifting as new ideas emerged, and beliefs about women evolved in tandem with these discoveries. From the outside looking in, it is easy to assume that the sexist, misogynistic ideals for women were

⁹ Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 2 vols. (London: A. Strahan, for T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1799), 2:2.

¹⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Miriam Brody (1792; London: Penguin Books, 2004), 98. All annotations hereafter will be to this edition.

unchanging in such a distant time. However, it is the voices of writers, most importantly the voices of female writers, that disprove such an assumption. With Samuel Richardson as a baseline for the early eighteenth-century views of women and Ann Radcliffe and Mary Wollstonecraft as examples of the push to change those views, this thesis will analyze Britain's transforming attitudes about women's role and education.

The significance of the written word for middling level individuals in the eighteenth century is an integral point within this argument. The accessibility of printed work made it possible for these individuals to consume the novels and tracts of their day, and the critical conversations being had in those texts. Although print was no brand-new phenomenon, it was gradually becoming more accessible to those who could not previously afford to own and read works. Similarly, the novel developed the century before, but it grew in popularity in the eighteenth century, reaching high and middle status audiences alike. Middling level people were not in a position of power in society, and women of the same station had even less influence. So, access to novels and tracts like those written by Radcliffe and Wollstonecraft was crucial to the development of shifting beliefs about women's role and education. Even Richardson, whose novel perpetuates many of the conservative, patriarchal ideals of the time, depicted Pamela as someone who was constantly reading and easily able to access books despite her lower station. When considering the changing opinions of the public in eighteenth-century England, it is important to study the written works that they would have been reading. The written word of the eighteenth century both reflected the conversations already being had and created new conversations.

Richardson's and Radcliffe's works demonstrate a reflection of the public's view of women across time through fictional portrayals. Richardson's Pamela embodies the perceived

downfalls of an over-educated servant girl while highlighting some of the key values of early eighteenth-century Britain, like female virtue and obedience. In contrast, Radcliffe's *Adeline* defies those values through her rationality, which aids her throughout her perilous journey and subtly displays the emerging value of educating women. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a work of nonfiction, and the concepts it explores reflect the critical conversations being had at the time. Wollstonecraft's work makes a direct demand for more educational opportunities for women and illustrates Britain's shifting mindset simply by being able to be published in the first place. By considering the effects and reflections of society in both fiction and nonfiction works, this thesis will more accurately analyze the shifting opinions across the eighteenth century about the role and education of British women.

Chapter 1

Richardson's *Pamela* and Society's Expectations of Women

First published in 1740, Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, often credited as the first English novel, was extremely popular during its time. The book sold out quickly upon being published, and many refer to the aftermath of Richardson's story as a "craze," invoking both mass consumerism and criticism of the book across Britain. The content of *Pamela* inspired several art forms, including both independent and parody written works, plays, engravings, murals, paintings, and more.¹¹ The novel was originally published anonymously, born from Richardson's having accepted a request to create a book of letter templates. While writing, Richardson found himself forming a storyline with moral lessons woven throughout. When it was eventually released for the public to read, the half-novel half-conduct book only listed Richardson as the editor of the letters the epistolary novel was combined of, not the storyline in its entirety. This anonymity as well as the insinuation of an inkling of truth behind the story incited even more curiosity and speculation around the piece. After the story of *Pamela* skyrocketed into popularity, causing it to be reprinted and translated over and over without an author to credit, Richardson revealed his identity as the writer behind the beloved story.

As crazes go, reactions to *Pamela* were mixed. Between the various reprints, rewrites, and parodies that followed the book's success, opinions about the morality of the story were split. Either the story was a scandalous and immoral potential threat to the virtue of young ladies

¹¹ Aaron Gabriel Montalvo, "Novel Paintings: Learning to Read Art through Joseph Highmore's *Adventures of Pamela*," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 51 (2022): 23–48.

everywhere, or it was a pleasant story of love, virtue, and the evolution of one's character. Opinions were so strong that, in the earlier stages of the novel's creation and publication, Richardson changed details about Pamela's status and speech to lessen the taboo surrounding her eventual relationship with Mr. B. *Pamela* tapped into the interests of the readerly marketplace, fueling conversation and debate over Pamela's character and fostering a community of related literary criticism. No matter the critique, the first British novel got people talking both about the story and the moral debates of real life that it reflected.¹²

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* reinforces the commonly believed ideas about women's position and education in eighteenth-century British society through his characterization of Pamela as a young woman. From the title alone, the novel's focus on the parameters of ambition and education that a young woman was expected to stay within is clear. The novel tells the story of a young, servant girl named Pamela Andrews who works for a high-status woman called Lady B. Pamela's employer is incredibly fond of her, seeing her as almost a daughter figure and teaching her to read and write at a high level as a result. When Lady B passes away, her son, Mr. B, inherits her estate and becomes Pamela's new master. Unfortunately for young, naïve Pamela, who spends her free time writing diary entries and letters to her parents ensuring them of her kept virtue, Mr. B sets his sights on her. Pamela narrowly escapes many of Mr. B's sexual advances, despite his plots to get her alone and cut off her communication to her parents. Aside from his sexual desire for her, the power-hungry Mr. B struggles with the complications that Pamela's education and aristocratic demeanor bring to her role as a servant, as someone below his own status. Eventually, after countless disputes between

¹² James Grantham Turner, "Novel Panic: Picture and Performance in the Reception of Richardson's *Pamela*." *Representations* 48 (1994): 70–96.

the two of them, Mr. B's infatuation with Pamela turns romantic as he reads her letters and finds himself attracted to her intellect, in addition to her appearance. After some back and forth, Pamela sees the change in Mr. B that she has inspired and decides she is in love with him, too. The title states that virtue would be rewarded in the story, and Pamela's eventual marriage to the higher-status Mr. B is that reward. Pamela holds tightly to the religious and moral teachings of her parents and displays the academic teachings of Lady B throughout the entire novel, resulting in a "changed" or "improved" Mr. B who inevitably asks her to marry him.

