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Wollstonecraft's Widow: Understanding the Dead Husband's Gaze

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ABSTRACT: *In A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft promotes her case for women's education by contrasting a profligate, coquettish widow with her reasonable, self-controlled counterpart. Wollstonecraft suggests that the reasonable widow disciplines her desires, in part, by internalizing a vision of her dead husband's gaze. This article provides an overview of the literary history of the dead husband's eyes and English property law regarding widows before placing Wollstonecraft's widow alongside eighteenth-century theories about the internalized gaze. Prior to Wollstonecraft, the dead husband's surveillance was usually imagined by male authors who assumed a prescriptive tone, wielding the gaze as a panoptic device. Wollstonecraft's revision of earlier treatments complicates that dynamic. She envisions a widow who welcomes her husband's eyes with a performative flair before asserting the authority of her own gaze. In the process, Wollstonecraft transforms a degrading cultural imperative into an impetus for the widow's empowerment.*

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), when Mary Wollstonecraft wants to strike an anxious chord in her readers' hearts, she describes the fate of an uneducated widow:

She either falls an easy prey to some mean fortune-hunter, who defrauds her children of their paternal inheritance, and renders her miserable; or becomes the victim of discontent and blind indulgence. Unable to educate her sons, or impress them with respect . . . she pines under the anguish of unavailing impotent regret. The serpent's tooth enters into her very soul, and the vices of licentious youth bring her with sorrow, if not with poverty also, to the grave.¹

Wollstonecraft hopes to influence male readers—the “men of understanding” directly addressed in her treatise's final paragraph—by reminding them of the personal stake they have in their wives being well-educated (p. 194).² Those wives might someday become widows, and what will happen to the men's children and property in the hands of poorly educated women?

Widows have traditionally served as a nexus of anxieties about women's independence—financial and sexual—and its impact on property and children. Although widows in eighteenth-century England were vulnerable to extreme poverty, those fortunate enough to inherit property could enjoy a financial autonomy unknown to most daughters and wives.³

Moreover, popular belief held that because widows had been introduced to sex but lacked husbands to channel their desires, they posed a threat to social order that might result in foolish remarriages or scandalous liaisons. Exploiting these preconceptions, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the material consequences of a widow's ignorance, invoking the prospect of a "fortune-hunter" who "defrauds" the family. The "paternal inheritance" hangs in the balance while the specter of poverty looms.

Wollstonecraft insists that her bleak prognosis "is not an overcharged picture; on the contrary, it is a very possible case, and something similar must have fallen under every attentive eye," but the words "possible" and "similar" cast doubt upon her "picture" (p. 49). The most important widows in Wollstonecraft's life—Mrs. Sarah Dawson, her first employer; Sarah Burgh, her wise friend; and Mrs. Blood, the impoverished mother of Wollstonecraft's friend, Fanny—differed widely from the sketch above. Wollstonecraft's imagined widow seems indebted to literature as much as life, not only because of the allusion to *King Lear* (1608)—"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child"—but also because the remarrying widow was such a prevalent figure on the English stage, from William Shakespeare's *Gertrude* to William Congreve's *Lady Wishfort*.⁴

After describing the widow's impact on her sons and their paternal inheritance, Wollstonecraft assesses the mother's effect on her daughters, employing a common literary caricature:

Supposing, no very improbable conjecture, that a being only taught to please must still find her happiness in pleasing;—what an example of folly, not to say vice, will she be to her innocent daughters! The mother will be lost in the coquette, and, instead of making friends of her daughters, view them with eyes askance, for they are rivals—rivals more cruel than any other, because they invite a comparison, and drive her from the throne of beauty, who has never thought of a seat on the bench of reason. (p. 49)

Here Wollstonecraft imagines a maternal variation on the stereotypical Merry Widow, a lascivious figure who plots against younger women in her quest for sexual power. During the eighteenth century, the Merry Widow's ranks included Richard Steele's *Lady Brumpton*, Henry Fielding's *Lady Bellaston*, Pierre Choderlose de LaClos's *Marquise de Merteuil*, and Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*.⁵ Thus, Wollstonecraft invokes the most derogatory conventions in literary representations of widows, referring to these women's supposedly rampant desires, mismanagement of finances, and neglect of maternal responsibilities.

Wollstonecraft's negative portrait initially seems indicative of the "feminist misogyny" Susan Gubar ascribed in 1994 to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In "Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of 'It Takes One to Know One,'" Gubar argued that Wollstonecraft's "self-animus," resulting from struggles with her own passionate nature,

produced a harsh denigration of women's sexuality.⁶ Gubar's article capped decades of objections to Wollstonecraft's critique of women—objections challenged by more recent critics but that remain inescapable.⁷ One passage from "Feminist Misogyny" is especially relevant when considering Wollstonecraft's depiction of widows:

Wollstonecraft's analyses of debilitating female images assume that we are what we read . . . [and that] female readers necessarily internalize male-authored and manifestly false impressions of who they are and what they should aspire to be, impressions that weaken rather than strengthen women's self-image. (p. 455)

Gubar recognizes Wollstonecraft as one of the first writers to acknowledge femininity as a social construct based in part on printed texts. This acknowledgment raises the question: to what extent does Wollstonecraft rely on a text-based construction of widowhood? Has she internalized and accepted "male-authored and manifestly false impressions" of widows, or does she manipulate conventions surrounding these women as a rhetorical strategy, one designed to trigger her audience's fears and strengthen her argument for women's education?

Wollstonecraft's portrait of an educated widow elicits the same speculation:

I must relieve myself by drawing a different picture.

Let fancy now present a woman with a tolerable understanding . . . whose constitution, strengthened by exercise, has allowed her body to acquire its full vigor; her mind, at the same time, gradually expanding itself to comprehend the moral duties of life, and in what human virtue and dignity consist. (p. 50)

"Picture" and "fancy" suggest that Wollstonecraft's reasonable widow is as indebted to imagination as the foolish widow she supersedes. Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft pushes forward, asserting that this paragon would not be crushed by widowhood. She would not fall prey to a fortune hunter or become a selfish coquette; her sexuality would be subordinated to the responsibilities of motherhood: "The pang of nature is felt; but after time has softened sorrow into melancholy resignation, her heart turns to her children with redoubled fondness, and anxious to provide for them, affection gives a sacred heroic cast to her maternal duties" (p. 50). The heroic widow lives "to see her children attain a strength of character sufficient to enable them to endure adversity without forgetting their mother's example" (p. 51).

At first glance, the angel/whore dichotomy that Wollstonecraft applies to widows appears to be one more manifestation of the much-discussed passion versus reason debate central to the work. According to Kirstin Wilcox,

Portrayals of vicious, weak, stupid, and frivolous women abound in the *Vindication*, as Wollstonecraft does not attempt "to extenuate their [women's]

faults; but to prove them to be the natural consequence of their education and station in society.” In contrast, the enlightened, virtuous, and reasonable “Woman” is the female subject who would exist in a world where principles of reason and justice prevail.⁸

True to this mold, Wollstonecraft’s reasonable widow “forgets her sex” (p. 50), in contrast to the injudicious widow who “has never thought of a seat on the bench of reason,” preferring the “throne of beauty” (p. 49).⁹

Angela Keane characterizes Wollstonecraft’s “mind-body dualism” as “anathema to contemporary, post-modern corporeal feminism.”¹⁰ Equally objectionable to feminist critical orthodoxy is Wollstonecraft’s allegiance to motherhood as the primary stage for women’s social action. Thomas H. Ford explains: “The paradoxical limitations of Wollstonecraft’s feminism tend to be traced back to her commitment to the middle class family, and specifically to her belief that motherhood should form the vital center of female cultural identity.”¹¹ Thus, Wollstonecraft’s good widow seems to embody her treatise’s most problematic bourgeois rhetoric.

