4. Style as Noise: Identity and Ideology in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

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Style as Noise: Identity and Ideology in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

The access to writing is the constitution of a free subject in the violent moment of its own effacement and of its own bondage.

—Jacques Derrida

To persuade someone to publish this book, I had first to convince several persons in authority—primarily editors and readers—that I had successfully created the illusion of a single-voiced “I” of énoncé, a speaking subject who, by virtue of the autonomy and coherence of my “voice,” would authorize the autonomy and coherence of my text.\(^1\) Drafts of chapters were met with friendly exhortations to “experiment with freeing my own voice” or to make my writing “less obsessively other-oriented,” more dramatic and less dialogic. Not surprisingly, these critics read with Foucault’s first set of questions in mind. Is it really “me” speaking and not someone else? Is what “I” am saying original, new? To be sure, these are the questions that publishers ask their readers to consider. They are conventions that govern the speech genre of academic publishing which we do not often think about in our work, unless we are trying to make the argument, as I am, that all language is dialogic and therefore continually interanimated by other words and other voices. If we want to challenge the illusion of a single “voice” that unifies the text, then perhaps we might want to consider how pronouns like “I” and “we” function to create seemingly unified semiotic fields—individuals, authors, readers—out of disparate linguistic materials (Benveniste 1971). In this chapter I examine how these processes operate ideologically in

\(^1\)For a discussion of enunciation in language, see Benveniste 1971, 217–22; and Belsey 1980, 56–84.
light of recent theoretical debates—like the one to which Foucault is contributing—on the nature of subjectivity.

What happens when women publicly express their subjectivity through writing is less clear-cut, as I have tried to suggest, than many feminist accounts of female authorship might suggest. Nancy K. Miller, in a 1981 exchange with Peggy Kamuf at Cornell University, takes exception to what she sees as Foucault’s “sovereign indifference” to the writer. She has in mind, of course, specifically the woman writer. In reply to his question “What does it matter who’s speaking?” she writes: “What matter who’s speaking? I would answer it matters, for example, to women who have lost and still routinely lose their proper name in marriage, and whose signature—not merely their voice—has not been worth the paper it was written on; women for whom the signature—by virtue of its power in the world of circulation—is not immaterial. Only those who have it can play with not having it” (1982, 53). In her comments, Miller expresses the anxieties of feminist critics that poststructuralist theories of authorship, which decenter and fragment the subject into a textual construction, simply reassert male hegemony in yet another guise because they foreclose feminist discussions of real female subjects’ agency and resistance to dominant ideologies. If the postmodern subject, as envisioned by writers as diverse as Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Kristeva, is a provisional subject, a process of becoming, “suspended in a continual moment of fabrication,” rather than a stable or fixed entity of being, then “woman” as such does not exist any more than “man.” The “subject” of feminism simply evaporates in the free play of the text (Miller 1986, 270). But this decentering, she argues, is as much an effect of power as the assertion of stable identity. The marginal and the oppressed—those who are not white, middle-class, or male—have always experienced the self as fragmented and subjectivity as subjection. Only those who have secure and fixed identities can afford the luxury of fragmenting them. The very real danger posed by theories of the “decentered” subject, then, is that in their movement to the margins those theorists at the center of Western philosophy reinforce their own centrality by co-opting the position of those already at the margins, preventing the truly mar-
ginized any subject position from which to articulate their exclusion.

I would not want to deny that at its most formalist and idealist the poststructuralist preference for textual production over authorial signature erases gender difference, neutralizing the female by collapsing it into the hegemonic and “universal” male. Miller’s critique of Geoffrey Hartman’s and J. Hillis Miller’s effacement of the female subject in their appropriation of the myths of Ariadne and Arachne convincingly demonstrates this tendency (1986, 281–86). But feminist literary critics’ fear of the text without an author results primarily from their ideological commitment to “gynocritics” and the assertion of an essential women’s experience through the recuperation of the woman writer. We need to interrogate the investments such a program requires in a concept of stable identity and an authenticity and originality rooted in an ontological “self.” Perhaps because, as feminist psychologists such as Nancy Chodorow have argued (1978), women have usually experienced their “selves” as already fragmented and the boundaries of their egos as more fluid, feminist thought has insisted upon reasserting the autonomy and coherence of the female “self.” Historically, because women have been responsible for virtually all dependency relationships within the family, they have been denied the necessary independence through which white, middle-class men construct a sense of independent selfhood. Therefore, it has been the project of feminism to enable women to construct the same powerful sense of identity as men. But the search for “authentic” women’s experience, for the woman writer who expresses herself authentically, grounds the female “self” in a Western mind/body dualism that ironically reinforces the very ideology of bourgeois individualism feminists wish to resist. As Nancy Armstrong has written, “If we simply assume that gender differentiation is at the root of human identity, we can understand neither the totalizing power of this figure nor the very real interests such power inevitably serves. . . . any political position founded primarily on sexual identity ultimately confirms the limited choices offered by such a dyadic model” (1987, 24). I wish to explore in this chapter the historical construction in the eighteenth century of this dyadic model of subjectivity and the powerful interests it serves.
Even Foucault does not say that it does not matter who speaks; he asks, “What does it matter?” And like Miller, he answers the question he raises. It matters, but for different reasons from those we have in the past supposed: not because a fixed, preexisting self expresses itself through discourse but because discourses—historically situated discourses—are part of the evolving, open-ended, and shifting process of becoming a subject. The contemporary theoretical concern with destabilizing subjectivity must be theorized relationally and historically rather than categorically. To dismantle the opposition between the fixed and stable self of Cartesian rationalism and the radically decentered and fragmented subject of Derridean deconstruction which has limited feminist discussions of subjectivity we need to explore the complex nexus of material, social, and historical practices through which subjectivity—and gendered subjectivity in particular—has been constructed. The invention of the woman writer as the theoretical ground of her text’s meaning is itself a historical process.

In other words, subjectivity does not transcend history or, as the cases of the troubadours and the medieval women mystics suggest, the material and cultural conditions of its production. Modern philosophy and psychology have tended to take the subject out of history, to universalize subjectivity by locating it outside of the political and social in the atemporal realm of reason or the apolitical realm of the family. The specific historical practices that led to modern notions of subjectivity, particularly that of the political individual as the possessor of certain “natural rights,” has, since the seventeenth century, also been the subject of feminism. To theorize this process, it is necessary to examine the role of language in the historical construction of subjectivity. Following Benveniste (1971) and Vološinov/Bakhtin (1986), I argue that the individual is constructed out of the languages available to the subject in her culture; subjectivity, that is, is primarily semiotic. In the eighteenth century, during the period in which modern notions of the individual took shape, semiotic activity created a site of contention.

2For a discussion of possessive individualism as it developed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political thought, see Macpherson 1962. For discussions of feminism’s relationship to “natural rights” philosophy, see Eisenstein 1981; and Delmar 1986.
and struggle which redefined power relations among classes, cultures, and genders. The modern gendered individual was fashioned out of the languages that consolidated middle-class culture in Europe.³

By the end of the eighteenth century, those at the “center” of Western culture—primarily white upper- and middle-class men—conceived of the self as autonomous and unified, atomized and separate from other selves. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this view of the subject provided the ideological legitimation for capitalism, imperialism, entrepreneurial growth, and the movement of labor from the home to the factory. The theoretical rationale for this view of the self has its origins in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy, particularly in Hobbes, Descartes, and Locke. But the success of the ideology of bourgeois individualism depended primarily upon two significant and interdependent semiotic realignments: the development of public arenas outside of the monarch’s court for intellectual and cultural exchange and a reconception of the family within texts for and about women which deemphasized genealogical ties and elevated domesticity as the primary means by which the individual locates him- or herself within society.

The bourgeois “public sphere” provided one network of specific and heterogeneous sites in which individuals—men primarily—could be constituted as subjects by sharing in a consensus of universal reason.⁴ The public sphere comprised many eighteenth-century social institutions—clubs, periodicals, coffeehouses, journals, salons, spas, and resorts—in which private individuals could assemble for the free and equal exchange of reasonable discourse. These institutions provided both discursive and physical spaces apart from the hierarchized, finely articulated network of genealogical relationships which marked cultural and political identities at court. In the coffeehouses, clubs, and periodicals of the early

³Felicity Nussbaum, in examining the historical situation of female subjectivity in eighteenth-century autobiography, also argues that the individual must be seen as a locus of intersection among cultural discourses (1988).