Richardson's novel exemplifies the moral and educational debates of the eighteenth century, serving as a baseline example of the beliefs about women's education and social station being displayed in written works. Richardson's perspective as a male writer affects his portrayal of Pamela, resulting in a young female character who is both extremely dedicated to her virtue and the smallest bit shallow. She is educated beyond what someone of her status typically would have been, but Richardson places a higher importance on her modesty than on anything else. In doing this, Richardson creates a position for women as the moral enforcer, something that does not necessarily need to be taught at a higher level and is instead seen as inherent or natural. If women's roles in the home or society do not need to be taught, then any incentive for a push for better education is eliminated. Additionally, by making Pamela a shallow character, Richardson reinforces the belief that women only have an interest in material things, further discarding any ideas that women are intelligent and wish to be educated. Through Pamela, Richardson perpetuates these commonly held beliefs about women, despite presenting her with the gift of education.

Pamela's education from Lady B and her subsequent status "upgrade" have a large impact on her place in the home. Just after Lady B's death, Mr. B asks to see the letter Pamela is

writing to her parents and says, “Why, Pamela, you write a very pretty Hand, and spell tolerably too,” noting that his mother took great care in educating her.¹³ Mr. B recalls Pamela’s love for reading and offers her full access to Lady B’s collection in order to “improve” herself, seemingly displaying a general interest in women’s education in the novel. However, Pamela’s parents note that she is “set so above [herself]” because of Lady B’s teachings and material gifts, and they fear she will fall from grace because of them.¹⁴ Pamela’s parents are thankful for Lady B’s kindness to their daughter but are aware that her methods for raising young women may not reflect those of the general population. While Richardson writes a well-educated female character, he does not hesitate to inform the reader of the threats and fears that her lofty education poses for society.

Pamela’s treatment as Lady B’s servant and daughter leaves Mr. B unsure in his interactions with her after his mother’s death. Lady B’s treatment of Pamela instills in her a high-status presence that becomes a conflict for Mr. B. Although at first, he encourages her reading and compliments her writing, Mr. B later begins to believe he “demean’d [him]self” by taking interest in Pamela, whose aristocratic nature blurs the line of wealth drawn between them.¹⁵ After this instance, Mr. B instructs Pamela to write less, in fear of her speaking out against his inappropriate behavior towards her and ruining his reputation. Mr. B’s discomfort with Pamela’s elevated education mirrors that of the British public, who felt strongly about not over-educating those of a lower status, especially women.¹⁶ Pamela appears to be a genteel girl despite her

¹³ Richardson, *Pamela*, 12.

¹⁴ Richardson, *Pamela*, 13.

¹⁵ Richardson, *Pamela*, 24.

¹⁶ Christopher Flint, “The Anxiety of Affluence: Family and Class (Dis)Order in *Pamela*: Or, Virtue Rewarded,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 29 (1989): 489–514.

family's station, and Mr. B struggles to situate her in both his home and society. For Mr. B, the easy attraction he feels toward her alters his treatment of her as a servant. In turn, Pamela's education poses a threat both to her own virtue and the integrity of the genteel society, a confusion of balance that British society wanted to avoid.

Between her parents' teachings on modesty and virtue and Lady B's lessons on reading, writing, and high society, Pamela upholds the messages British society did and did not want to send out to women. Modesty and virtue were exactly what women should display, while a high level of female intellect was a threat to the balance of society. Colleagues of Mr. B's note that the way Pamela excuses herself from a social setting is "prettily said," acknowledging that she has been educated on not just the reading and writing of the higher status, but also the social manners.¹⁷ Due to her learned ability to play the part of a wealthy girl and the charm of her modest manner, Pamela is treated differently by the people around her, and that disrupts Mr. B's carefully curated household dynamic. In passing for a rich young lady, Pamela challenges the boundaries set between the stations and complicates Mr. B's understanding of class identities. This blurring of the lines mirrors the confusion of Richardson's world, and Mr. B's anxieties are reciprocated by British society. To combat this sense of support for women's education, Richardson places an importance on Pamela's traits that make further education unnecessary, like her virtuous morality and her shallow nature.

While Pamela's high-status education and subsequent marriage could be seen as progressive for the time, Richardson's story does not look past the stereotypes of young women that later writers such as Radcliffe and Wollstonecraft sought to undermine. Pamela's virtue is

¹⁷ Richardson, *Pamela*, 53.

her main concern and therefore the main concern for the novel as well. While Richardson portrays a young girl with elevated reading, writing, and social skills, he also highlights her hyperfocus on virtue and her tendency to dwell on surface-level things, like fashion and beauty. These aspects of Pamela's character reflect the ideas about women of early to mid-eighteenth-century Britain that mark them incapable of handling the same levels of education as men.

Pamela is sure to note all mentions of her beauty any chance she gets in her letters. Early on, she gushes to her parents that she thinks Harry "call'd me his pretty Pamela" and that Mr. B "said [she] was very pretty," while making sure to appear bashful about the nice words.¹⁸ When Mr. B gifts Pamela "fine Things" like clothes and accessories, she is sure to list the full details of every single item.¹⁹ Pamela's attention to detail with the gifts cannot simply be linked to her familiarity with them as a maidservant for Lady B; it is instead a result of the value she puts on expensive items. As much as she longs to be back in her rags when her interactions with Mr. B become particularly terrible, Pamela enjoys wearing nice clothes and looking good. Including the detail that Pamela is beautiful at all is a sign of Richardson's clear male perspective, but Pamela's almost shallow nature is even more so. Pamela is a symbol of what British society saw in women at the time, focused on beauty and expensive clothes rather than anything regarding intelligence.