If Wollstonecraft’s portrait offered nothing more than a paean to chaste widows and self-sacrificial motherhood, it would not merit attention. But Wollstonecraft’s depiction of an ideal widow becomes more compelling if we examine her nuanced use of literary formulae. Her characterization of “bad” widows relies in part on stereotypes surrounding remarrying—and sometimes merry—widows; her description of the good widow also employs a well-established motif: the gaze of the dead husband.

Wollstonecraft asserts that the reasonable widow disciplines her desires beneath the consciousness of a two-tiered patriarchal gaze, welcoming the eyes of her deceased husband as a reinforcement of the eye of God:

She thinks that not only the eye sees her virtuous efforts from whom all her comfort now must flow, and whose approbation is life; but her imagination, a little abstracted and exalted by grief, dwells on the fond hope that the eyes which her trembling hand closed, may still see how she subdues every wayward passion to fulfil the double duty of being the father as well as the mother of her children. (p. 50)

Wollstonecraft’s readers were accustomed to the concept of surveillance. They lived in an age of spectatorship, in which the eyes of society joined—and sometimes displaced—the eye of God, to constrain the individual’s behavior. As Blakey Vermeule explains in *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (2010): “Only a few decades separate the writers Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson, but Richardson’s character Clarissa feels invaded (and unjustly controlled) by the ‘eye of the World’ whereas Defoe’s characters fear the ‘eye of God.’”¹² By the turn of the nineteenth century, Jane Austen’s Henry Tilney would remind Catherine Morland that they live in a “neighbourhood of voluntary spies.”¹³ When Wollstonecraft, describing

her widowed victim of fortune hunters, states that “something similar must have fallen under every attentive eye,” she acknowledges society’s pervasive gaze (p. 49). However, in the widow’s case, surveillance advances one step further because widows were observed not only by God and society but by the eyes of their dead spouses.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in plays, ghost stories, and conduct books, widows were encouraged to keep their husbands’ vigilant presence in mind as a check on their actions and desires. From Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603) forward, the dead husband who exerts a punitive gaze appears as a counterpoint to the remarrying widow. However, this gaze has never been explored in literary criticism. Most discussions of widows in English literature address the subversive sexuality of a Wife of Bath or the abrasive authority of a Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Karen Bloom Gevirtz’s *Life After Death: Widows and the English Novel, Defoe to Austen* (2005), which offers the most in-depth study of widows in eighteenth-century English literature to date, focuses on economic questions, examining the widow’s role in the development of capitalism and the early novel. My interest, by contrast, lies in the widow’s relation to her dead spouse and how it was prescribed by societal pressures. Considered from the broadest perspective, an understanding of the dead husband’s gaze can facilitate new readings of key scenes in English literature—from the ghost’s appearance in Gertrude’s bedroom in act three of *Hamlet* to the young Jane Eyre’s assertion to her widowed Aunt Reed: “My Uncle Reed is in heaven, and can see all you do and think.”¹⁴ In Wollstonecraft’s case, her reference to the dead husband’s gaze conforms to her revisionist agenda.

Wollstonecraft’s ideal widow is best read within three contexts: the literary history of the dead husband’s eyes, the history of English property law regarding widows, and eighteenth-century theories about the gaze. Situated in this larger landscape, the widow becomes a case study in Wollstonecraft’s approach toward women’s independence. According to Catriona MacKenzie, “The overriding preoccupations of Wollstonecraft’s work . . . were to articulate what it means for women to think and act as autonomous moral agents.”¹⁵ Wollstonecraft’s widow initially seems to challenge this norm, as female autonomy is tempered by male scrutiny; the widow’s self-governance reinforces the husband’s authority. However, Wollstonecraft’s revision of earlier treatments of the dead husband’s gaze complicates this dynamic. Prior to Wollstonecraft, the dead husband’s surveillance was usually imagined by male authors, who assumed a prescriptive tone toward women, wielding the gaze as a disciplinary device. Wollstonecraft, however, envisions a widow who welcomes her husband’s eyes with a performative flair before asserting the authority of her own gaze. In the process, Wollstonecraft transforms a degrading cultural imperative into an impetus for the widow’s empowerment.

Wollstonecraft and Vives

The punitive pressure of the dead husband's gaze has a long history, extending back at least as far as the sixteenth century. A vivid example appears in Juan Luis Vives's *De institutione feminae christianae* (1523) translated by Richard Hyrde as *The Instruction of a Christen Woman* (1524). Dedicated to Catherine of Aragon as a guidebook for educating Princess Mary, Vives's text was one of the most influential treatises on women's education prior to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Hyrde's translation appeared in nine editions by 1592, extending its reach well beyond Vives's original Catholic audience to influence later Protestant conduct books.¹⁶ Vives's work resembles Wollstonecraft's in its advocacy for women's education and in his denigration of sexuality as a hindrance to the development of reason. However, when Vives offers advice for wives and widows, he emphasizes woman's absolute subjection to man, harshly admonishing the widow on "the mynding of her husbande":

let her take hym for her keper and spy, nat only of her dedes, but also of her conscience. Let her handell so her house and householde, and so bryng up her children, that her husbande may be glad, and thinke that he is happy to leave suche a wyfe behynde hym. And let her nat behave her selfe so, that his soule have cause to be angry with her, and take vengeaunce on her ungratiousnes. (pp. 167, 168)

"Keeper" is a common term in Hyrde's translation, appearing in multiple contexts. "Spy," however, remains anomalous, applied solely to the dead husband. Charles Fantazzi, in his 2000 edition, translates Vives's *observatorem* as "observer" rather than "spy" and prefers "guardian" to "keeper" when translating *custodem*.¹⁷ These nouns produce a less carceral tone, but the meaning remains unchanged; when considering dead husbands, Vives introduces a perpetual gaze, as death transforms the husband into an agent of surveillance.

Wollstonecraft's widow is a distant descendent of Vives's model with a few key differences. Vives employs the imperative mood; he writes with a disciplinary voice, commanding the widow, whereas Wollstonecraft's virtuous female has already learned the lesson, having internalized her husband's image. Vives also presents the husband as an external force able to intervene physically in the widow's life, exacting "vengeaunce" for her transgressions. According to Vives, the dead could participate in the world of the living and were kept informed of earthly affairs through reports from angels: "The soule departeth nat so from the body in to an other lyfe, that it clerely gyveth over our matters here in this world, and they have bene oft tymes harde of [heard by] them that were on lyve, and they knowe moche of our actis and fortunes by the shewyng of angels, that go betwene" (p. 167). Wollstonecraft says nothing of angels nor does she suggest that

the dead might punish the living. In the final chapter of her treatise, she criticizes women's superstition, praising the authority of God but assigning no earthly power to spirits or spiritualists (p. 181). Her good widow accepts the dead husband as a mental construct, exercising an "imagination, a little abstracted and exalted by grief" while she "thinks" and nurtures a "fond hope" that her husband watches (p. 50). The vocabulary emphasizes the idea of the husband rather than a being who could take action.