⁴For discussions of the eighteenth-century public sphere, see Hohendahl 1982; Eagleton 1984, 9–27; Stallybrass and White 1986, 80–84; also Habermas 1962.
eighteenth century, propertied men of different classes—the aristocracy, the “squirearchy,” the City, and the professions—came together as equals, as “men of reason.” These alliances, however, were never as homogeneous as some commentators have suggested. Nor was the public sphere simply a collection of “ideas or ideals” that articulated a new ideology of middle-class judgment and taste. The exchanges that took place within those spaces were material as well as intellectual; they produced not only the Tatler and Spectator but the stock exchange and Lloyds as well (Stallybrass and White 1986, 99–100).

Within the public sphere, identities were not preestablished but “constructed by the very act of participation in polite conversation” (Eagleton 1984, 14–15), creating a “quasi-transcendental community of subjects” (15) which laid the groundwork for modern notions of the rational, self-interested political individual. The claims made for the equalizing power of reason served to mediate, at least superficially, the conflicting interests of the landed and privileged aristocracy and the wealthy but often politically marginal middle class. Indeed, it was the function of these institutions to “negotiate cultural alliances between the gentry, the Court, and the town” (Stallybrass and White 1986, 83). Reason did not distinguish between aristocrat and commoner. At least within the spaces of the public sphere, power and position no longer conferred cultural authority. Instead, “the speech act itself, the énonciation as opposed to the énoncé, figures in its very form an equality, autonomy and reciprocity at odds with its class-bound content” (Eagleton 1984, 14). Besides temporarily suppressing class distinctions, the discursive space established by the public sphere took individuals out of history; reason assumed the status of a universalizing, transcendental ground of identity: cogito ergo sum.

But this account of the history of the modern individual is at best only partial. The development of the public sphere was connected to and depended upon the simultaneous development of an equally ahistorical and universalized private space. The domestic sphere of the home and the family became a site in which everyday practices performed on the body—including such things as manners, dress, and hygiene—could create new ideologies and new power
relations. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu suggests the potency of these apparently insignificant practices to imbue ideological values.

If all societies and, significantly, all the “totalitarian institutions” . . . that seek to produce a new man through a process of “de-culturation” and “reculturation” set such store on the seemingly most insignificant details of *dress, bearing, physical and verbal manners*, the reason is that, treating the body as a memory, they entrust to it in abbreviated and practical, i.e., mnemonic, form the fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of culture. The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and therefore, more precious, than the values given body, made body. (1977, 94)

The regulation of the body through these practices becomes a means of fashioning subjectivity out of ideology. Their aim is to make “socially desirable behavior automatic, a matter of self-control, causing it to appear in the consciousness of the individual as the result of his own free will” (Elias 1978, 150). In the eighteenth century, the historically specific practices that regulated the body constructed new subjects in the privatized space of the home. The conduct books, educational treatises, and domestic fiction from which such practices emerged were designed to inculcate such middle-class virtues as neatness, industry, morality, economy, modesty, and discretion even before the middle-class ever existed (Armstrong 1987, 66).

If the public sphere was confined primarily to propertied men, the domestic sphere was presided over by women. Indeed, Nancy Armstrong maintains that “the modern individual was first and foremost a woman,” that “a modern, gendered form of subjectivity developed first as a feminine discourse in certain literature for women before it provided the semiotic of nineteenth-century . . . psychological theory” (1987, 8, 14). Moreso than through the epistemological and philosophical debates of the eighteenth-century
public sphere, Armstrong argues, modern notions of gendered subjectivity—of masculine and feminine identities—before they ever actually existed in social practice, were worked out semiotically through fiction, conduct books, and educational treatises written for women. A subjectivity “engendered” and shaped within the domestic sphere gave women certain powers and authority in the reproduction of bourgeois hegemony denied them in aristocratic culture. Within a privatized and naturalized ideology of the family, under the watchful eye of feminine surveillance, our peculiarly modern notions of the self became commonplace. Later, in the nineteenth century, the emerging sciences of psychology and sociology would reproduce the semiotics of domestic texts written for women, refiguring political and economic problems in terms of sexual conduct and domestic order (Armstrong 1987, 180–82). The practice of blaming poverty on the degeneration of the family continues unabated today among politicians and academics, its ideological investments masked by rhetoric about traditional family values.

Significantly, the beginnings of feminist “consciousness”—the first arguments for a uniquely female self claiming the right to equality with men—may be traced to the eighteenth century as well. Feminist discourse marks at least one point of convergence between these two discursive formations I have been describing—the public sphere and the domestic organization of the family—at the end of the century. To demonstrate this claim I turn now to examine how the eighteenth-century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft constructs a female and feminist self in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as a *bricolage* of the public and domestic discourses available to her—in particular, those of philosophy, the gothic novel, and bourgeois sentimentality. A close examination of Wollstonecraft’s treatise illustrates, I believe, the interdependence of the public and domestic spheres in defining a uniquely modern but historically specific individual. It may also provide an opportunity to “deconstruct” modern subjectivity by revealing the cracks and fissures within this formation when the speaking subject has been gendered as a woman, when she must claim to be speaking from within the public sphere while calling upon the authority of domesticity.
The publication in 1792 of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* provoked a predictably violent reaction. Horace Walpole, in a letter to Hannah More, described its author as one of "the philosophizing serpents we have in our bosom," and later as a "hyena in petticoats." A review of William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”* in *European Magazine* describes Wollstonecraft posthumously as a "philosophic wanton" (Wardle 1951, 159, 318). Although her book was not everywhere viewed with such loathing in the eighteenth century as these remarks suggest, a woman philosopher claiming to speak from within the public sphere and assuming the equality granted to "men of reason" could be dismissed as unnatural, a perversion of nature. Dr. James Fordyce in *Sermons for Young Women* writes, "You yourself, I think, will allow that war, commerce, politics, exercises of strength and dexterity, abstract philosophy, and all the abstruser sciences are most properly the province of men. I am sure those masculine women, that would plead for your sharing any part of this province equally with us, do not understand your interests" (London, 1792; quoted in Wardle 1951, 140). Just as women lacked the physical strength to wage war, so the argument went, they lacked the mental dexterity, the ability to reason abstractly, required of philosophy and of all discourse within the public sphere. Any woman who could pretend to such abilities must be unsexed, a "masculine woman." Her intellectual transgressions could easily be figured as sexual transgressions.

Philosophy, however, is exactly what Wollstonecraft set out to write in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and what so many of her contemporaries vilified her for attempting to write. A philosopher, Wollstonecraft writes elsewhere, "dedicates his existence to promote the welfare, and perfection of mankind, carrying his views beyond any time he chooses to mark" (1796, v–vi). In *Rights of Woman* she claims, "Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all was right: a crowd of authors that all is now right: and I, that all will be right" (1975, 15). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is Wollstonecraft's vision of what woman's place should be in a perfected society, her articulation of a specifically female identity with-
in the public sphere. Her feminism, in this respect, is inseparable
from the philosophy of egalitarianism which made her a staunch
supporter of the ideals of the French Revolution and which, at least
implicitly, also supported the rhetoric of rationality which charac-
terized the eighteenth-century bourgeois public sphere in which
Wollstonecraft tried to claim membership.

But we cannot understand Wollstonecraft’s attempt to stake out a
subject position from which to articulate her sense of the “wrongs
of woman” without understanding the historical moment from
which she speaks. In particular, it is necessary to know that the
alliances forged within the discursive formation of the “public
sphere” during the first decades of the eighteenth century had
become fractured and divided by the end of the century. The con-
sensus of reason and the commonality of interest was beginning to
disintegrate. Terry Eagleton (1984, 30–38) cites several reasons for
the demise of the “classical” bourgeois public sphere. The first is
purely economic, a change in the modes of production and con-
sumption of texts. A rapid expansion of literary production at the
end of the century began to outpace the social relations that made
possible the institutions supported by the public sphere—
periodicals, clubs, journals. An expansion in wealth, population,
and education created a larger, more heterogeneous middle class
eager for reading materials, while technologies in printing and
publishing made such an expansion possible, but under radically
different conditions. The decline of literary patronage, for instance,
increased the power of the bookseller. Thus, “as capitalist society
develops and market forces come increasingly to determine the
destiny of literary products, it is no longer possible to assume that
‘taste’ or ‘cultivation’ are the fruits of civilized dialogue and reason-
able debate” (34). This new, more “vulgar” reading public could
not be expected to participate in a reasonable and objective dis-
course on “taste,” nor could those who had participated in the
discourse of the public sphere be expected to recognize the extent
to which their “reasonable and objective discourse on taste” was
tinged with the values and interests of the propertied classes. The
second factor that undermined the consensus of the public sphere
is related. The expansion of the reading public meant that the
social and political interests of the propertied classes could no long-
er dominate public discourse to the exclusion of all others. Once one has made the argument that the universalizing discourse of reason obliterates class distinctions between aristocrat and merchant, it is a slippery slope to the argument that other dispossessed groups must be included within the equalizing sphere of reason. During the late eighteenth century, those groups whose interests fell outside the articulated interest of the public sphere and who posed a material threat to its hegemony became increasingly vocal. Eagleton cites such counterhegemonic institutions as the corresponding societies, the radical press, the dissenting churches, and of course, feminism as examples of what he calls a “counter public sphere,” a “whole oppositional network of journals, clubs, pamphlets, debates, and institutions” which “invades the dominant consensus, threatening to fragment it from within” (36).