As Pamela seems to gossip about how Mr. B showers her with gifts and compliments her to Mrs. Jervis, Pamela's parents remind her that "it is Virtue and Goodness only, that make the true Beauty."²⁰ Throughout her letters, both to her parents and not, Pamela reassures her

¹⁸ Richardson, *Pamela*, 17-18.

¹⁹ Richardson, *Pamela*, 19.

²⁰ Richardson, *Pamela*, 20.

audience that her virtue is intact because she knows that is what they want from her. As moral as she may truly be, Pamela is also written as a naïve girl who questions what she *should* do, rather than just doing what she believes is right. She assures her parents and herself of her virtue because those religious teachings are what she has been taught to keep close to her heart. Her intellect and ability to read and write are admirable, but it is her virtue that the novel focuses on as what makes her so much better than other servants.

Pamela has an elevated education that gives her an aristocratic demeanor and she eventually marries a man above her station, whom she brought closer to God through her supposedly innate virtue and goodness. All this female success, as well as the underlying condemnation of Mr. B's actions, should signify a support for furthering women's education to benefit all of society. Pamela's learned abilities are important to the plot and Richardson touches on them frequently, but the main twist to the novel is that Pamela changes Mr. B. After his confession, he remarks that he is not succumbed to her beauty and love, but that he is a "Victim" to her "Virtue."²¹ Pamela rids Mr. B of his violent sexual nature and brings him closer to God through her dutiful letters; her virtue saves the day while her intellect is a mere bonus. Richardson's novel encompasses the early thoughts about women's education and role in society, despite giving Pamela all the tools to surpass those ideals.

As the century wore on, Richardson's beliefs about young women and education became less prevalent. Groups like the blue stockings, who believed in furthering women's education and valued the prospects of female intelligence, surfaced during Richardson's literary dominance. The blue stockings' sentiments gradually gained popularity alongside women

²¹ Richardson, *Pamela*, 341.

writers. Women sought their own marketplace of readers and platform to publish written work, and the innocence of young female characters was handled differently. Under the care of a female writer, the young woman became more mature and less stereotypical; she was valued for her mind, not her body, though she was clearly an attractive individual. Woman writers presented the British, readerly audience with young women who had natural wisdom and intelligence, who were confident in their knowledge, and who did not place an importance on physical beauty, though they were often beautiful. Radcliffe, for example, wrote a female character, Adeline, as naturally intelligent and kind. Adeline's intellect is woven throughout the story, making a statement about women's capacity for education by identifying the heroine with the one trait that was seen as exclusively masculine.

Chapter 2

Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* and the Rational Heroine

Across the century, educational opportunities for women gradually improved, and women's ambition arose. Schools for girls began to input a wider selection of topics while also becoming more established. Early in the century, many schools were short-lived, either because of a lack of funding or students, and young women seeking an education had to switch from place to place because of it. As the century wore on, though, better, more stable opportunities arose for women to learn the basics, reading, writing, language, and a selection of genteel talents, and even sometimes what was not considered basic, like math and science. If not in childhood, then women could also read informative encyclopedias and attend lectures to gain knowledge toward the end of the century.

As a result of these educational improvements, the women of Radcliffe's generation had a different outlook than those of Richardson's generation. With written works like the *Lady's Encyclopedia* and the *Lady's Diary*, which allowed women to read and write in ideas and solutions to math equations, the women of Radcliffe's generation saw a world that was more open to women contributing to it. With scholars around like Margaret Bryan, who taught lectures on mathematics and astronomy at her boarding school outside of London and continued to share her future lectures with many of those women after they left school, academic success felt more possible. While some women ventured into the sciences, linguistic studies were more common and not discouraged by the public. With this new encouragement of women's learning, albeit limited, women toward the end of the century were better equipped academically and could see

the potential for even more. Women writers, like Ann Radcliffe, felt empowered during this time to publish works under their own name and to make a living from their words.²²

Gothic fiction, a genre characterized by supernaturalism and the writer's effort to evoke fear in readers, tended to be the province of men writers. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, published in 1764, was considered the first of many gothic written works. Set in a haunted castle that harbors secret passageways and pictures and doors that move on a whim, Walpole's story pioneered the kind of fiction today called gothic fiction. Walpole even identified the storyline as gothic in the book's second edition. Later, more gothic works by men emerged like William Thomas Beckford's *Vathek*, which has its fair share of supernatural powers and frightening incidents. Though the genre was initially saturated by men, Clara Reeve's 1777 novel, *The Old English Baron*, became an incredibly well-known work of gothic fiction. Written in response to Walpole's novel, *The Old English Baron* had a great influence not only on the genre itself but also on women's writing overall. Reeve kept the genre from careening into the fantastical and unbelievable, which Radcliffe continued later in the century. *The Old English Baron* also gained the attention of the general public, creating a platform for women's writing to be read and appreciated by the masses. Reeve's novel and success inspired Radcliffe, who went on to write gothic novels of her own in the 1790s, like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and, of course, *The Romance of the Forest*. Reeve's success and the need to uphold the standards of gothic fiction that she set empowered Radcliffe.