The distance between Vives and Wollstonecraft illustrates an evolution from external surveillance and punishment in the Renaissance representation of widows to an internalized self-discipline encouraged in widows by the end of the Enlightenment. In essence, this evolution provides a female-centered rendering of the dynamic Michel Foucault outlines in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995):

[She] who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; [she] makes them play spontaneously upon [herself]; [she] inscribes in [herself] the power relation in which [she] simultaneously plays both roles; [she] becomes the principle of [her] own subjection. By this very fact, the external power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound and permanent are its effects; it is a perpetual victory that avoids any physical confrontation and which is always decided in advance.¹⁸

Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon; or, the Inspection House* (1791) to illustrate a technology of power in which the possibility of perpetual surveillance results over time in a prisoner's self-discipline. The panopticon provides an architectural version of the eye of God in an age when the eye of society was replacing the divine gaze.

Wollstonecraft's composition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was contemporaneous with Bentham's publication of *Panopticon*, and their combined work demonstrates the prevalence of the disciplinary gaze in late eighteenth-century discourse. Wollstonecraft offers a variant on panopticism when she segues from the eye of God, "whose approbation is life," to the eyes of a dead husband. The dead often acquire a pervasive, all-seeing presence in the minds of the living, a phenomenon especially meaningful for widows, who, more than any other bereaved persons, were charged with remembering the dead. Widows were encouraged to live within their own private panopticons, structures built not with stone or steel but with the cumulative force of cultural admonition. In text after text from the English tradition, the sentinel in the tower is not a prison guard but a deceased husband bent upon exerting authority from the grave.

Foucault never envisioned private panopticons; the efficiency of Bentham's design derived from the ability of the one to observe the many. Throughout his work, Foucault (taking his cues from Bentham)

concentrates on disciplining large, mostly male populations such as soldiers, factory workers, and students. However, Foucault suggests that his ideas might be applied to intra-familial models: “one day we should show how intra-familial relations, essentially in the parents-children cell, have become ‘disciplined’” (p. 215). Although Foucault emphasizes parents and children, his ideas resonate with the relationship between husbands and wives. These resonances become clear if we consider the power of cultural admonition, showing how an accumulation of texts might create a field of visibility that could make widows, in Foucault’s terms, “docile bodies” (p. 138). The examples that follow are designed to be suggestive not exhaustive, offered as representative works from a larger tradition. They provide useful illustrations of the husband-as-spy before we examine why surveillance of widows was considered necessary and how it became internalized in the eighteenth century. I begin with examples from theater because the stage, as a playground for spectatorship, provides the most frequent examples of the dead husband’s gaze.

The Field of Visibility

In several plays from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, one finds a curious group of characters at work: husbands who fake their deaths in order to spy on their wives. George Chapman, Molière, Aphra Behn, Thomas Shadwell, and Richard Steele all imagine husbands who preview their deaths in order to test their wives’ loyalty.¹⁹ Inevitably their “widows” behave badly, preparing to surrender the paternal inheritance to new lovers, at which point the spying husbands emerge from the wings, eager to reassert sexual and financial order. A counterpoint appears in works in which not-so-dead husbands return to reward grieving widows. Congreve’s *The Mourning Bride* (1697) and Joseph Addison’s *The Drummer: or The Haunted House* (1716) continue a tradition extending back at least as far as Penelope and Odysseus. Addison draws from Homer to depict a returning soldier, presumed dead, who secretly observes his wife and her suitors before reestablishing familial order. The narrative practice of reuniting faithful “widows” with lost husbands continued into the late eighteenth century with Mary Robinson’s epistolary novel *The Widow, or a Picture of Modern Times* (1794). Robinson explores society’s gaze, stressing the widow’s subjection to “the prying eye of curiosity” and “the open eye of observation.”²⁰ However, Robinson does not emphasize the long-lost husband’s eyes.

One particularly representative example of the husband’s gaze appears in Steele’s *The Funeral: or Grief a la Mode* (1701)—a biting satire on mourning customs. Steele’s play was popular throughout the eighteenth century, printed in over twenty editions by 1794. It features Lady Brumpton,

whose mind “jumps to all the Joys of Widowhood.”²¹ When her husband apparently dies, Lady Brumpton celebrates with her maid, challenges her widowed friends in shows of mourning, and in the Merry Widow tradition, plots the rape of her late husband’s ward. This young woman threatens Lady Brumpton with the condemnation of “an all piercing Eye, nay by what you much more fear, The Eye of the World” (II.iii.286-87). She suggests that a fear of social condemnation, more than spiritual damnation, might influence the corrupt widow. But neither ward nor widow recognizes the third layer of surveillance already present, Lord Brumpton, who has circulated a report of his death in order to observe his wife’s behavior. He previously had altered his will, disinheriting his son and making Lady Brumpton his “Son and Heir.” This trial tests her worthiness.

One could argue that Steele’s play, like earlier dramatic depictions of “dead” husbands, does not really address widows since the husband never dies. These works merely experiment with a common device: an audience inscribed within the play. Characters in seventeenth and early eighteenth-century drama frequently spy on one another, folding the audience into their spectatorship as in Molière’s *Tartuffe* (1664), where Orgon observes Tartuffe’s treachery from his hiding place beneath a table. However, Lord Brumpton emphasizes his particular role as a dead man gazing upon a treacherous widow: “Well I know I do not really Live, but wander o’er the place, where once I had Treasure—I’ll haunt her . . . Gaze in that False Beauteous Face: ’till she Trembles, ’till she looks Pale, nay till she Blushes” (I.ii.254-57). He insists that the dead husband’s gaze should shame the widow.

Steele reinforces the husband’s spectral status near the play’s end when a suitor named Cabinet sees Lord Brumpton in his study. Lord Brumpton’s faithful servant describes Cabinet’s response:

Now as he was prying about, he peep’d into your Closet—where he saw your Lordship Reading—struck with horreur, and believing himself (as well he might) The Disturber of your Ghost for Alienation of your Fortune from your Family—He writ me this Letter, wherein he acknowledges a Private Marriage with [Lady Brumpton] half a Year before you ever saw her. (V.iv.186-91)

Here Steele alludes to the contemporary belief in legacy ghosts. According to R. C. Finucane, author of a cultural history of ghosts, supernatural tales from the late seventeenth century often featured dead men who were especially uneasy about provisions for heirs (as opposed to, for example, medieval ghosts’ concerns about purgatory). Offering examples from Joseph Glanvill’s *Saducismus Triumphatus; or, Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions* (1689) and Richard Baxter’s *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* (1691), Finucane argues that seventeenth-century literature witnessed a surge of legacy ghosts, who hoped to monitor their finances from

the grave.²² Such ghosts represent one subset of a larger folktale tradition in which dead husbands monitor their widows. Edwin Sidney Hartland's *Ritual and Belief: Studies in the History of Religion* (1914) contains a chapter titled "The Haunted Widow," which surveys dozens of tales of disgruntled dead husbands worldwide, from the medieval period to the early twentieth century. He even cites a legal case from 1912 in Macon, Georgia, in which a widow's second husband was granted a divorce because her first husband's ghost haunted them so regularly—"nightly with groans and reproachful glances"—that it was impossible to live together.²³

R. G. Collingwood cites Hartland's research in *The Philosophy of Enchantment: Studies in Folktale, Cultural Criticism, and Anthropology* (2005), attributing the prevalence of dead husband lore to women's fear of men's jealousy: "All over the world, it is customary for widows to fear the jealousy of their dead husbands if they should marry again."²⁴ The key difference between dead husbands in international folktales and those haunting the seventeenth-century English stage is the latter's concern with money. Anxiety about the paternal inheritance permeates all of the theatrical works cited above; Behn's "widowed" Lady Fancy, watched by her not-so-dead spouse, sums up the husband's nightmare: "That which the slave so many years was toiling for, I in one moment barter for a kiss."²⁵

The confluence of sexual jealousy and financial anxiety in seventeenth-century English texts appears to correspond to developments in the laws surrounding inheritance. English property law from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries reveals that the shift from feudalism to capitalism caused increasing worries about widows' control of property. Dead husbands appear frequently in writings from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries because growing concerns about the disposition of wealth were matched by a proliferation of literary and legal attempts to bolster husbands' authority over their widows.