The historical “place” from which Wollstonecraft speaks must be located within this “counter public sphere.” Her argument for the rights of woman cannot be separated from this larger network of counterhegemonic discourses institutionalized in the late eighteenth century through many of the same apparatuses that served earlier in the century in the formation of the public sphere: periodicals, clubs, journals, and publishing houses. In this respect, Wollstonecraft’s experience is almost paradigmatic. Upon her arrival in London, she came under the influence of the publisher Joseph Johnson, who was eventually to publish all her writing. At his house in 72 St. Paul’s Churchyard, she became acquainted with a circle of intellectuals of liberal and radical leanings. These included John Bonnycastle, a mathematician; George Fordyce, a physician; George Anderson, a classical scholar; Alexander Geddes, a biblical scholar; Henry Fuseli, the Swiss painter; and later Thomas Paine, author of Rights of Man; the poet William Blake, and her future husband, William Godwin (Wardle 1951, 94). Wollstonecraft wrote prolifically for the Analytical Review, the periodical founded by Johnson in 1788. Indeed her entire literary production is bound up with her membership in Johnson’s “circle”; it provided the material, financial, intellectual, and emotional support necessary for her project. Essential to her ability to assert herself as a speaking subject was her membership within a public sphere of reasonable discourse. Ironically, the very presence of people like her (i.e.,
women) within this public sphere created the contradictions that would eventually lead to its demise. The public sphere could survive—at least in its eighteenth-century form—only so long as those who spoke and wrote within it could maintain their pose of disinterested rationality, so long as they could mask their own interests and exclusions and suppress the contradictions upon which the public sphere was founded. Wollstonecraft's oppositional practices could not help but call this pose into question. Speaking within a public sphere designed to create male subjectivity—and a class-based subjectivity at that—Wollstonecraft had to find a language in which to express something that did not really exist within that sphere: a rational female subjectivity. The only cultural language adaptable to her purpose—outside that of rationality—was the language of domesticity. What make Rights of Woman such a fascinating text are the ways in which it embodies and plays out the contradictions between public and domestic identities not only in its contents but in its style as well.

Throughout, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman seems an argument at odds with itself, attesting to the ideological difficulties inherent in its project. Contradictions are everywhere apparent, as countless critics have pointed out. These contradictions, I would argue, are not logical flaws but productive tensions that reveal the impossibility within eighteenth-century philosophical discourse of creating a rational speaking subject who is also a woman. Wollstonecraft begins with the premise that all human beings, women included, are rational and that through the exercise of reason the lot of mankind, and womankind, can be improved. She believes that "from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow" (12). In passages such as these, Wollstonecraft most clearly reveals her commitment to the eighteenth-century ideals of the public sphere, to the belief in the essential equality of individuals as rational beings. Reason, not class or sexual hierarchies, she says, provides the glue that "binds society." Wollstonecraft, mistakenly as it turns out, assumes that the abstract equality of reason promised by the classical public sphere, which generally existed to articulate the interests and culture of propertied men, could be extended as well to the nonpropertied and to women. But women's "state of degradation," which she sees as unnatural, has been insti-
tutionalized by the “authorities” (many of them men) who have
written about women in conduct books and educational treatises.
At first, Wollstonecraft’s use of texts written for women and be-
longing more properly to the domestic sphere seems incongruous,
at odds with her claims of philosophical seriousness. But it is pre-
cisely Wollstonecraft’s need to call upon the language of domes-
ticity articulated in conduct books and educational manuals to con-
struct female identity which provides the deconstructive moment in
Rights of Woman. Wollstonecraft’s attempt to weld these two
opposing discourses—the public discourse of political philosophy
and the private discourse of domesticity—into a single argument
creates tensions and contradictions within the text which ulti-
mately lead to its unraveling. The “rationality” that argues for the
subjugation of women cannot be divorced from the domestic in-
stitutions that by the end of the eighteenth century shaped the
lives of both men and women. By the end of Rights of Woman,
neither philosophy nor reason exists as timeless or universal, set
apart from other social practices; they must develop from an “early
association of ideas”—that is, from the socializing process of a
largely domestic education.

With the benefit of over a century’s hindsight, Virginia Woolf
notes that Wollstonecraft’s arguments in Rights of Woman are at
once original and clichéd; they are, she states, “so true that they
seem now to contain nothing new in them” (Woolf 1932, 176). From
the perspective of the late eighteenth century, however, Wollstone-
craft’s difficulties seem insurmountable. She wants to make an
argument for women as public agents, but she has no language out
of which to construct this role except that of the masculine public
sphere. The languages of female subjectivity located women ex-
clusively within the family at the same time as they denied women
public agency. The separation of public from domestic is the found-
ing split of the bourgeois hegemony. To create the male as an
autonomous independent agent in the public sphere, bourgeois
ideology had to relegate all dependency relations that might under-
mine that independent selfhood to the domestic realm under the
supervision of women. The ideology that supports separate
spheres for men and women, then, is the same ideology that con-
structs identity, selfhood. For women to move out of the sphere
assigned to them and adopt a public persona would be to expose the contradictions and exclusions the ideology of bourgeois individualism was designed to mystify. Wollstonecraft continually struggles with these contradictions. She accepts without question that domesticity is the "natural" occupation for women; their primary duties ought to be nurturing children and managing their households. Women should be given rights, she argues, primarily to make them better mothers, to prepare them to exercise their domestic authority. "When I treat of the peculiar duties of woman," she writes, "as I should treat of the peculiar duties of a citizen or father it will be found that I do not mean to insinuate that they should be taken out of their families, speaking of the majority" (63). Later she writes, "As the care of children in their infancy is one of the grand duties annexed to the female character by nature, this duty would afford many forcible arguments for strengthening the female understanding, if it were properly considered" (151). These statements are characteristic of most of Wollstonecraft's argument. Women "belong" in some essential way "in" the family. The care of children is given to women "by nature." She accepts as biological facts the social imperatives that limit women (with some exceptions) to roles as wives and mothers.

Yet without making Wollstonecraft into a twentieth-century feminist, we can perceive in places a more radical tendency toward asserting the rights of women to public identities—to roles that allow her to articulate the social, political, or economic interests of women. At times she verges on promoting women's political independence from domesticity, frequently casting her argument in economic terms: "How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry, instead of hanging their heads surcharged with the dew of sensibility, that consumes the beauty to which it at first gave lustre" (149). Passages such as this one work against the ideology of domesticity that Wollstonecraft generally accepts. In this re-

5For a discussion of the political ramifications of bourgeois individualism and the split between public and domestic spheres, see Eisenstein 1981, esp. 55–112. For a discussion of the formation of gendered identity within the domestic sphere, see Armstrong 1987.
spect, at times her argument is often forthrightly egalitarian and feminist. But these moments also reveal the contradictions that the emerging ideologies of bourgeois egalitarianism and feminism created for women. Wollstonecraft has to argue that if women are to be better mothers and wives, they must have at least the choice of alternative ways of living.

Nowhere are the contradictions between the bourgeois and the radical in Wollstonecraft's thinking more evident than in her penultimate chapter on the reform of national education. She argues for an equality within marriage which hinges on equality of education for both sexes: "If marriage be the cement of society, mankind should all be educated after the same model, or the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship, nor will women ever fulfill the peculiar duties of their sex, till they become enlightened citizens, till they become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men; in the same manner, I mean, to prevent misconstruction, as one man is independent of another" (165). The implication of her argument is clearly radical: women must be given greater political and economic freedom to exercise their rights in new and, at least for her critics, potentially disruptive ways. Education becomes inseparable, in Wollstonecraft's mind, from equality of opportunity for the sexes. As she explains, her notion of equality is based on eighteenth-century, particularly Lockean, notions of selfhood which envision individuals as atomized and disconnected from social relations. But she is careful to subsume "education" within the framework of bourgeois gender roles that dictate a division between public and domestic identities. She is unable to see how this ideology of the subject rests on the recuperation of social connectedness in the domestic sphere. If women are to preside over all dependency relationships, they will obviously be unable to participate in the ideology of individualism which requires agents free from social dependency.