The ideas about women's role and education Radcliffe gained through her studies were then exercised in her gothic fiction. With the increased attention given to women's situations,

²² Hans, *New Trends in Education*, 194.

both educationally and in domestic life, Radcliffe's writing displayed support for women's potential intellectual and psychological strength. Radcliffe stood among the foremost women writers who pioneered the gothic fiction genre, crafting representations of scholarly and sensible women within the pages of their novels. Similarly to Richardson Radcliffe's novels were initially published anonymously, attributed to "the Authoress of a Sicilian Romance" until *The Romance of the Forest*, which became her first widely popular work. Only then, in future editions of the novel, did Radcliffe begin to put her name on her novels. As a result, Radcliffe became one of the most well-known and well-liked authors of her time, earning the respect and admiration of critics and average readers alike. Many critics noted Radcliffe's notions of anti-Catholicism in her novels, which was beginning to be a pattern in gothic literature. By disentangling her stories, and most importantly her female characters, from the often-oppressive hand of religion, Radcliffe introduced a new area of interest for women in the natural world and the world of work.

Though there are no concrete records of a formal education, Radcliffe is clearly well-versed in classic literature. At the beginning of each chapter in *The Romance of the Forest*, she inserts epigraphs excerpted from famous playwrights, poets, and philosophers, including Shakespeare, Thomas Warton, James Beattie, William Collins, and Anna Seward. Radcliffe benefitted from having access and exposure to the works of these individuals. It is an indicator of her intelligence that she extracted specific quotations and made connections between them and the themes of her own chapters of writing. For example, at the opening of a chapter that details Adeline's anxious, hopeless, and weary state of both physical and mental being, Radcliffe quotes Beattie: "Hail awful scenes, that calm the troubled breast, and woo the weary to profound

repose”.²³ Her use of this excerpt from Beattie’s “The Minstrel” to foreshadow the events of the chapter is just one instance in which Radcliffe displays her well-read and scholarly knowledge. She quotes numerous works by Shakespeare, too, revealing her capacity to decipher and apply the classics to her own ideas. Seward, the only female writer credited in Radcliffe’s list of epigraphs, is well-known for having an extensive education and, subsequently, strong beliefs about women’s education. Canon Seward, her father, wrote *The Female Right to Literature*, a poem that questioned “Why then does Custom bind in chains of Ignorance the female mind?”²⁴ Not only was Radcliffe well-versed in classic literature, but she was also reading works by women who felt similarly to her about education. All these aspects of Radcliffe’s education, whether she was formally or self-taught, impacted the ideas and messages she pushed into conversation in her fiction.

The narratives about women that Radcliffe presented to the British public were likely not accidental. Female characters like Adeline were not just characters; they were informed, purposeful instruments used to disseminate Radcliffe’s views on womanhood and the value of female intelligence. *The Romance of the Forest* details the life of Adeline, an orphan who spent much of her life in a cruelly run convent after her father’s death. Adeline is taken in by Monsieur Pierre de la Motte and his wife, Madame Constance de la Motte, who are running from the law in Paris after neglecting to pay money they owed. The group finds themselves stranded at an abandoned abbey, where the sinister and dark events begin to occur. Louis de la Motte, the son

²³ Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, ed. Chloe Chard (1791; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 242. All annotations hereafter will be to this edition.

²⁴ Thomas Seward, “The Female Right to Literature,” in *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes*, 6 vols. (London: J. Hughs, for R. and J. Dodsley, 1763 [1st ed. 1758]), 294-300.

of Pierre and Constance, arrives at the abbey and creates a stir. He listens to his mother, who believes Adeline is having an affair with her husband, and then he falls in love with Adeline, who seemingly has no interest in him. Then, the Marquis de Montalt, a regiment commander who owns the abbey, arrives with a master plan to hold a false wedding with Adeline and keep her as a mistress, as he is married. Yet Theodore, a man in the marquis's regiment, had seen Adeline once in the forest. Theodore warns Adeline of this plan and the two run away together, falling in love during the journey. Theodore is imprisoned and sentenced to death, and Adeline is taken in by his long-lost family, the la Lucs, while she attempts to free him. In the end, the Marquis, who reveals that he had murdered Adeline's father and stolen his wealth, poisons himself. Theodore is released.

In addition to creating in Adeline a character with marked intelligence and ethical probity, Radcliffe gave Adeline a high level of what might be called natural sensibility. Adeline's inherent response to the natural world and the natural world's response to her identify her innate sympathy and intelligence. Radcliffe writes:

She now ventured to look out from the tower: the only animate objects, that appeared, were the deer, quietly grazing under the shade of the woods. Her favorite little fawn distinguished Adeline, and came bounding towards her with strong marks of joy. She was somewhat alarmed lest the animal, being observed, should betray her, and walked swiftly away through the cloisters.²⁵

Adeline's natural sympathy even for creatures that she cannot fully understand is most visible in scenes where she embraces the outside world. When Adeline visits the forest, she feels calm and

²⁵ Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, 63.

joyful among nature's creatures, which is something so natural to her that it does not need to be taught. She frequently escapes the dark, anxious confinement of the abbey for the woods, a place where she feels belonging and serenity. In contrast to the cruel, forceful convent she came of age in, Adeline is most herself in nature. She connects with and respects animals and takes her interactions with nature as lessons for her interactions with people. Adeline's morals and intellect are born from nature's teachings, rather than those of the Bible. This affinity for nature is returned by nature's fondness of her, as the deer are not fearful of Adeline in the slightest. Still, because of her natural sympathy and sensibility, Adeline is careful not to scare them.

These naturalist ideas of Radcliffe's are carried out further in other characters' admiration for Adeline. Louis, who is one of two men to witness Adeline being one with nature, falls for her despite the falsehoods told by his mother, saying, "Without designing it, she has won my admiration, which would not have been the case, had she been capable of the conduct you mentioned."²⁶ While Louis admires Adeline's "amiable manners," Theodore develops love for both her connection to nature and her mind.²⁷ Like the fawn, a representation of the natural world, Theodore is first drawn to Adeline when he sees her in the forest singing the stanzas of a sonnet written by Radcliffe called, "To The Lily." Later, when the two meet again formally, Adeline's "conversation ... disclosed the beauties of her mind, and seemed to produce a mutual confidence," as Theodore "seemed frequently to anticipate the thought of Adeline."²⁸ By setting up Theodore's love for Adeline to blossom from her natural sensibility and grow even more as a

²⁶ Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, 79.