On Widows and Wills

Vives does not mention property when he discusses widows. True to the norms for Catholic conduct books of his day, he posits a woman's chastity as her greatest wealth, and for widows, chastity meant faithfulness to the dead husband. By contrast, Wollstonecraft deals with material concerns beyond the widow's body, not only referencing the "paternal inheritance" when sketching her bad widow but also measuring the virtuous widow's triumph with a financial parable: "The task of life thus fulfilled, she calmly waits for the sleep of death, and rising from the grave, may say—Behold, thou gavest me a talent—and here are five talents" (p. 51).²⁶

The difference between these authors' approaches can be attributed in part to changes in property law. Vives was writing prior to the Statute of

Uses (1535), at a time in which widows' common law right to dower—one third of any property in which her husband was vested during his lifetime—was taken for granted. After the statute, widows were increasingly subject to jointures, a type of prenuptial settlement that gave men more control over the widow's inheritance. Eileen Spring's *Law, Land, and Family: Aristocratic Inheritance in England, 1300 to 1800* (1997) and Susan Staves's *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1883* (1990) describe the changing legal landscape.²⁷ Both women argue that the gradual erosion of widows' dower during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries testifies to men's interests in limiting widows' control of wealth. A widow's right to dower was cumbersome for a society newly engaged in the buying and selling of land, but it represented a belief, prevalent from Anglo-Saxon times through the mid-sixteenth century, that women had fixed property rights that could not be restricted by their husbands.

Although the widow's right to dower was not officially altered in England until the Dower Act of 1833, by Wollstonecraft's day the practice had largely been replaced by jointures. These prenuptial agreements suited an economy where much wealth existed in cash, bonds, and assets other than real property, and they could sometimes benefit widows more than dower.²⁸ In Frances Brooke's *History of Lady Julia Mandeville* (1763), Lady Ann Wilmot's father "could not refuse his daughter to a jointure of 3000*l.* a year."²⁹ The wording implies that the woman is married "to a jointure" rather than a man, and when Lady Wilmot's husband dies, the generous jointure proves beneficial. However, the benefits of jointure depended upon the benevolence of individuals. Staves and Spring argue that jointures exposed women to the ravages of inflation and the whims of male negotiators. In *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville*, for instance, the father enjoys the right of refusal.

The history of jointure demonstrates a steadily decreasing generosity toward widows. Spring explains that a jointure was often judged against the portion a bride brought from her natal family:

This is an amazing shift in the method of accounting. Whereas the widow's right in the earlier periods is calculated as a right over her husband's land, in later periods it is calculated as a return on her own fortune. The husband's land, the very item that dower was all about, has dropped off the balance sheet. (p. 50)

Spring goes on to note that the ratio of jointure to portion dropped precipitously from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, from which she deduces an increasing desire to circumscribe widows' control of wealth.³⁰

Barbara J. Todd draws the same conclusion from a different body of evidence. Focusing on wills from Abingdon, England from 1540-1720, she notes rising prohibitions against widows' remarriage. Todd explains that

prior to the seventeenth century many husbands anticipated and even encouraged their widows' later marriages. One man referred to "the time 'when it shall seem good to [his widow] to marry,'" and another acknowledged the man "who soon marrieth my wife next."³¹ Such men usually made bequests to young children and required the widow or new husband to enter a bond to pay any legacies, but no man in Abingdon suggested that widows be punished for remarriage. Things changed, however, after 1570. Todd observes increasing penalties for remarriage, first among husbands of greater status and later among testators of all ranks. These provisions often challenged the widow's right to her house, her land, and sometimes her household goods. Children usually prompted the concern:

In the sixteenth century, Abingdonians had seen the widow mainly as the absolute successor to her husband's wealth, to make of it the best she could for her children and herself; in the seventeenth century, the widow's tenure was conceived more as a temporary custody, and the way she was to use the property was more circumscribed. Since her possible remarriage was one of the greatest threats to the rights of the children, the widow's right to decide for herself whether remarriage was the most suitable course was restrained. . . . This is one more way in which the sense of individualism and the desire to perpetuate family and wealth into the next generation negatively affected women's situation. (p. 74)

When Wollstonecraft uses the biblical parable of the talents to describe her virtuous widow's success, she imagines a woman who has only a lifetime interest in her property; upon her death the widow returns the metaphorical wealth bequeathed to her by her husband and God. Hers is a temporary custody, granted by a male figure who may or may not leave his servant with a talent upon his departure, according to his whim, in keeping with a society in which men employed the legal system to exert authority from beyond the grave.

The Internalization of the Gaze

All of the texts prior to Wollstonecraft's that are cited above describe a surveillance exercised by external figures. The spying husbands on the English stage are tangible men who can, in Vives's words, exact "vengeance" for a woman's "ungratiousnes." Similarly, the ghosts in *Hamlet* and the folktales of Glanvill and Baxter appear visible or audible to men, if not always to women. By contrast, the dead husband in Wollstonecraft's text exists only in the ideal widow's mind, and his authority surfaces only when she imagines it. The widow accepts the husband as her internal monitor.

Thus far, I have suggested that two hundred years of plays and ghost stories portraying dead husbands as hidden observers might have been

enough to impress their gaze upon any widow's mind. Eighteenth-century philosophy, however, with its attention to the internalized gaze, also plays an important role. Bentham was not alone in exploring the power of observation to prompt self-discipline; he translated into architectural form ideas that had been circulating for decades among writers such as Lord Shaftesbury, Bernard Mandeville, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Adam Smith.³² Throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft presents herself as a reader conversing with other writers, and her response to Rousseau and Smith in chapter eight provides a useful correlative to her earlier description of the ideal widow because in the later pages she considers how the eyes of God and man effect morality. Rousseau accepted God as a legitimate monitor of his actions: "I shall bear in mind that thou art witness to all my deeds, and I shall endeavor to do nothing which is unworthy of thy awesome presence."³³ To "bear in mind" an all-seeing witness is to internalize a disciplinary eye. Wollstonecraft, in describing her widow, portrays God as the eye "whose approbation is life" (p. 50).