Style as Ideology

Even though the critics, both her contemporaries and ours, have perceived in Rights of Woman well-defined speech genres—history,
politics, education, philosophy—the work has frequently been attacked for its stylistic transgressions precisely because of these contradictions. Wollstonecraft's husband, William Godwin, calls it "a very unequal performance and eminently deficient in method and arrangement" (1974, 83). Mary Hays notes in her memoirs of Wollstonecraft that "in perspicuity and arrangement it must be confessed to be defective" (quoted in Wollstonecraft 1975, 212). Even its more recent critics, while admitting the text's undeniable power, harp on the same flaws its original critics were so fond of pointing out. Ralph Wardle writes condescendingly of it: "The book is tedious. Did she write it in six weeks? Then would she have spent six years on it! . . . Its worst fault is its lack of organization" (1951, 156). Eleanor Flexner says that Wollstonecraft's "lack of education is also shown in her inability to organize material, to follow a consistent train of thought, or to avoid digressions when they are largely irrelevant and in her habit of loose organization. She is incapable either of the coherent organization of ideas or of avoiding repetition" (1972, 164)

This criticism, however, faults Wollstonecraft for her disregard of philosophical authority and for not conforming to what most would acknowledge as the rhetorical rules of the public sphere: a commitment to a coherently expressed and logical argument, the dispassionate weighing of alternatives, and the objective observation of the world. The charges that Rights of Woman lacks a coherent, rational organization criticize it, paradoxically, by the very standards of rationality her treatise ultimately contests. Preoccupied with her breaches of philosophical and stylistic decorum, her critics largely fail to identify the alternatives posed by her writing because they have not done justice to the more subversive elements of her argument. A more sympathetic critic notes that the "unevenness of the book, its unclear organization, its repetition or arguments, have less to do with Wollstonecraft's lack of formal education—she can be formidable in argument when she allows herself to be—than with her attempt to bring about a bloodless revolution" (Vlaspolos 1980, 462). As Anca Vlaspolos suggests, the stylistic idiosyncrasies that have been criticized in the past can be

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6For a critique of this notion of philosophical rhetoric, see Bordo 1982; Rorty 1979; and Richetti 1983, 4–32.
seen as a set of rhetorical strategies by which Wollstonecraft attempts to forge out of a hostile philosophical tradition an alternative language that can represent—and even create—a subject position from which a woman can effect political change.

Wollstonecraft’s style wavers between strategies of assimilation and strategies of rebellion, between conservative philosophical language and a radical attempt to call its assumptions and values into question. This stylistic instability reflects the tensions in her argument between traditionalist and revolutionary views of the nature of women, as well as the rhetorical difficulties she faces in trying to redefine the “nature of woman,” while moving between the public and domestic spheres. Stylistic analysis, then, may provide a lens through which to examine the relationships in the text between ideology and subjectivity.

Wollstonecraft herself, in keeping with eighteenth-century beliefs about philosophical decorum dismisses style as “noise,” re-affirming her commitment to “objectivity,” which, she claims, inheres in a view of language as transparent which dismisses rhetoric and concerns itself with “things.”

Animated by this important object, I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style;—I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected; for, wishing rather to persuade by the force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods, or in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings, which, coming from the head, never reach the heart.—I shall be employed about things, not words!—and, anxious to render my sex more respectable to members of society, I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slipped from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation. (10)

This passage accomplishes two purposes. First, it distances Wollstonecraft’s writing from the “noise” of women’s writing—novels, letters, and the like—and identifies it more closely with masculine writing, with the purposeful writing of the public

7For a perceptive discussion of the conflict between radical and conservative ideologies in Wollstonecraft’s political thought, see Eisenstein 1981, 89–112.
sphere; it purports to be forceful, not flowery. Second, and more important, it does what most philosophical writing since Plato has attempted to do: it creates the fiction that its rhetoric—the rhetoric of rational discourse—does not really exist, that the prose is simply a vehicle, a “mirror of nature,” which conveys unmediated truth. Wollstonecraft’s sincerity and hence the truth of her argument are assumed by her concern with things, not words. She rather ingeniously disdains “rounding periods,” “the turgid bombast of artificial feeling,” and “elegant” language as so much noise. Her claims are intended to prevent the reader from considering the role that style—language and rhetoric—must necessarily play in shaping “truth” and hence the possibility that “truth” is more subject to the writer’s perspective and position within a particular historical and social context than many philosophers would like to believe.8

As Robert Markley has noted, style implicates the individual in a complex dynamic of history, culture, and hence ideology: “Style records the writer’s struggle against convention and towards an elusive individuality that is itself bounded culturally. It is a dynamic record of the pressures created by a vocabulary simultaneously demonstrating and rebelling against its conventional nature. Style constructs a dynamic and historical rather than a static and ideal self, forcing us to reassess constantly the relation between the internal and external, between idiosyncratic utterance and anonymous replication” (1988, 26). This kind of dialogical analysis conceives of style not merely as an expression of essentialist notions of the self—“style is the woman”—or as an abstract system of generic classification but as a historical arena of conflict, a dynamic interplay among individuals, genres, conventions, and ideologies in which style functions as both a producer and a production of social meanings. In Wollstonecraft’s case, the confrontation between radical and conservative styles—between philosophical reason and a radical assertion of women’s political rights—is played out as a dialogical rather than dialectical process. Rights of Woman offers no third term to transcend the ideological contradictions with which it wrestles. Rather than a dispassionate, objective treatise, it is the record of a struggle.

8On the relationship of truth and rhetoric in philosophic writing, see Richetti 1983, 6–8; and Rorty 1979.
The conservative elements of Wollstonecraft’s argument reveal her conscious stylistic decision to write about women’s inequality from within the public sphere. This was, after all, not the only stylistic option open to Wollstonecraft, who did not limit her writing to those speech genres belonging exclusively to the public sphere. Before *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she wrote prolifically in several domestic genres, including children’s stories (“Lessons for Children”), educational treatises (*Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*), conduct books (*Original Stories*), and domestic fiction (*Mary* and the posthumous *Maria*). She justifies her stylistic choices in *Rights of Woman*: “Because I am a woman, I would not lead my readers to suppose that I mean violently to agitate the contested question respecting the inequality or inferiority of the sex; but as the subject lies in my way, and I cannot pass it over without subjecting the main tendency of my reasoning to mis-construction, I shall stop a moment to deliver, in a few words, my opinion” (8). The apologetic tone of these remarks (and many like them) reveals the anxieties Wollstonecraft experiences as a woman writing publicly for a living. She must avoid the appearance of being too radical; she must not appear violent or overly passionate or she risks being pigeonholed as an emotional woman who cannot master the rhetoric of philosophical discourse. Instead, to gain her audience’s acceptance, she must appropriate masculine models of writing while effacing her sexual identity. Characteristically, Wollstonecraft attempts to outdo her male counterparts in their own style, to demonstrate her rationality, objectivity, and evenhandedness. She identifies herself with men, in this passage referring to women as “the sex” and in others simply as “them.” She distances herself throughout *Rights of Woman* from her “despised femininity” by dismissing “pretty feminine phrases” (9), “pretty superlatives,” and “false sentiments” (10) from her self-consciously masculinized style.

These decisions reflect Wollstonecraft’s belief that she is writing for an unsympathetic audience: she conceives of and addresses her readers primarily as men, not as other women (Vlaspolos 1980, Mitzi Myers examines Wollstonecraft’s exploration of subjectivity in her pedagogical texts. “Wollstonecraft’s pedagogical exercises,” she writes, “try out a plurality of selfhoods” (1988, 206).
She also writes within a paternalistic philosophical tradition that excludes women as both writers and subjects. To enable herself to write, Wollstonecraft adopts the objective and therefore powerful rhetorical pose of patriarchal discourse, even as she simultaneously subverts it. She must work within the confining strictures of a rhetoric that, while aggressively masculine, presents itself as transparent and unproblematic, as uninterested in anything except the true representation of reality. As a woman, Wollstonecraft could not hope to be taken seriously without appropriating the trappings of this rhetorical pose, however incongruous it might seem for her sex. For this reason, she is stridently argumentative in asserting her thesis: "In this work I have produced many arguments, which to me were conclusive, to prove that the prevailing notion respecting a sexual character was subversive of morality, and I have contended, that to render the human body and mind more perfect, chastity must more universally prevail" (4). And again: "I have repeatedly asserted, and produced what appear to me irrefragable arguments drawn from matters of fact, to prove my assertion, that women cannot, by force, be confined to domestic concerns" (5). She "contends" and "proves" arguments, drawn from "fact," which are "irrefragable" and "conclusive." The first four chapters are full of such self-conscious references to her argument: she speaks of disputes and proofs, of "simple truths," of "unequivocal axioms," and of "reason," a word that can be found at least once on virtually every page of Rights of Woman. The militant tone of her language is partly the result of the political purpose with which she writes, but it is also calculated to establish her credentials as an aggressive, even masculine reasoner, and to enlist the sympathies of heretofore hostile or indifferent male readers by proving herself one of them and not merely a woman. The value Wollstonecraft places on such a "masculine understanding" is evident in her praise of Catherine Macaulay, who for Wollstonecraft was "an example of intellectual acquirements supposed to be incompatible with the weakness of her sex. In her style of writing, indeed, no sex appears, for it is like the sense it conveys, strong and clear" (105).