²⁷ Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, 78.

²⁸ Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, 95.

result of the thoughts that she shares with him, Radcliffe reinforces a value in female intelligence and sensibility, rather than just beauty.

Adeline is attuned to nature as well as intellectual life, and Theodore admires her for both of those traits. Where Louis sees only one layer of Adeline's personality, and even takes it upon himself to walk her home in fear of her safety, Theodore watches her from afar and allows her to choose whether she stays or goes, not stepping closer to her because he can sense her wariness. Radcliffe writes Adeline and Theodore's love to be a matching of minds in an effort to establish women as independent and naturalistic beings. Adeline is an avid reader, but she is not necessarily a reader of the Bible, despite being raised in a convent. Unlike Pamela, Adeline enjoys womanhood as something that is natural, not learned, and her decisions rely on her own moral understanding of situations, not on that of religion. Radcliffe separates womanhood from religion, broaching the idea that women can have a natural sympathy and intelligence that does not need to be taught solely by the Bible.²⁹ Romantic relationships, though perhaps an obvious choice given the novel's genre, are the prime platform on which to express these concepts. The reader favors Theodore because he values Adeline's mind, and therefore the British public should wish to enhance the minds of young women, too.

In the abbey itself, Adeline finds herself investigating the mysteries that lurk in the darkest parts of the abandoned building. After experiencing terrifying nightmares involving the basement of the abbey, Adeline is brave enough to go down to the very place where her dream took place and investigate. When she first sees the door, she says, "A mystery seems to hang

²⁹ Anne Chandler, "Ann Radcliffe And Natural Theology," *Studies in the Novel* 38 (2006): 133-153.

over these ... it is, perhaps, my lot to develope.” Adeline is set on solving this mystery, exercising the curiosities in her mind to discover whatever secrets she believes are housed in the basements. She assesses the room and its layout, her “discovery confirmed her former conjectures concerning the interior situation” of the room.³⁰ Adeline is not exploring for the thrill of it; she is exploring because she has theorized and thought deeply about whatever horrors had happened in the abbey. Adeline’s investigation of the abbey is a clear indicator of her inherent intelligence. Radcliffe uses the mystery of the abbey to set up Adeline as a curious and educated character from the start, allowing room for even more instances like this one to have an impact on both the story and the portrayal of womanhood.

Theodore’s illness presents a key instance where Adeline’s natural common sense and intelligence are not only present but incredibly useful to those around Adeline. Theodore is placed under the care of a so-called surgeon, whose remedies do not manage to aid him and, in fact, increase his difficulties. Before truly talking to him, Adeline is sure that she does not like the surgeon and does not hesitate to share that opinion with Theodore. That initial perception is a testament to Adeline’s natural, innate intelligence. As she talks to the surgeon, Adeline recognizes the bluffs scattered throughout his boastful spiels about other physicians stealing his patients. After hearing his fabricated stories, Adeline “had been considering by what means she could discover the name of the physician” in competition with the surgeon and was set on removing “Theodore from the hands of the surgeon.”³¹ This passage touches on both the underestimation of women and the handiness of female intellect. The surgeon assumes that Adeline would not discover the lies in his stories, so he spews nonsense to her and gives her

³⁰ Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, 115.

³¹ Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, 185.

enough information to not only know that he should be replaced but also who to replace him with. Later, Adeline manages to recruit the physician that the surgeon condemned, and he helps Theodore recover. Adeline had the common sense, and the general knowledge, to question the legitimacy and talents of the first surgeon. Theodore was set to die had Adeline not stepped in, and he has her intellect to thank. Adeline's intelligence and natural sensibility are the reason that Theodore survives, and her confidence to challenge the surgeon on his methods is a result of her knowledge. Through Adeline's heroic actions that benefit society as well as her close friends, Radcliffe advocates for a greater importance towards educating women.

Another instance in which Adeline's confidence in her intellect proved useful was during the trial. Adeline is "led trembling to the Court" and very visibly fearful of the Marquis.³² Still, she knows that she must give this testimony to save her companions and bring justice to the situation. Despite her fear, Adeline gives "her little narrative with clearness and precision" and the truth of her birth is revealed. Adeline decides that if the trial is decided in her favor, the trial "upon which depended the establishment of her rank, her fortune, and consequently her influence," she will plead "the cause of Theodore" and "ask the life of La Motte."³³ Adeline's sympathy and intelligence work together here to save the fates of her friends. Not only does Adeline keep her composure when it matters most, holding in her anxieties until her part in the trial is over, but she also plans to use her potential status upgrade to help others. Rather than imagining the pleasantries her new life as the daughter of the late, true Marquis might bring, Adeline composes a plan to use her newfound influence to save Theodore and La Motte. Adeline can see past the first layer of a situation and analyze how she can shift the circumstances in her

³² Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, 340.

³³ Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, 348.

favor, achieving both her own justice and that of her companions. Radcliffe's heroine speaks to the potential of educated women, highlighting the justice and knowledge that intelligent young women could bring to society if they are given the tools to do so.