While Rousseau welcomed the eye of God, he resented the gaze of society, recognizing it as a necessary part of human existence but also the foundation of inequality and vice:

Each began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself; and public esteem came to be prized. He who sang or danced the best; he who was the most handsome, the strongest, the most adroit or the most eloquent, became the most highly regarded, and this was the first step towards inequality and at the same time towards vice.³⁴

In an ideal, transparent society, citizens would observe one another without envy, from a position of equality, but Rousseau found human beings to be riddled with opaque deceptions.³⁵ As Nigel Joseph explains: "For Rousseau, as for Sartre, hell is other people, and for both writers an awareness of being the focus of the gaze leads the subject to hyperbolized and inauthentic performance."³⁶

Smith was familiar with Rousseau's suspicion of the gaze, having published a review of *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1754; *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality*) in *The Edinburgh Review*, but Smith embraced the gaze as a productive force for social stability.³⁷ In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith welcomed public scrutiny as a crucial inspiration for moral action. In keeping with the Scottish Enlightenment's early explorations of sensibility, Smith suggested that morality begins with a gaze upon human suffering that prompts a sympathetic response: "By the imagination we place ourselves in [the sufferer's] situation."³⁸ Once in that situation, the individual imagines himself appearing before the eyes of others and hopes those eyes will be compassionate. Through the repeated exercise of imagination, he gradually

internalizes an “impartial spectator” and seeks the “approbation of this supposed equitable judge” (pp. 24, 110).

Wollstonecraft deplored Smith’s secularization of the gaze. She responds to him by affirming God as the only equitable judge of human behavior:

it is not sufficient to view ourselves as we suppose that we are viewed by others, though this has been ingeniously argued as the foundation of our moral sentiments. Because each bystander may have his own prejudices, beside the prejudices of his age or country. We should rather endeavour to view ourselves, as we suppose that Being views us who seeth each thought ripen into action, and whose judgment never swerves from the eternal rule of right. Righteous are all his judgments—just, as merciful!

The humble mind that seeketh to find favour in His sight, and calmly examines its conduct when only His presence is felt, will seldom form a very erroneous opinion of its own virtues. (p. 135)

Wollstonecraft does not object to Smith’s internalized spectator, created through an exercise in self-distancing—“we should endeavor to view ourselves, as we suppose that Being views us”—but she insists that the spectator should be God, not a representative of society.

Wollstonecraft’s praise for “the humble mind” that “calmly examines its conduct when *only* His presence is felt” seems to challenge her depiction of the ideal widow in chapter three. There, Wollstonecraft suggests that the divine gaze can combine with an internalized human eye to reinforce moral behavior. This difference raises the question of whether Wollstonecraft draws a distinction between men’s and women’s experiences of the gaze or whether the different standard applies just to widows. Smith insisted on essential gender differences, making fuzzy distinctions between men’s “generosity” and women’s “humanity” that supposedly disqualified women from moral agency. In his view, women lacked the self-control and self-denial needed to obey the impartial spectator’s judgements.³⁹

Meanwhile, Rousseau believed in woman-as-spectacle, alleging that girls were naturally consumed with visual presentation. In *Émile: or Treatise on Education* (1762), Rousseau argues,

Girls are from their earliest infancy fond of dress. Not content with being pretty, they are desirous of being thought so; we see, by all their little airs, that this thought engages their attention; and they are hardly capable of understanding what is said to them, before they are to be governed by talking to them of what people will think of their behaviour.⁴⁰

William H. Payne translates Rousseau’s last sentence more bluntly, using the active voice: “We control them by telling them what people will think of them.”⁴¹ Rousseau describes this governance or control as “very good” because women, more than men, must rely on their public reputations (p. 237). Rousseau writes,

A man . . . secure in his own good conduct, depends only on himself, and may brave the public opinion: but a woman, in behaving well, performs but half her duty; as what is thought of her, is as important to her as what she really is. . . . Opinion is the grave of virtue among the men; but its throne among women.⁴²

Wollstonecraft quotes both these passages and challenges Rousseau's views in her chapter "Morality Undermined by Sexual Notions of the Importance of a Good Reputation." In the opening paragraphs of this chapter, Wollstonecraft discusses the influence of the eyes of God and man on women's reputations: "'Women,' says some author, I cannot recollect who, 'mind not what only heaven sees.' Why, indeed, should they? it is the eye of man that they have been taught to dread—" (p. 131). Later in the chapter, Wollstonecraft denies this gender difference, insisting that *any* "humble mind," male or female, will "calmly [examine] its conduct when only His presence is felt." However, her earlier reply to the unnamed author adopts an exasperated tone, as she capitulates to claims that women are not solely allegiant to the eye of God. In Rousseau's words, women have learned since childhood "to be governed" by society, and Wollstonecraft acknowledges the social construction of the gaze when she stresses that women "have been taught to dread" man's eye. Her emphasis on teaching raises the question: how have widows been *taught* to internalize the husband's eye? The answer can be found through one last foray into literary history with special attention to writings on women's conduct. With that final piece of the puzzle assembled, we can step back and assess the full portrait of Wollstonecraft's widow.

The Widow's Conduct

Returning to Vives, in his instructions that the widow "take" her husband "for her keeper and spy," the widow apparently must assert initiative in constructing the husband as spy because Vives never states that the husband watches her directly. The husband relies on reports from angels traveling between worlds. While he can audit her activities through third-party accounts and maintain the externalized ability to return and take revenge, he does not enjoy an all-seeing eye. Further description of the widow's role in internalizing the gaze appears in the writings of seventeenth-century clergymen. The Reverend John Howe, former household chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, offers telling advice to the widowed Lady Rachel Russell in 1683:

Were it possible [your children's] now glorious father should visit and inspect you, would you not be troubled to behold a frown in that bright serene face? *You are to please a more penetrating eye, which you will best do by putting on a temper and deportment suitable to your weighty charge and duty.*⁴³

Lady Russell's husband was beheaded after conspiring in the Rye House Plot to kill Charles II and his brother, James. Howe does not suggest that Lord Russell will return either as a living man or vengeful ghost; "were it possible" implies impossibility. Still, Howe, like Vives, uses the imperative mood to command the widow's acceptance of her husband's gaze. Lord Russell's eye is "more penetrating" in death, and the widow must please the acute gaze of a spiritual rather than an earthly inspector.

In many appearances of dead husbands, the eyes of God and man are conflated as the man gains deific authority. Here, in describing the husband as a "glorious father" with a "bright serene face" who acts as an inspector, Howe invests the dead man with a godlike presence before segueing into the "more penetrating eye," which completes the apotheosis. One finds a similar deification of the husband in a late eighteenth-century edition of William Kenrick's conduct book *The Whole Duty of Woman* (1753), where the epigraph to the section on widows reads: "He who had first my vows shall ever have; / For whom I lov'd on earth, I worship in the grave."⁴⁴ Although this epigraph first appears in the 1796 edition, the teachings it precedes were over a century old, highlighting a curious fact about eighteenth-century guidelines for widows. Many of them are reprints of a lengthy discussion of widows originally published in 1673 in *The Ladies' Calling*, which has been attributed to Richard Allestree, who was chaplain to Charles II and who is also credited with *The Gentleman's Calling* (1660) and *The Whole Duty of Man* (1661).⁴⁵ Whether Wollstonecraft was familiar with Allestree's work is unknown. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she responds to the sermons and letters of James Fordyce and John Gregory, but they do not discuss widows. Like most eighteenth-century guides to women's conduct, they focus on young women, especially daughters; Wollstonecraft did the same when writing her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787). In fact, new writings on widows rarely appeared in the best-known eighteenth-century conduct books. During this time, widows proliferate in novels but dwindle in instruction manuals—which might support Nancy Armstrong's contention that the chief purpose of conduct books in the eighteenth century was to specify desirable features of young women and wives.⁴⁶