Like Macaulay, Wollstonecraft, in appropriating the rhetoric of the public sphere must efface her sexual identity and her historical
perspective as a speaking subject along with it. Again and again she tries to ensure her objectivity by creating a fictional vantage point that allows her to stand outside the particulars of her time and place as a disinterested observer: “Let me now from an eminence survey the world stripped of all its false delusive charms. The clear atmosphere enables me to see each object in its true point of view, while my heart is still. I am calm as the prospect in a morning when the mists, slowly dispersing, silently unveil the beauties of nature, refreshed by rest” (110). In dedicating herself to describing the “truth,” she assumes what one critic has called an “ideal, disembodied state” that allows her to transcend her femininity (Poovey 1984, 80). Her “Miltonic disinterestedness” creates the illusion that she speaks from outside the “false delusive charms” of the world, from beyond the historical circumstances that led her to compose *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In assuming this philosophical stance, she adopts the pose most favored by the bourgeois public sphere, that of the “spectator,” who sees more clearly because he does not participate actively in the “human show” around him, who sees, as Addison and Steele’s *Spectator* argues, “as Standers-by discover Blots, which are apt to escape those who are in the Game.”

On the surface, therefore, Wollstonecraft’s treatise attempts to conform to the rhetorical rules of logical argument, rules that historically excluded women from philosophical discourse. It asserts and supports a thesis, attacking its opponents by rational argument. Its prose attempts to be, like Catherine Macaulay’s, “strong and clear.”

Wollstonecraft’s insistence on the disinterestedness of her prose, and hence its truth, is one reason she is so often criticized when she fails to live up to her standards. Yet this rhetorical strategy proves much more problematic for a woman writing within the public sphere than for her male counterparts. It is not entirely clear that Wollstonecraft recognizes the problems inherent in adapting these masculine models to her purposes. For her “philosophical project,” the illusion of objectivity is necessary, but it does not suit her purposes beyond establishing her ability to reason as effec-

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10 For a discussion of this pose of objectivity, see Straub 1989, 855; Poovey 1984, 80; and Bordo 1982, 181–85.
tively as a man, because it reinforces as truths masculine notions of
women as irrational, thereby ensuring their intellectual subserv-
ience. Her attack on patriarchy requires that she question any
“artificial structure” (78) that represses women as subjects; one of
the most powerful of these structures is writing. She must approp-
riate the apparently disinterested rhetoric of masculine authority
for her own purposes because there is no other language in which
she can write; but she must simultaneously subvert it, exposing it
as an arbitrary fiction, a prejudice that keeps women in their place.
She must fashion out of patriarchal discourse a language in which
to inscribe her subjectivity and experience as correctives to the
masculine authorities on women she has read.

The Dialogics of Style

Wollstonecraft’s solution is to interweave the languages and
genres of public rationality and domestic feeling in a dialogue that
allows her to create an oppositional stance within public-sphere
discourse and reveals the extent to which writing had become an
arena of sexual conflict in the late eighteenth century. The opening
paragraph illustrates this productive tension between what be-
comes in Rights of Woman two kinds of rhetoric: that of philosophi-
cal authority and that of domestic authority.

After considering the historical page, and viewing the living
world with anxious solicitude, the most melancholy emotions and
sorrowful indignation have depressed my spirits, and I have
sighed when obliged to confess, that either nature has made a
great difference between man and man, or that the civilization
which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial.
I have turned over various books written on the subject of educa-
tion, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the man-
agement of schools; but what has been the result?—a profound
conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is
the ground source of the misery I deplore; and that women, in
particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of con-
curring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. (7)
The first sentence is a microcosm of Wollstonecraft’s style. The tone of the first clause is judicious. Words such as “considering” and “viewing” create the impression of a thoughtful observer, while “anxious solicitude” gives just the right sense of distanced objectivity. The speaking subject, if not totally suppressed, stands outside of and apart from the situation she surveys. “Historical page” imparts weight and authority to the prose, both because it is a circumlocution for “books” and because it invokes “authority.” The rationality and disinterestedness of the first clause, however, give way in the second to a personal emotion of gothic intensity, conveyed by words and phrases such as “melancholy,” “sorrowful indignation,” “depressed,” and “sighed.” In the second clause, Wollstonecraft invokes the language of feeling prominent in domestic and sentimental fiction and conduct manuals. The second sentence repeats the same pattern. The dispassionate phrases “turned over” and “patiently observed” are followed in the second clause by “profound conviction,” “neglected education,” “misery,” and “weak and wretched,” all of which she “deplores.” The contradictions of Wollstonecraft’s life—her belief in the Enlightenment ideal of reason as opposed to the passionate intensity of her life (which often reads like a domestic novel)—are embedded in her prose. Each sentence begins objectively, but the facade is quickly dropped, replaced by a prose of subjective and emotional involvement. The pose of objectivity itself is called into question. The reader is drawn with the writer into a rhetorical and ideological reconstruction of the subjective experience of womanhood. The paragraph climaxes in an extended simile describing woman as created—and perverted—by man, a hothouse flower “planted in too rich a soil,” whose “strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty” (7). Wollstonecraft’s strategy in this introductory paragraph enables her to consider herself—a woman—as both subject and object and to dismantle the opposition between them. It enables her to adopt the masculine rhetoric of eighteenth-century philosophy and at the same time to subvert it by invoking the rhetoric of domestic authority, questioning all truisms about women.

The clash between public and domestic rhetorics or strategies of writing repeats itself throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The effect is less that of a single style (however various), than of
a variety of competing styles, each of which makes different claims on the reader’s attention. The extremes of Wollstonecraft’s styles testify to the perspicuity of Mary Hays’s remark that “the high masculine tone, sometimes degenerating into coarseness, that characterizes this performance, is in a variety of parts softened and blended with a tenderness of sentiment, an exquisite delicacy of feeling, that touches the heart, and takes captive the imagination” (quoted in Wollstonecraft 1975, 212). As Wollstonecraft appropriates and experiments with various kinds of rhetorical strategies, she demonstrates just how difficult it is to construct a language capable of empowering female desire and subjectivity. Because the personae established by the discourse of the public sphere frame the questions Wollstonecraft can ask, she is necessarily limited in the kinds of answers she can offer.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as I have been arguing, Wollstonecraft strives for stylistic effects appropriate to the philosophical seriousness of her argument. Thus, her language, because it adopts the language of philosophical rationalism, is often elaborately structured, even ponderous, given to rhetorical flourishes that are intended as much to create a tone of weighty disinterestedness as to further the specifics of her argument. Consider, by way of example, the following passage:

> The stamen of immortality, if I may be allowed the phrase, is the perfectibility of human reason; for, were man created perfect, or did a flood of knowledge break in upon him, when he arrived at maturity, that precluded error, I should doubt whether his existence would be continued after the dissolution of the body. But, in the present state of things, every difficulty in morals that escapes from human discussion, and equally baffles the investigation of profound thinking, and the lightning glance of genius, is an argument on which I build my belief of the immortality of the soul. Reason is, consequently, the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth. (52–53)

Both diction and syntax contribute to the impression of philosophical authority which Wollstonecraft tries to create in this passage. She relies heavily on largely abstract, Latinate nouns such as “sta-
men,” “immortality,” “perfectibility,” and “dissolution” to create a solidity and stasis. Her first sentence delays, through a long series of dependent clauses, her main point that perfection logically precludes existence since the purpose of existence is to strive for perfection. The reader is asked to follow the movement of the sentence, and indeed the whole passage, hypothetically through a series of logical connectives: “if,” “for,” “when,” “but,” and “consequently.” The passage as a whole attempts to command assent by convincing the reader of the objectivity, the orderliness, and hence the truth of its argument. The characteristics often associated with philosophical discourse—seriousness, abstraction, logical connection through subordination and cause and effect—all figure prominently here in Wollstonecraft’s style.