Radcliffe's novel, *The Romance of the Forest*, illustrates the shifting views on women's education and role in British society through women characters who possess both intelligence and natural sensibility. With the empowerment that arose from the successes of other scholarly women and the gradually improving educational opportunities for women, Radcliffe wrote a novel that embodied the world women hoped to see. Radcliffe bestowed Adeline with natural sympathy and quick, confident thinking, then made her the heroine of the story. Adeline served as an amalgamation of what women could offer to society, if they were only given the chance. She grew up surrounded by religion, and yet her intelligence was never rooted in the teachings of the Bible, but the teachings of nature. Radcliffe separated the oppressive hand of religion from the teachings of young women in her novel, and then displayed the greatness of a woman who grew up that way. Through her own education and its impact on her monumental gothic writing, Radcliffe pushed for an improved and changed women's education and role in eighteenth-century society.

Chapter 3

Wollstonecraft on Women's Education, Rights, and Independence

The community of eighteenth-century British writers, people who could afford to learn how to read and write and to do so for profit, was incredibly small. The population of women writers in this community was even smaller. For example, the first edition of Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* was dedicated to and reputed to have been edited by Samuel Richardson's daughter, Mrs. Bridgen. Reeve's success with this novel and its content influenced and inspired Radcliffe's gothic fiction.³⁴ This one example illustrates the narrow, exclusive nature of the British writing community in the eighteenth century. Everyone knew everyone, or at the very least knew someone who knew someone else. The dissemination of ideas and the works created in response to those ideas were confined to this small circle of colleagues and their circumscribed worldviews.

As a result, there was an urgency among women writers to broaden the scope of the writing world through education. As seen in the successful women writers of the time, like More, Reeve, and Radcliffe, women were being educated in larger numbers. Whether through self-teaching measures like attending lectures and reading classic works of fiction or through the gradual increase in longer-lasting schools for young girls, women had more access to education as the century came to a close. While not all women were educated this way, the expanding community of those who were inspired an interest in both further education and the lives of

³⁴ Ellen Ledoux, "Was There Ever a 'Female Gothic'?" *Palgrave Communications* 3, (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.42> Accessed March 15, 2024.

women in general. If even more women could have access to the same resources that writers like Reeve and Radcliffe utilized, then more space could be allowed for women in the writing world. Accordingly, the writing community in England could expand along with the content and ideas it put out. Women's lives, both their experience of the world and their hopes for the future, could become a respected topic of discussion if only more women were educated to think in this way. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the women writers who was most vocal about this issue.

Wollstonecraft lived an unconventional life for a woman in the eighteenth century, attending with her friends lectures on philosophy and science and engaging in a few less than traditional romantic relationships, including one that resulted in the non-marital birth of her daughter, Fanny. In her childhood, Wollstonecraft's father frequently spent the family's money on various unsuccessful projects, which resulted in multiple necessary moves. Wollstonecraft's chances at formal education, which were already slim, due to her gender and status, were squandered as her family bounced from place to place. However, her ability to read and write allowed her to teach herself, and she eventually became familiar with classics like Shakespeare and Milton. After various, unfulfilling attempts at educating others, both through a self-made school and a governess position, Wollstonecraft decided to pursue writing.

Like her past endeavors, becoming an author was a bold choice, as making a living off writing was hard enough as it was in this time, let alone to do so as a woman author. Regardless of the risks, Wollstonecraft was determined to succeed and even believed herself to be "the first of a new genus."³⁵ Her self-taught knowledge is illustrated in earlier works like *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Mary: A Fiction* (1788). Both works display not only

³⁵ Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002).

Wollstonecraft's acute knowledge of successful writing practices but also her intellectual beliefs on education and society. She even composed an anthology of what she believed to be important literary excerpts for young women, titled *The Female Reader* (1789), and she translated other works, further highlighting how informed, well-read, and consequently, educated she became over her short lifetime. Wollstonecraft's intense focus on women's education in the early years of her career was reflected in her more established and popular works.

Wollstonecraft's most well-known works mark her civic and political engagement, particularly regarding her concern about women's lives and their social roles. Written in response to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord's 1791 *Report on Public Instruction* to the French National Assembly, which argued that women should only be educated to perform domestic duties, Wollstonecraft wrote and published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. The treatise argued for an elevation of women's education to raise their role in society and subsequently, to better society overall. In short, Wollstonecraft wanted women to have the capability to succeed in society, especially in the civic and political spheres. Ironically, Wollstonecraft's own work was often not taken seriously for its political sentiments, written off as merely an educational tract even by her supporters. Any demands she made for a change to women's role in the home or their political involvement were often ignored, the focus residing instead on her pushes for a better female education.

As an educational tract, the work was well received and, for the most part, approved of.³⁶ Critics seemed to be convinced by Wollstonecraft's work, agreeing that women were capable and deserving of better and more thorough educational practices. While many of her calls for the

³⁶ R. M. Janes, "On the Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 (1978): 293–302.

personal empowerment of women were achieved quickly through *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, her attempts at invoking social change were met with a slightly slower process.

Regarding her hopes of women's role in society changing rather than simply improving, *The Monthly Review* said, "several of her opinions are fanciful, and some of her projects romantic."³⁷

Despite the clear sociopolitical nature of Wollstonecraft's tract, it was easier to choose which aspects of her argument to highlight and which to disregard because of her sex than it was to read the work as a singular, comprehensive argument. Many people saw promise in Wollstonecraft's ideas, but the change she was seeking did not occur overnight. Still, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had a serious impact on the future of women's education and role in society, altering the British public's opinions one critic at a time.