The relative void in new guidelines for widows was filled with constant reprintings, excerpts, and abridgements of Allestree's instructions. Twelve impressions of the original Oxford edition of *The Ladies' Calling* appeared by 1727, and a new edition combining *The Gentleman's Calling* and *The Ladies' Calling* was published in Edinburgh in 1765. Twenty-two years later another new edition of *The Ladies' Calling* came out in London. Meanwhile, Allestree's guidelines for widows were reprinted in popular compilations with various titles, including *The Whole Duty of a Woman* (nine editions from 1695 to 1737), Richard Steele's *The Ladies' Library* (six

editions from 1714 to 1751), and *The Lady's Companion* (at least four editions by 1743). In 1753, Kenrick first published *The Whole Duty of Woman* (not to be confused with *The Whole Duty of a Woman*), which was the most widely circulated of all, with at least twelve editions published in cities throughout England, Ireland, and America by 1800. In Kenrick's segment on widows, he condenses Allestree's main points into one or two-sentence axioms while preserving many of Allestree's most colorful metaphors. No attribution to *The Ladies' Calling* appears in any of these works.

Allestree's advice regarding dead husbands begins by cautioning widows against excessive mourning over a husband's corpse: "those frantic Embraces and caresses of a Carcass, which betray a little too much the sensuality of their Love."⁴⁷ Instead, the widow should concentrate on her husband's memory:

The more valuable Kindness therefore, is that to his Memory, endeavoring to embalm that, keep it from perishing; and by this innocent Magic (as the Egyptians were wont by a more guilty) she may converse with the dead, represent him to her thoughts, that his life may still be repeated to her: and as in a broken Mirror the refraction multiplies the Images, so by his dissolution every hour presents distinct Ideas of him; so that she sees him the oftener, for his being hid from her eies. (p. 211)

Allestree's widow is not a passive object; she actively performs the seeing through an act of imagination. However, Allestree prescribes what the widow should see ("distinct ideas" of her husband) and how often she must see him ("every hour"). Death multiplies the husband's image, increasing his presence in the woman's thoughts even if he remains "hid from her eies." A "hidden" man differs from someone completely absent; the husband resembles the panopticon guard, whose unseen presence encourages self-discipline.

Allestree wants the unseen husband to haunt the widow's mind through an act of embalming—a curiously macabre metaphor for a seventeenth-century English author.⁴⁸ Steele, in the preface to *The Funeral*, mocked embalming as a new and suspect practice—a "Phantastick Posthumous folly" and a "Kind Invitation to be Pickled" (p. 19). He wondered what "sweet Conversation" might arise between living persons and the embalmed dead (p. 20). Allestree by contrast does not promote the embalming of bodies but suggests that a mental form of the practice might enable widows to "converse with the dead."

Allestree insists upon the husband's preservation because of deep concerns about widows' management of property. In the pages following his advice on how to perpetuate the husband's memory, Allestree offers extensive admonitions regarding property, extolling widows to avoid spending money on themselves, which he characterizes as robbery: "I see not what

there is in the title of a mother, that can legitimate her defrauding her child” (p. 215). After addressing children’s rights, Allestree devotes three times as many pages to considering how the widow’s “fortune may also be consecrated” (p. 239). In the end, he strongly advises widows against remarriage (eliminating one threat to the paternal inheritance); instead, they should devote their lives to piety, charity, and self-sacrificial motherhood while keeping the husband continually in mind.

The Widow’s Talent

Wollstonecraft’s good widow appears to follow Allestree’s strictures. She disciplines her desires and determines never to remarry, devoting her life to her children while envisioning her husband. She becomes father and mother, just as Allestree encourages widows to “supply the place of both parents, and to the tenderness of a mother add the care and conduct of a father” (p. 212). Wollstonecraft’s use of the parable of the talents even recalls Allestree’s allusion to Matthew’s gospel in his praise for charitable dowagers: “*Well don thou good and faithful servant*” (p. 220). Wollstonecraft’s depiction of ideal widowhood thus clearly relies on well-established traditions. However, the striking feature in her passage is not its somewhat derivative content, but its uplifting tone. From Vives, we hear threats of “vengeance”; from Howe, strict commands. Allestree’s tone is more sympathetic, but his compassion is marked by condescension: “*Well don thou good and faithful servant.*” By contrast, in Wollstonecraft’s version of the parable, we hear the voice of the widow herself, “rising from the grave” with Christ-like transcendence and announcing her triumph: “Behold thou gavest me a talent—and here are five talents” (p. 51).

Wollstonecraft achieves this climactic account by revising the widow’s relation to the gaze. First, she allows her widow some power over the husband’s eyes. The widow physically closes his eyes after the husband’s death with “her trembling hand,” and once those eyes are shut, the husband only regains visual authority when she exercises her imagination (p. 50). Like Smith, Wollstonecraft privileges imagination in the widow’s process of internalizing the gaze. The widow must exert agency to imagine the husband’s eyes, and Wollstonecraft characterizes this agency as the act of an “exalted” mind not a docile body. The widow’s impulse is performative—she wants the husband to witness her triumph as she assumes the mantle of his authority as father as well as mother.

If the passage ended here, the widow would merely reinforce a problem that Mary Poovey identified in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790):

despite her valorization of self-assertion, what Wollstonecraft really wants is to achieve a new position of dependence within a paternal order of her own

choosing. . . . In her utopia an entire army of father figures, both secular and religious, ensures happiness by anticipating every need.⁴⁹

Wollstonecraft's widow initially seems to accept a secular and religious "paternal order." However, Wollstonecraft goes on to posit an equally authoritative maternal order, as she follows the male gaze of God and husband with the female gaze of author and mother: "I think I see her surrounded by her children, reaping the reward of her care. The intelligent eye meets hers, whilst health and innocence smile on their chubby cheeks, and as they grow up the cares of life are lessened by their grateful attention" (p. 51). Here, Wollstonecraft adds her own gaze to the mix—"I think I see her." The female author joins the previous F/father(s), overseeing her creation with "approbation." Next, the "intelligent eye" of the child combines with Wollstonecraft's earlier references to the "eye" of God and the "eyes" of the husband in a visual triumvirate. For the first time in this passage, the seeing is reciprocal—the "eye meets hers." Mother and child exercise a complementary gaze quite different from the one-sided viewing by male figures who remain invisible.

If Foucault had ever achieved his objective of showing "how intra-familial relations, especially in the parents-children cell, have become 'disciplined,'" one wonders how he would have assessed the mother-child gaze. Tzvetan Todorov, in an essay that incorporates Rousseau, Smith, and Hegel, upholds the complementary gaze between mother and child as the prime example of the gaze's necessity and healthfulness in human development:

The mother seeks to accord her child that recognition to assure him of his existence. And at the same time, without always being aware of it, she finds herself recognized in her role of agent of recognition through the demanding gaze of her child. The existence of the individual as a specifically human being does not begin on a battlefield but in the infant's solicitation of his mother's gaze.⁵⁰

To conceptualize the gaze solely in terms of subject-object domination denies the possibility of love, friendship, and mutual esteem. This dynamic is true not only for parents and children but also husbands and wives. Although Wollstonecraft viewed marriage in an inequitable society as a form of slavery, in the letter to M. Talleyrand-Perigord that prefaces *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she expresses the hope that with the establishment of more just laws, "marriage may become more sacred" (p. 6).⁵¹

Until marriage becomes a more worthy arena for the expression of women's care, motherhood—when practiced with reason—can exercise a woman's "sacred heroic" affection (p. 50).⁵² Wollstonecraft's ideal widow advances from the reciprocal gaze of parent and child to a scene in which

the widowed mother's sight takes precedence: "She lives to see the virtues which she endeavored to plant on principles, fixed into habits, to see her children attain a strength of character sufficient to enable them to endure adversity without forgetting their mother's example" (p. 51). The widow progresses from imagining her husband's eyes upon her to exercising her own visual pleasure, gaining a scopophilic joy from watching her children thrive.