Yet even in this passage, so thoroughly serious about itself as philosophy, Wollstonecraft characteristically undercuts its fictions of objectivity and certitude. Many of the dependent clauses create seemingly unnecessary hedges: “if I may be allowed the phrase,” “I should doubt,” “I build my belief,” and the subjunctives “were” and “did.” The author, in one sense, heaps qualification upon qualification, creating a rhetoric that both asserts and questions its stated beliefs. The result is a language that reveals its distrust of the authority of philosophical discourse and of the ability of language to proceed logically to a discovery of truth. Her philosophical style, in this regard, insists not merely on its own authority but on the ambiguities that inhere in the assumptions eighteenth-century philosophy makes about its claims to authoritative and objective discourse.

Wollstonecraft’s distrust of the language she employs results in radical shifts in style and tone. Her prose is experimental, given to pushing the decorum of philosophical language to its extremes by incorporating stylistic conventions from other speech genres. Chapter 7, “On Modesty,” begins with an exaggerated apostrophe that recalls the worst stylistic excesses of the domestic fiction she rejects at the beginning of the treatise.

Modesty! Sacred offspring of sensibility and reason!—true delicacy of mind!—may I unblamed presume to investigate thy nature, and trace to its covert the mild charm, that mellowing each harsh
feature of character, renders what would otherwise only inspire cold admiration—lovely!—Thou that smoothest the wrinkles of wisdom, and softenest the tone of the sublimest virtues till they all melt into humanity;—thou that spreadest the ethereal cloud that, surrounding love, heightens every beauty, it half shades, breathing those coy sweets that steal into the heart, and charm the senses—modulate for me the language of persuasive reason till I rouse my sex from the flowery bed on which they supinely sleep life away! (121)

This passage is often counted among the inflated excesses of Wollstonecraft’s style. Mary Poovey, for instance, discusses it at some length, noting that the “artificial and abstract rhetoric” enables Wollstonecraft to distance herself from her more volatile emotions, in this case from her sexuality (1984, 78). For Poovey, Wollstonecraft’s “dematerialization” of her subject is proof of her ideological commitment to the repression of female sexuality. No doubt Poovey is right; others have commented on Wollstonecraft’s almost pathological denial of female sexuality.11 Yet the excesses of this passage border on parody, and considered in the context of the chapter’s style, they have the quite different effect of paradoxically calling attention to—and hence constructing—sexual difference.

The language of this passage is a parody of the rhetoric of domestic fiction. It mocks the docile, acutely feminine voice of countless gothic heroines, echoing and representing women’s culturally enforced weakness and dependence. To lend some authority to the prose, Wollstonecraft borrows an archaic and nearly biblical phraseology, replacing the more common “you” and “your” with “thou” and “thy” and employing the verb ending -est in “smoothest,” “softenest,” and “spreadest.” Her abstract diction forgoes the pursuit of philosophical truth for the clichés of domestic bliss: “mellowing,” sublimest,” “wrinkle of wisdom,” “ethereal cloud,” “coy sweets,” and “flowery bed.” The climax of the paragraph conjures up the image of a Sleeping Beauty or a gothic heroine passively, even docilely, awaiting the arrival of the man who will be at once her savior and her despoiler.

Wollstonecraft underscores the ironic mockery of her prayer to Modesty to “modulate for me the language of persuasive reason” when in the next sentence she does exactly that: she “modulates” her style to a different kind of language: “In speaking of the association of our ideas, I have noticed two distinct modes; and in defining modesty, it appears to me equally proper to discriminate that purity of mind, which is the effect of chastity, from a simplicity of character that leads us to form a just opinion of ourselves, equally distant from vanity or presumption, though by no means incompatible with a lofty consciousness of our own dignity” (121–22). The straightforward language of this sentence is as serious as the previous one is purplish. Despite its length, it has a “plainness” lacking in the previous passages, and even in the more philosophical sections of Wollstonecraft’s prose. Its insistence on logical divisions and classifications coincides with its comparatively straightforward diction and style. It must be read, then, as the antithesis of the preceding paragraph, even as it implicitly asks the reader to compare rhetorical strategies. Taken together, these two passages define the difference between what Wollstonecraft sees as a domestic feminized “style” foisted upon women by their culturally defined subject position and what she sees as a truly denotive style, which, in effect, subsumes the differences between masculine and feminine in its pursuit of general, transhistorical truths.

Wollstonecraft’s attempts to rewrite philosophical discourse, to move from a prose characterized by its reliance on the models of public-sphere discourse to one that can accommodate her own interests and observations, are the basis for her efforts to create a style free from the tyranny of both masculine and feminine ideologies. But her success at circumventing—or subverting—the ideologies of patriarchy and middle-class morality is necessarily mixed. To criticize the system, Wollstonecraft must write from within it; she must borrow from various cultural languages in order to create a new one. Her attempts to deal with “women’s experience” as something immediately accessible, unmediated by language, ideology, and cultural representations, are undermined by a style that frequently verges on bourgeois sentimentality.

One long passage suggests the difficulties all feminists since Wollstonecraft have encountered when trying to talk about some essential “woman’s experience”: 
Cold would be the heart of a husband, were he not rendered unnatural by early debauchery, who did not feel more delight at seeing his child suckled by its mother, than the most artful wanton tricks could ever raise; yet this natural way of cementing the matrimonial tie, and twisting esteem with fonder recollections, wealth leads women to spurn. To preserve their beauty, and wear the flowery crown of the day, which gives them a kind of right to reign for a short time over the sex, they neglect to stamp impressions on their husbands’ hearts, that would be remembered with more tenderness when the snow on the head began to chill the bosom, than even their virgin charms. The maternal solicitude of a reasonable affectionate woman is very interesting, and the chastened dignity with which a mother returns the caresses that she and the child receive from a father who has been fulfilling the serious duties of his station, is not only a respectable, but a beautiful sight. So singular, indeed, are my feelings, and I have endeavoured not to catch factitious ones, that after having been fatigued with the sigh of insipid grandeur and the slavish ceremonies that with cumberous pomp supplied the place of domestic affections, I have turned to some other scene to relieve my eye by resting it on the refreshing green every where scattered by nature. I have then viewed with pleasure a woman nursing her children, and discharging the duties of her station with, perhaps, merely a servant maid to take off her hands the servile part of the household business. I have seen her prepare herself and children, with only the luxury of cleanliness, to receive her husband, who returning weary home in the evening found smiling babes and a clean hearth. My heart has loitered in the midst of the group, and has even throbbed with sympathetic emotion, when the scraping of the well-known foot has raised a pleasing tumult. (142–43)

In this passage, Wollstonecraft confronts a subject of almost exclusive concern to women—breast-feeding. Whereas this subject might occupy the attention of, say, a medical book on obstetrics, in the context of a philosophical work such as this one purports to be, its inclusion appears ludicrously incongruous, even tasteless. Yet Wollstonecraft’s treatment of the subject is less tasteless than overly sentimental, less radical than fraught with the values of a conservative and bourgeois ideology of domesticity. This passage would be appropriate for an eighteenth-century conduct book intended to
socialize a young daughter to her domestic duties. It employs a clichéd poetic diction to defuse a potentially embarrassing subject, one perhaps too closely allied with female sexuality. Women’s sexuality, which Wollstonecraft generally prefers to ignore in *Rights of Woman* as potentially dangerous or highly disturbing, is thus displaced onto a description of maternal duty. Her choice of imagery, euphemisms, and circumlocutions in this passage disembodies her subject, rendering it nonsexual and therefore safe. Nowhere is there any hint of the physical suggested by the word “breastfeeding.” Instead, “the child” is “suckled by its mother.” Such images as “stamp impressions,” “snow on the head,” and “chill the bosom” distance the writer from her own body—both as a material and a symbolic object—and perhaps from her own un-sanctioned desires as well. The entire passage basks in the kind of sensibility and flowery diction of which she has earlier been so critical and which she had hoped to excise from her writing: “virgin charms,” “maternal solicitude,” “caresses,” “smiling babes,” “throbbed with sympathetic delight,” and “pleasing tumult” create a safe emotionalism that allows the writer to assume a position of both superiority to and alienation from her own sexuality. This passage, rather than confront women’s physical emancipation as a potentially creative and liberating, although disturbing, force for change, endorses the middle-class virtues of economy and cleanliness which created the domestic slavery of women Wollstonecraft deplores. While sentimentalizing the breast-feeding (middle- or upper-class) mother, she quickly dismisses the “servant maid” to take care of the “servile part of the household business.”