Wollstonecraft's treatise addresses each angle of her argument, beginning with a general discussion of gender roles in eighteenth-century British society. This conversation, which references and counters other writing on the topic by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Gregory, serves as the foundation for the latter sections of her argument. First, Wollstonecraft gives her definition of a proper education and the type of individual it should produce, ensuring that no details are lost further on in the work. Wollstonecraft writes:

Consequently, the most perfect education ... is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau's opinion

³⁷ *The Monthly Review* 8 (1792), 209.

respecting men; I extend it to women, and confidently assert that they have been drawn out of their sphere by false refinement, and not by an endeavour to acquire masculine qualities.³⁸

Wollstonecraft's definition is noteworthy because it centers individual thought for women as well as men. She insists that if virtue is a concern, one should consider that people cannot truly be virtuous without cultivating minds of their own. Women, she claims, cannot reach the level of virtue men require of them without a proper education, as being told how to act is not the same as understanding that it is right to act that way. She then critiques Rousseau's opinion that women should only be educated for domestic purposes as anything beyond that would take away from their natural femininity.³⁹ Wollstonecraft explains that women deserve to become truly virtuous, but the limitations placed on their education make that impossible. Women seek out better education than the "false refinement" they have been given not to become or overtake men, but to better themselves and society. Through this clarification, Wollstonecraft makes a case for better educational and career opportunities for women.

Independence, a key point in Wollstonecraft's understanding of the ideal results of a proper education, is the center of her argument. She claims that women's education renders them unable to achieve the level of intelligence that their strong minds have the potential for. The "cultivation of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment," as women are taught domestic and superficial skills while men are primed for civic engagement.⁴⁰ Women cannot be independent if they are not taught to think for themselves,

³⁸ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 15.

³⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or, Education*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1921), 553.

⁴⁰ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 17.

and Wollstonecraft's argument proposes the value of freethinking women to society. While the past opinions on women's role made a minimalistic education seem sufficient, the changing views across the century call for women to be taught more. Instead of merely supporting the men in their lives through domestic duties, women can impact their morals and knowledge, if they are educated properly. Under what was the current system of education, women are "created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused."⁴¹ Not only does this dynamic eradicate the independence of women, but it also diminishes the quality of the husband-wife relationship. Wollstonecraft points out that if women's minds are not expanded through proper education, they can only perform for their husbands using the superficial talents taught to them, rather than form an advantageous companionship. In another example, Wollstonecraft questions the ability of a woman to educate and raise her children or, most importantly to society, her sons, if her husband passes away. Not only would she struggle to provide for her family, but the ignorance of her sons would affect the state of society. By educating women more thoroughly on the same topics as men, society's future is secure because their husbands and sons will be better equipped for life.

Between the lines are notions that Wollstonecraft's reasoning is not perfectly aligned with her personal beliefs, but it is the angle that will convince society to make necessary changes. Of poorly educated soldiers who are still considered greater than equally educated women, she claims that "in what their superiority consists ... is difficult to discover."⁴² Men only have authority because of their sex, not because of their intelligence or capability of impacting society positively. To be educated for the sole reason of bettering these men so they may

⁴¹ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 29.

⁴² Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 18.

(hopefully) better society is not ideal. However, Wollstonecraft's aim is to enact the improvements to women's education that have been considered by the public gradually across the century. Her own feminist beliefs are partially sacrificed in order to make change. Society wanted women to be models of virtue for those around them, but to achieve that they needed to think for themselves. Finally, when women are capable of independent thinking, they can push for even greater respect and opportunities.

In giving these examples to support her cause, examples that assert women as humans but do not risk losing her audience by straying too far into radicalism, Wollstonecraft argues for the bettering of women's education and role in society. She credits her own strong mind as the force that allowed her to publish her beliefs on the subject, as she is not dependent on men like her fellow women have been raised to be. She is capable of rationality, forming opinions based on her own morals rather than those held by a man, and she believes it is only fair that all women get a chance at that kind of freedom. Instead of being confined to the sole ambition of pleasing one's husband, Wollstonecraft argues women should be educated to have many ambitions, as men are.

Wollstonecraft believes that reason, which is achieved through education, is a key aspect of being human. She argues that women are frequently not granted this because they are not yet seen as equal human beings to men. She explains the advantages of educating women to the same degree as men and resolves that, if women are truly naturally inferior, further educating them would do no harm anyway. Young women were taught to depend on men before they were educated to think for themselves, and this social understanding of women's role was what Wollstonecraft aimed to shift. To convince her readers that women should be educated equally to men, she had to first establish women as individuals capable and worthy of said education.

Education might bring intellect to women, and reason is the mark of being human that Wollstonecraft's world has come to know. By establishing that women are deserving of education, Wollstonecraft also reminds society that women are human beings who are not being treated as such. Denying women education denies them a core characteristic of humanity.

A sort of civic and especially educational equality between men and women must be reached for women to be efficient partners, mothers, and effective teachers of morality. After a thorough discussion of the faulty education women received and how it negatively affected not only women but society entirely, Wollstonecraft concludes *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* with her proposed solution to this epidemic against female reason. She insists that girls and boys be educated together, claiming that "only by the jostlings of equality can we form a just opinion of ourselves."⁴³ By educating the sexes side-by-side throughout all stages of academic life, Wollstonecraft believes the relationships between them will develop in healthier ways. This is a concept she touched on earlier in the treatise, noting that men and women being on equal playing fields as far as academics goes will strengthen how they interact, which will then benefit society. Instead of separating girls and boys from a young age, they should learn together so they may work together when they become adults. In suggesting this, Wollstonecraft states that women should be educated on all subjects, from the sciences to the arts, to foster a well-rounded rationality whereby women will be able to enhance society on all fronts, wife, mother, and civic engager. She acknowledges the fears that educating women will turn their attention away from their duties, but counters that it will instead better equip them to complete those duties. She

⁴³ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 83.

reiterates that women are educated to think only of trivial things, which affects their friendships with their husbands and then the upbringing of their children.