In serving as "the father as well as the mother of her children," the widow becomes the autonomous moral agent that MacKenzie identifies at the heart of Wollstonecraft's authorial mission. However, the widow achieves her autonomy at the expense of her sexuality: "The pang of nature is felt; but . . . her heart turns to her children with redoubled fondness" (p. 50). Poovey finds this substitution of maternal love for sexual love highly problematic: "the heroism of the self-sacrificing widow, which she celebrates, turns out to be barren and decidedly equivocal."⁵³ But "barren" is a strange adjective to apply to a heroism expressed through the nurturing of children. Wollstonecraft's denigration of sexuality throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is undeniably disturbing; she equates sexual activity with "depravity" (p. 138). However, repression of libido is a form of agency that can be just as healthy as the indulgence of libido, depending on the circumstances. Because remarriage jeopardized a widow's independence and her children's inheritance and because a widow's suitors might be "mean fortune-hunter[s]," for Wollstonecraft's widow the repression of desire appears less problematic and more pragmatic. It is also rhetorically useful. Smith (among others) accused women of a deficient capacity for self-control and self-denial. Wollstonecraft responds by sketching a widow who exerts self-control over her sexuality and exercises self-denial in her devotion to her children. The widow's subjugation of "wayward passion" assuages male readers' fears of being supplanted after their deaths by new husbands or lovers and achieves Wollstonecraft's vision of autonomous womanhood.

The widow's ability to thrive without a second husband points forward, in Wollstonecraft's career, toward the proposed ending of *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), where the heroine determines to raise her daughter on her own. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft honors single motherhood even before it became a feature of her life. Both works demonstrate how she invests motherhood with the power to give life to the mother as well as the child. Maria's determination to "live for my child!" saves her from imminent death while the widow achieves eternal life—"rising from the grave"—due to her devotion as a virtuous parent.⁵⁴ Although Wollstonecraft's promotion of heroic motherhood might grate on modern ears, for most women of Wollstonecraft's day, motherhood was an inevitability not a choice; to empower maternity was to empower

women. However, Wollstonecraft does not create an angel in the house; she hints that a widow's work might extend beyond the domestic sphere. Her ideal widow has been left "without a sufficient provision" and must "provide for" her children (p. 50). The widow's agency must extend beyond piety and chastity, tackling the challenges of economic self-sufficiency.

I have noted that Wollstonecraft celebrates the widow's success by invoking the parable of the talents, just as Allestree did one century earlier. Wollstonecraft's use of the story proves more provocative because she revises the tale to make her widow more profitable than any character in the Bible's original. In Matthew's telling, a master leaving on a journey entrusts three servants with five talents, two talents, and one talent, each according to his ability. Although the first two servants double their master's investment, upon his return he discovers that the servant with one talent hoarded the treasure and gained no interest. The irate master strips the unprofitable servant of all belongings. By contrast, Wollstonecraft's ideal widow, when given one talent (and thus designated as the servant with least potential), increases her small investment fivefold, an interest rate far beyond the parable's most lucrative servant. In an age filled with anxiety about widows' management of property and children, Wollstonecraft progresses from the bad widow's squandering of the paternal inheritance to the good widow's maternal triumph, measured in financial metaphors.

Wollstonecraft's revision of Matthew encapsulates her rhetorical strategy; throughout this passage she manipulates previous writings to support her case for women's education. Education will help widows rendered independent by tragic circumstance to become self-sufficient and rational beings whose profitability can be assessed in the successes of their children. After completing her "picture," Wollstonecraft announces "I here throw down my gauntlet" (p. 51). With the ascension of her reasonable widow, who succeeds as father and mother, Wollstonecraft underscores her case for the denial of sexual virtues and challenges the reader to prove her wrong.

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NOTES

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: Norton, 1975), 49. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² Wollstonecraft envisions male and female readers, but she often discounts the women. Although in her introduction she states that she will be “addressing my sex” and will “pay particular attention to those in the middle class,” she continues to refer to “them” in the third person as her subject more than her audience (p. 9). Mary Poovey explains, “Occasionally she addresses women, but both her formal, self-consciously rhetorical address and her condescension distance her from her natural allies: ‘Hapless woman! What can be expected from thee . . . ?’”; see Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 80.

³ For a discussion of widows’ poverty, see Karen Bloom Gevirtz, “Poor, Pathetic and Positive: Poverty and the Widow,” in *Life after Death: Widows and the English Novel, Defoe to Austen* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 95-116. The term “extreme poverty” is used by Ben Polak and Jeffrey G. Williamson to distinguish indigent persons from those suffering a more widespread level of economic hardship; see Polak and Williamson, “Poverty, Policy and Industrialization in the Past,” in *Including the Poor: Proceedings of a Symposium Organized by the World Bank and the International Food Policy Research Institute*, ed. Michael Lipton and Jacques Van Der Gaag (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1993). According to Polak and Williamson, “almost 40% of widow-headed households in eighteenth-century England were on poor relief” (p. 235).

⁴ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2016), I.iv.255-56.

⁵ Jay Arnold Levine provides an overview of the Merry Widow stereotype in “Lady Susan: Jane Austen’s Character of the Merry Widow,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 1 (1961), 23-34.

⁶ Susan Gubar, “Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of ‘It Takes One to Know One,’” *Feminist Studies*, 20 (1994), 452-73. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷ Objections to Wollstonecraft’s repression of female sexuality appear in Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), 31-56; and Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, 69-81. For responses, see Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender and Sentimentality in the 1790s—Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 23-25; and Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750-1810* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 289.

⁸ Kirstin R. Wilcox, “Vindicating Paradoxes: Mary Wollstonecraft’s ‘Woman,’” *Studies in Romanticism*, 48 (2009), 450. Wilcox is quoting from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

⁹ The word “throne,” one of Wollstonecraft’s favorites, appears eleven times in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Here, it reinforces her frequent parallels between monarchs and women: “A king is always a king—and a woman always a woman: his authority and her sex, ever stand between them and rational converse” (p. 56).

¹⁰ Angela Keane, *Women Writers and the English Nation in the 1790s: Romantic Belongings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 109. Curiously, Keane criticizes Wollstonecraft's negative depiction of the widow but does not go on to consider her portrait of an educated widow (p. 125).

¹¹ Thomas H. Ford, "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Motherhood of Feminism," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 37, No. 3/4 (2009), 190.

¹² Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 108.

¹³ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, in "Northanger Abbey," "Lady Susan," "The Watsons" and "Sanditon," ed. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 145. In her introduction, Johnson explains that Henry is referring to the Treasonable Practices Act of 1794, which permitted anyone to report their neighbors for suspiciously seditious speech (p. xxvi).

