"Seeing Through a Glass Darkly": Wollstonecraft and the Confinements of Eighteenth-Century Femininity

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Abstract
This essay applies Luce Irigaray's theories of the speculum and subversive mimesis to Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman. I argue that Wollstonecraft reveals the limitations of eighteenth-century femininity by using her text as a mirror that distorts and also reflects the image of womanhood at the men who have prescribed an idealised version of femininity. Anticipating Irigaray, Wollstonecraft exposes and undermines this male ideal through mimicry of the masculine position. I begin by assessing modern interpretations of Wollstonecraft's feminism, her characterisation as a masculine writer and how this can be viewed as a deliberate feminist tactic on her part. I analyse the way in which she deliberately mimics male writers such as Edmund Burke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau before focusing on her specific use of the word beauty. I argue that in the Rights of Woman Wollstonecraft carefully chooses words that are closely connected to women in male discourse but also common in other topics of male interest such as botany and royalty. Through a process of associative organisation, surrounding the keyword 'beauty', Wollstonecraft repeatedly uses and mimics male discourse to subvert the logic and reveal the inconsistencies behind the insistence on a specific sort of femininity in the eighteenth century. I conclude that Wollstonecraft is seeking, through this technique, an eradication of sexual difference in the hope of reviving the otherwise barren social system.

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Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman In Natural Law and in religion the right of woman to fill the highest measure of enlightened understanding and the highest places in government, is inalienable . . . This is woman’s hour; with all its sweet amenities and its moral and religious reforms. A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) is a political pamphlet, written by the 18th-century British liberal feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, which attacks aristocracy and advocates republicanism. Wollstonecraft's was the first response in a pamphlet war sparked by the publication of Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), a defense of constitutional monarchy, aristocracy; Wollstonecraft was truly a child of the enlightenment. Writing in 1792, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" was a direct response to the philosophies of the French Revolution. As such, her work was written for an audience of philosophers. Yet, over a century later, another feminist writer rocked the world with her critique of women in fiction. Virginia Woolf made a much more radical argument, in many respects than Wollstonecraft. Femininity and the standards that came with it created many problems for the best and brightest among women in England during their respect times, an important similarity between them. While both women accepted that stereotypes affected women in a detrimental way, they differed as to why.