Wollstonecraft’s failure to offer any real alternatives to women’s confinement in the domestic sphere is instructive. In this passage she demonstrates just how distorting it is to refract female identity through the stylistic conventions of a philosophical discourse that was created to treat only a masculine subjectivity. Her choices are circumscribed by the cultural representations available to her. She can appropriate either the vocabulary of the medical textbook or that of the sentimental novel, but either way she offers an ideological representation of the experience which is at odds with the one she desires. Breast-feeding was a subject Wollstonecraft felt very strongly about. It symbolized for her one way in which women
could be at once creative, powerful, and nurturing without violating middle-class standards of propriety. For her, breast-feeding and the celebration of femininity that it symbolizes must become fit subjects for philosophy if philosophy were ever to be truly egalitarian. Yet the philosopher’s insistence on reason and detachment must deny the emotional and connected nature of the mother-child relationship, leaving only the flowery diction of sentimentality—of domestic fiction—to describe these emotions. The stylistic dilemma this passage creates for Wollstonecraft is crucial to understanding the so-called flaws of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft must constantly move between two poles, between a public posture of confrontation which is troped as masculine and a strategy of indirection and feeling which is troped as domestic and therefore feminine. In short she must move between reason and emotion.12

**The Passions Should Unfold Our Reason**

“We reason deeply, when we forcibly feel,” Wollstonecraft writes in *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1976, 160). As my analysis suggests, reason and passion, for Wollstonecraft, cannot exist as mutually exclusive modes of thought. She attacks the eighteenth-century bifurcation of emotion and reason and the concomitant devaluation of emotion as feminine.13 Emotions are not the sole prerogative of the female. Indeed, in their present state, she argues, women do not experience true emotion: “Women are supposed to possess more sensibility, and even humanity, than men, and their strong attachments and instantaneous emotions of compassion are given as proofs; but the clinging affectation of ignorance has seldom any thing noble in it, and may mostly be resolved into selfishness” (188). Nor are men purely rational creatures, like Dean Swift’s “insipid Houyhnhnms” (58). Their so-called rational arguments slide as easily into sentimentality and emotion as a woman’s. According

12For a discussion of the “masculine” and “feminine” in Wollstonecraft’s prose, see Poovey 1984, 68.
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to Wollstonecraft, Rousseau’s errors all arise from “sensibility”: “When he should have reasoned he became impassioned” (90). Neither reason nor emotion can be the exclusive province of one sex, nor can the two function independently: “the passions should unfold our reason” (14).

Accustomed as they are to the elegant dialectics of eighteenth-century philosophy—in which reason opposes passion, slavery tyranny, power powerlessness, body spirit, and male female—it is little wonder that Wollstonecraft’s critics feel so ill at ease with her prose and have accused her of pointless digressions. Central to her critique of patriarchal culture is her challenge of a rhetoric that can so neatly dispose of contradictions by creating rigid dichotomies, often in the service of oppression. All such oppositions imply the valorization of one term to the exclusion of the other; the powerful are privileged over the powerless, objective knowledge over the subjective passion, reason over emotion, and male over female. Generally, the lesser of each pair is ideologically typed as feminine and devalued accordingly. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman attempts to forge a new rhetoric to counter the oppressive power of this confrontational rhetoric by conflating oppositions, collapsing one term into the other. This strategy has the effect of robbing the “higher” term of its privileged masculine status and revaluing the other.

Elissa Guralnick has pointed out that in Rights of Woman “oppressed womankind serves . . . not merely as a figure for oppressed and impoverished mankind, but as a figure for all men, high as well as low, who are implicated in social and political contacts which condone inequality of wealth, rank, and privilege” (1977, 159). Woman is at once a figure for both oppressed and oppressor, for in Wollstonecraft’s mind, woman is both tyrant and slave. Women, “sometimes boast of their weakness, cunningly obtaining power by playing on the weakness of men; and they may well have more real power than their masters” (40). Her strategy, throughout Rights of Woman, exposes the neat dialectics of patriarchy as tools of oppression. The long digressions in chapter 1, for example, on the monarchy, the army, and the clergy, illustrate for many critics Wollstonecraft’s tendency to lose track of her argument. In their minds, the abuses of power she finds in these in-
stitutions have nothing to do with her argument about the rights of women. For Wollstonecraft, however, the association between women's oppression and patriarchal institutions is precisely the point; these are examples of that "arbitrary power" (15)—social convention—which keeps women from exercising their rights and duties as citizens. She attacks all institutions "in which great subordination of rank constitutes its power" (17).

It is impossible for any man, when the most favorable circumstances concur, to acquire sufficient knowledge and strength of mind to discharge the duties of a king, entrusted with uncontrolled power; how then must they be violated when his very elevation is an insuperable bar to the attainment of either wisdom or virtue; when all the feelings of a man are stifled by flattery, and reflection shut out by pleasure! Surely it is madness to make the fate of thousands depend on the caprice of a weak fellow, whose very station sinks him necessarily below the meanest of his subjects! But one power should not be thrown down to exalt another—for all power inebriates weak man; and its abuse proves that the more equality there is established among men, the more virtues and happiness will reign in society. (16)

Central to Wollstonecraft's argument, which anticipates the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, is the belief that power is powerless and tyranny is slavery. This passage suggests that the institution of monarchy is a figure for this paradox. It oppresses not only the "common mass of mankind" (37) but the monarch as well, who becomes enslaved to flatterers and sycophants. By usurping all power for itself, the monarchy becomes powerless. By tyrannizing over others, a king is himself enslaved; his "very station sinks him necessarily below the meanest of his subjects." Repeatedly in Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft attacks the divine right of kings along with the divine right of husbands (41). But women, too, are like kings: their power springs from their weakness and their weakness springs from their power. "A king is always a king—and a woman always a woman" (56); both exercise their right to enslave others to the detriment of their own freedom. Wollstonecraft, at some level, recognizes that the political system is
implicated in the oppression of women, despite the eighteenth-century project of isolating women within a universalizing domesticity that masks the exercise of political power.

The clergy and the military provide Wollstonecraft with two more analogies for the woman who is both slave and despot. “Blind submission” (18) is the lesson of the clergy, and the army is “a chain of despots, who, submitting and tyrannizing without exercising their reason, become dead weights of vice and folly on the community” (17). Soldiers become feminine in their tyrannical servility: “As for any depth of understanding, I will venture to affirm, that it is as rarely to be found in the army as amongst women; and the cause, I maintain, is the same. It may be further observed, that officers are also particularly attentive to their persons, fond of dancing, crowded rooms, adventures, and ridicule. Like the fair sex, the business of their lives is gallantry.—They were taught to please, and they only live to please” (24). The language in this and in similar passages (17) emasculates army officers, exposing them as vain, trivial, and sentimental. Officers, far from being virile and masculine, love fine clothes, dancing, flattery, and idleness—the vices of women. This passage works to reduce the distinctions between male and female, showing them to be not biologically innate but the result, at least in part, of social prejudices and early training. In this respect, Wollstonecraft’s argument is clear: gendered individuals are not born, they are made, historically and culturally constructed.

As Wollstonecraft’s argument develops, the oppression of women attaches itself to so many other social issues that eventually it encompasses all forms of political inequality. Wollstonecraft intuitively understands how various forms of oppression—by gender and class—operate in relation to one another. Yet, as Elissa Guralnick has pointed out, she rarely compares women to the “truly abject” (1977, 161). Instead, Wollstonecraft links women to the powerful and privileged, arguing that “wealth and female softness equally tend to debase mankind” (51). Repeatedly, the rich, like military officers, are emasculated:

The whole female sex are, till their character is formed, in the same condition as the rich: for they are born . . . with certain
sexual privileges, and whilst they are gratuitously granted them, few will ever think of works of supererogation, to obtain the esteem of a small number of superiour people. (57)

Women, in general, as well as the rich of both sexes, have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit. (60)

The comparison [of women] with the rich still occurs to me; for, when men neglect the duties of humanity, women will follow their example; a common stream hurries them both along with thoughtless celerity. Riches and honours prevent a man from enlarging his understanding, and enervate all his powers by reversing the order of nature, which has ever made true pleasure the reward of labour. (64)

Wollstonecraft so frequently reiterates the comparison between women and the rich that it becomes an essential element in her argument rather than a pointless digression or tedious repetition, as some of her critics have contended. She realizes that the edifice of male privilege has been built upon the bifurcation of masculine and feminine virtue between the public sphere, where monarchs, the wealthy, soldiers, and clergy contend for power, and the domestic, where women wield power. Metaphoric emasculation, the collapsing of the dichotomy between male and female, is one of the tools she uses to dismantle these “artificial structures” of power, exposing them as ideological formations and not the natural order of things.