¹⁴ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York: Norton, 2001), 23. Jane goes on to say that her parents are also watching; she believes that all dead people can view the living, but Uncle Reed has precedence as the monitor of his widow's conscience.

¹⁵ Catriona MacKenzie, "Reason and Sensibility: The Ideal of Women's Self-Governance in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 8, No. 4 (1993), 36.

¹⁶ For a discussion of Vives's influence on Protestant and Catholic writers, see the introduction to *The Instruction of a Christen Woman*, by Juan Luis Vives, ed. Virginia Walcott Beauchamp, Elizabeth H. Hageman, and Margaret Mikesell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), xlii-xlvi. Charles Fantazzi, in the introduction to his translation of Vives, notes that the last two editions of Hyrde's translation were from Puritan printers, Robert Redgrave (1585) and John Danter (1592); see Fantazzi, introduction to *The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth-Century Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 31. Subsequent references to Vives will be cited parenthetically in the text to the Beauchamp, Hageman, and Mikesell edition.

¹⁷ Fantazzi's edition reads: "Let her place him as an observer and guardian" (p. 310).

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995), 202-03. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁹ I have in mind Chapman's *The Widow's Tears* (1612), Molière's *Le Malade Imaginaire* (1673; *The Imaginary Invalid*), Behn's *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678), Shadwell's *The Humourists* (1691)—which also employs a mother-daughter Merry Widow plot—and Steele's *The Funeral: or Grief a la Mode* (1701). In addition, Thomas Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage: or the Innocent Adultery Play* (1694) features a widow who commits suicide when her dead husband returns. Southerne's play enjoyed renewed popularity in the mid-eighteenth century after a successful 1757 production starring David Garrick.

²⁰ Mary Robinson, *The Widow, or a Picture of Modern Times*, vol. 1 (London: Hookham and Carpenter, 1794), 51, 117.

²¹ Richard Steele, *The Funeral: or Grief a la Mode*, in *The Plays of Richard Steele*, ed. Shirley Strum Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), I.ii.49-50. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²² See R. C. Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1984), 129-34. Ghost stories of this variety had a lasting impact on the English cultural imagination. In the red room scene from *Jane Eyre*, young Jane's mind seems to be steeped in the old tales: "I began to recall what I had heard of dead men, troubled in their graves by the violation of their last wishes, revisiting the earth to punish the perjured and avenge the oppressed" (p. 13).

²³ Edwin Sidney Hartland, *Ritual and Belief: Studies in the History of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 209.

²⁴ R. G. Collingwood, *The Philosophy of Enchantment: Studies in Folktales, Cultural Criticism, and Anthropology*, ed. David Boucher, Wendy James, and Philip Smallwood (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 201.

²⁵ Behn, *Sir Patient Fancy*, in *The Meridian Anthology of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Plays by Women*, ed. Katharine M. Rogers (New York: Meridian, 1994) 120.

²⁶ The biblical parable of the talents that Wollstonecraft alludes to can be found in Matthew 25:14-30.

²⁷ See Eileen Spring, *Law, Land, and Family: Aristocratic Inheritance in England, 1300 to 1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1883* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). Subsequent references to Spring will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²⁸ J. M. W. Bean argues in *The Decline of English Feudalism, 1250-1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968) that jointures were more beneficial to widows than dowers (p. 136; p. 287, n. 1), but Spring counters this position (pp. 43-47).

²⁹ Frances Brooke, *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville*, vol. 1 (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1763), 12.

³⁰ Spring states, "In the mid-sixteenth century the ratio of jointure to portion stood at about one to five; that is, for one pound of jointure the wife paid five pounds in portion. The ratio apparently fell to one to six or seven by 1600; and by the latter half of the seventeenth century it had further fallen to one to ten" (p. 50). Ten percent prevailed as the norm through Wollstonecraft's day although Spring states that the number could range from five to twenty percent.

³¹ Barbara J. Todd, "The Remarrying Widow: A Stereotype Reconsidered," in *Women in English Society, 1500-1800*, ed. Mary Prior (London: Methuen, 1985), 73. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³² For Shaftesbury's influence on Smith, see David Marshall, *The Figure of the Theater: Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 176-77. For the importance of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714) in relation to Smith and Rousseau, see Nigel Joseph, "The Impartial Spectator, *amour-propre*, and Consequences of the Secular Gaze: Rousseau's and Adam Smith's Responses to Mandeville," *Lumen: Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 30 (2011), 33-44.

³³ Quoted in Charles A. Spurr, *Prayer in the Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 39.

³⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin, 1984) 114.

³⁵ My vocabulary acknowledges the work of Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques*

Rousseau: *Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

³⁶ Joseph, "The Impartial Spectator, *amour-propre*, and Consequences of the Secular Gaze," 39.

³⁷ Adam Smith, "A Letter to the Authors of the *Edinburgh Review*," in *The Early Writings of Adam Smith*, ed. J. Ralph Lindgren, Reprints of Economics Classics (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1967), 24.

³⁸ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 9. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³⁹ Smith writes, "Humanity is the virtue of a woman, generosity of a man. The fair-sex, who have commonly much more tenderness than ours, have seldom so much generosity. . . . The most humane actions require no self-denial, no self-command, no great exertion of the sense of propriety" (pp. 190-91). Smith explains that self-denial is inspired by a man's acceptance of the opinions of an impartial spectator: "When to the interest of this other person, therefore, they sacrifice their own, they accommodate themselves to the sentiments of the spectator, and by an effort of magnanimity act according to those views of things which, they feel, must naturally occur to any third person" (p. 191). Wollstonecraft responds to Smith by agreeing that women lack generosity, but she attributes this deficit to their oppression by men; see chapter thirteen, section four of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 188-89.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 80.

⁴¹ Rousseau, *Émile: or Treatise on Education*, trans. William H. Payne (New York: Prometheus Books, 2003), 263. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴² Quoted in Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 133.

⁴³ Quoted in John Angell James, *The Widow Directed to the Widow's God* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1858), 169, emphasis added.

⁴⁴ W. Kenrick, *The Whole Duty of Woman* (London: William Lane, 1796), 118.

⁴⁵ Richard Allestree's authorship of conduct books for men offers one example of Nancy Armstrong's point that throughout the seventeenth century, "the great majority of conduct books were devoted mainly to representing the male of the dominant class"; see Armstrong, "The Rise of the Domestic Woman," in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987), 98.

⁴⁶ Armstrong, "The Rise of the Domestic Woman," 96-141. Her essay is adapted from the second chapter of her *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴⁷ Richard Allestree, *The Ladies' Calling* (Oxford: Printed at the Theater, 1673), 211, Early English Books Online, reel position 831:08. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁸ Embalming did not become common in the West until after the American Civil War, when Lincoln ordered its use to preserve corpses of Union soldiers for their journeys home, and it has always remained more popular in the United States than in Britain. See Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (New York: Vintage, 2000).

⁴⁹ Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, 67.

⁵⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, "Living Alone Together," *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, 27 (1996), 12.

⁵¹ On the "slavery of marriage," see chapter eleven of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (p. 155).

⁵² Wollstonecraft argues in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that ignorance makes women unfit mothers (p. 151).

⁵³ Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, 75.

⁵⁴ Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman*, in "Mary, A Fiction" and "The Wrongs of Woman," ed. Gary Kelley (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 203.