By strengthening women's minds through education, Wollstonecraft argues, society will benefit. In the individual interests of women, Wollstonecraft calls for a "revolution in female manners" to restore the reason and opportunities women might have been able to enjoy had they been educated properly in the first place.⁴⁴ By publishing *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft exemplified the changing opinions about women's role and the benefits of female education. For her to have not only the means and intellect but also the confidence to release this treatise to the British public in 1792 was an indicator that the times were changing. Where before women were lucky to see themselves portrayed as virtuous and then heroic, as in Richardson and Radcliffe, Wollstonecraft showed women they could enter the world of civic discourse. Not only did she enter that world with a bold confidence, but she also entered it advocating for women. She explained that womanhood was more than being a mother and a wife: women have just not been given the opportunity to display the potentials of their minds that go beyond those roles. Wollstonecraft detailed the way the nation's current education system failed women *and* society, warning of the impending downfall of Britain's reason if it did not supply women with the mental tools to fulfill the duties required of them. As the tract was generally well received and is now considered a trailblazing feminist text, its existence as well as its content signifies the shift in opinions.

⁴⁴ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 102.

Conclusion

It truly was a man's world in eighteenth-century Britain. Women's education was undervalued, and most women were left with limited options to support themselves and their families should anything go awry. The death of a husband forced a woman to care for and raise her children alone despite her lackluster education and struggle for employment. Society allowed women to come of age completely unequipped for this situation, leaving them with nothing but the silver lining of their love for their children. If a divorce were pursued, however, this silver lining could be snatched away. The first Divorce Act did not pass until 1857. Prior to that, the only grounds for divorce were physical cruelty and adultery. Still, women were often disregarded in deliberations about divorce. Children were considered the property of the husband even if they were unfit caretakers. Oftentimes, the process of divorce was turned into a sexualized scandal, and that humiliation alone kept women in unhealthy relationships. As society made it so difficult for women to sustain themselves or be with their families without the support of a man, divorce was not always the best option.⁴⁵ The independence that Wollstonecraft pushed for was in response to these exact scenarios, in which women were restricted from full, human lives because they lacked education. Women, as writers like Radcliffe and Wollstonecraft insisted, could not live freely without the agency that education and admittance into the civic sphere would grant them. This opinion gradually became more popular, particularly because of the written work of the time.

⁴⁵ For background on problems women faced during divorce, see Lawrence Stone, *Broken Lives: Separation and Divorce in England, 1660-1857* (Oxford and NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).

The change occurred as women began to voice their opinions to the public. A significant aspect of this empowerment lay in the shifting portrayals of women in literature and then in treatises. Novels like *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* and *The Romance of the Forest* show the gradual shift in opinions through their characters. The representation of young girls in *Pamela* is a baseline for the written women to come after it; Richardson supplies his protagonist with all the qualities and tools of an educated, sensible woman just to reward her with a rich, formerly abusive husband. *Pamela* gives insight into how men perceived women and why these men were so wary of elevating women's status through education. *The Romance of the Forest*, on the other hand, introduces a refreshing common sense and heroism to the roster of female characters. Radcliffe inserts ideas into her novel about natural sensibility and separating women's virtue from the restrictions of Christianity, presenting readers with an intelligent and heroic female character whose ethic of care—whether of animals or humans—makes the world better. Fiction is important to consider because of its direct impact on and reflection of the public's views on women. After all, characters are modeled after how authors see real people, so Richardson's frivolous and naïve Pamela and Radcliffe's intelligent and confident Adeline are not just creations, they are reflections of the authors' perception of reality.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman displays the public's opinion through both the content of the work and the very existence of the work itself. Granted, Radcliffe's success as an author was a signifier of the change, but Wollstonecraft's capability to enter what bordered political discourse, and the acceptance she received in it, goes even further. Wollstonecraft had the courage to enter a sphere in which she was not the typical member, and once inside, she did not refrain from speaking her mind wholly. Wollstonecraft's treatise is an example of why one cannot merely look at one genre of written work to understand the full scope of the issue. The

compelling case for women's education made in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* calls for and signifies a change in public opinion itself. With the work established as a politically charged treatise, Wollstonecraft's ability to publish it in the first place is a testament to that very change as well. She was comfortable and confident enough in her skills to break into a field that was not traditionally populated with women, and what Wollstonecraft published had an impact. Beyond inspiring women in Britain to seek fulfillment in more than being a wife or mother, Wollstonecraft inspired women's rights movements across the globe, the most notable example being the American suffragists.

Education continues to be a core part of women's fight for equality. Today, more women than men make up the population of college graduates across the board. This would have been considered revolutionary to the women of Wollstonecraft's time.⁴⁶ Still, groups like Women in STEM and Women in Business exist to encourage and support young women in pursuing careers in male-dominated fields. With wage gaps and the term "male-dominated" still having a hold over women in the twenty-first century, the earliest strides for equal education remain significant to the conversations of today. As American suffragists looked back nearly eighty years to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* for inspiration amidst their own fight, many women continue to reference ideas spearheaded by Wollstonecraft during the #MeToo movement.⁴⁷ Across the

⁴⁶ Katherine Schaeffer, "10 Facts about Today's College Graduates," Pew Research Center, April 12, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/04/12/10-facts-about-todays-college-graduates/> Accessed March 24, 2024.

⁴⁷ We know that Wollstonecraft's work was supremely important to women's rights activists during the nineteenth century, because the Library of Congress holds Susan B. Anthony's copy of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). To access the copy online, go to: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbc0001.2008amimp11328/?st=gallery> Accessed March 24, 2024.

eighteenth century, the progression of opinions about women's education and role can clearly be seen through literature, from Pamela to Adeline to Mary. This is a pattern of humanity that one can argue will be seen decades from now, too. There is an innate value in the written word to changing the structures of the world around it; words, fictional or not, force discussions onto the public and also reflect the discussions being had.