By collapsing this distinction between male and female forms of power, Wollstonecraft defines power in ideological terms. Underlying and uniting all the digressions and repetitions in Rights of Woman is an attack on an ideology of power which has hardened into absolute authority: “Power, in fact, is ever true to its vital principle, for in every shape it would reign without controul or inquiry. Its throne is built across a deep abyss, which no eye must dare to explore, lest the baseless fabric should totter under investigation” (150). Ideological power is all the more difficult to question precisely because its foundations are nearly invisible. For Wollstonecraft,
power inheres not in any single institution or individual but in what Foucault calls its "deployment" or in the discursive formations of language and belief. Therefore, her attack on masculine prerogatives is an attack on the language in which they are cast. The rhetorical tools of eighteenth-century philosophical discourse—its fictions of dispassionate objectivity and rational oppositions—support the conservative ideology upon which both aristocratic and masculine privilege are based. Wollstonecraft's efforts, like those of her predecessors, the architects of the French Revolution, to construct a counterideology of the rights of man and woman necessitates a counterdiscourse. The "flaws" in Wollstonecraft's style, in this context, become the vehicles for her philosophical program, which embraces the so-called feminine values of subjectivity and emotionalism and looks forward to romanticism with its valorization of intuition, passion, and the imagination over reason.

Wollstonecraft's poaching takes the form of a confrontation—a dialogue—with her philosophical fathers, the authorities on women she has read and to some extent internalized. While drawing on the tradition of philosophical reason, she realizes that the authority of books, of the written word, powerfully perpetuates the myths of male superiority and female weakness precisely because it is a discourse controlled by—and for—men: "I must therefore venture to doubt whether what has been thought an axiom in morals may not have been a dogmatic assertion made by men who have coolly seen mankind through the medium of books" (110). Ralph Wardle has noted that in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft alludes to more works by other authors than in any of her other books, and although she refers to a few works by women, including Catherine Macaulay and Anna Laetitia Barbauld, the majority of the texts she discusses are by men. The list is extensive. She refers to authorities on women's education—Rousseau, Talleyrand, Vicesimus Knox, Dr. James Fordyce, Dr. John Gregory—and to works on political theory, linguistics, philosophy, and literature. She cites or quotes passages from the Bible and works by Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Locke, Hume, Richardson, Swift, Johnson, Lord Monboddo, Adam Smith, Butler, Gay, Boswell, Dryden, Cowper, and Edward Young. This list suggests not so much the extent of her indebtedness to other writers (or the alleged gaps in
her education) as the freedom she exercises in appropriating and recasting the voices of her “fathers.” Because she has less at stake in perpetuating the voice of reason than in subverting and reconstructing it, she is relatively free to experiment with the dialogic power of the speech act. Without feeling constrained to prove the “authenticity” and “originality” of her “voice,” Wollstonecraft is able to permit her words to become entangled with other, “alien” words in complex relationships of attraction and repulsion, alliance and struggle, intersection and merger.

In Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, Volosinov/Bakhtin argues that the processes of citation involved in both direct and indirect quotation are not passive and mechanical but active and dialogic (1986, 125–40). Wollstonecraft’s method of extensive citation demonstrates how masculine discourse has created and perpetuated the weaknesses of women. She devotes her entire fifth chapter to writers who, in her words, “have rendered women objects of pity, bordering on contempt.” She insists that it is not the power of individuals, or even institutions, which has kept women from assuming equal citizenship with men but the power of the written word. Two writers who particularly epitomize for Wollstonecraft the power of masculine discourse to exclude and silence women as subjects, the power of the father to stifle his daughters, are Rousseau and Milton. Both represent the ideological work of the public sphere as a discursive formation that creates and enforces and even naturalizes the dichotomies of gender that degrade women. Her critique of these influential authors demonstrates how the hegemony of the public sphere depends on a network of exclusions upon which the powerful ideological formation of the male subject as whole, autonomous, and unified is based.

Rousseau represents to Wollstonecraft the masculine deployment of discursive power against women in education and philosophy. She devotes almost half of chapter 5, “Animadversions on Some Writers,” to her argument with Rousseau’s ideas on the education of women. On the surface, the education of children—whether boys or girls—does not seem an issue weighty enough for philosophical debate; but Wollstonecraft recognizes in Rousseau’s comments on the education of Sophia the subtle ways in which the unequal relationships inherent in such institutions as schools un-
derlie and undercut the theoretical equality of men claimed by philosophy. She examines and questions the disciplinary “technologies” of education advanced by Rousseau—the separation of children from their parents (158), the separation of the sexes (79, 165), and the physical constraints imposed upon schoolgirls (82, 162)—which constitute the modern “individual” and invisibly perpetuate the unequal relationships between the sexes. Rousseau attempts to argue from biological necessity that because men and women are not “constituted alike in temperament and character,” they should not be educated alike: “The education of the women should always be relative to the men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young, and take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable: these are the duties of women at all times, and what they should be taught in their infancy” (79). This version of the domestic ideal, Wollstonecraft argues, constitutes an arbitrary distinction that Rousseau claims is “the natural order of things.” But if this domesticity is so natural, one wonders why it need be so thoroughly inculcated “from infancy”: “The effect of habit is insisted upon as an undoubted indication of nature” (81). Such trivial activities as a young girl’s playing with dolls, her fondness for dress, even her capacity for needlework form the basis of Rousseau’s system of female education, providing at the same time both the proof of woman’s unfitness for masculine subjectivity and the means of her exclusion from it. As Bourdieu has argued, “The whole trick of pedagogic reason lies precisely in the way it exhorts the essential while seeming to demand the insignificant.” This is the “hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as ‘stand up straight’” (1977, 94–95). The very triviality of the activities recommended for young girls allows Rousseau to maintain social conventions and “narrow prejudices” (92) more powerfully than any tyrannic authority imposed from above because they are so thoroughly and invisibly inculcated in young girls as “habits of thinking” at an early age that they seem “natural.” As Bourdieu notes: “The con-

14In this connection see also Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 184–88.
cessions of politeness always contain political concessions” (1977, 95).

Wollstonecraft perceptively grasps the problems inherent in Rousseau’s thoughts on the education of women for his vision of a perfected society. His ideas, which Wollstonecraft discusses at length, support rather than subvert the unequal distribution of power throughout society. In this regard, Rousseau is a “partial moralist” (84) whose notions endorse and perpetuate the vices he wishes to correct. Wollstonecraft protests: “I now appeal from the reveries of fancy and refined licentiousness to the good sense of mankind, whether, if the object of education be to prepare women to become chaste wives and sensible mothers, the method so plausibly recommended in the foregoing sketch, be the one best calculated to produce those ends? Will it be allowed that the surest way to make a wife chaste, is to teach her to practise the wanton arts of a mistress, termed virtuous coquetry?” (90). Far from being a rationalist and an egalitarian whose first wish is to perfect mankind, Rousseau is a sensualist whose licentiousness supports the status quo under the guise of rationality. For Wollstonecraft, Rousseau is not a philosopher but a “poetic writer” who “skillfully exhibits the objects of sense, most voluptuously shadowed or gracefully veiled—And thus making us feel whilst dreaming that we reason, erroneous conclusions are left in the mind” (91). As this passage suggests, Wollstonecraft attacks not Rousseau so much as the ideology he presents—the fiction of sexual inequality disguised as philosophical disinterest.

Yet it is Milton, the philosophical poet, even more than Rousseau, the poetic philosopher, who represents for Wollstonecraft the co-opting of creative energy by men. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that A Vindication of the Rights of Woman “often reads like an outraged commentary on Paradise Lost.”15 If Wollstonecraft’s domineering “poetic father” troubles her imagination—and incites her rebellion—more than her “philosophical father,” Rousseau, it is because of the mythic power of “the institutionalized and elabo-

15Gilbert and Gubar 1979a, 205. I am indebted to Gilbert and Gubar’s discussion of Milton’s influence on women writers. For discussions of Milton’s influence on Wollstonecraft specifically, see Poovey 1984, 72–80, and on eighteenth-century women writers in general, see Wittreich 1987.
rate metaphoric misogyny Milton's epic expresses" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979a, 189), buttressed by the full weight of biblical authority, by "Moses's beautiful poetical cosmogony." Indeed, Gilbert and Gubar find that most women writers have been all too aware of Milton's intimidating presence. Virginia Woolf, they note, remarks in *A Room of One's Own* that literate women had to "look past Milton's bogey, for no human being could shut out the view" (188). If *Paradise Lost* is more incapacitating for Wollstonecraft than Rousseau's "wild chimeras" (39), it is because the book itself "constitutes the essence of what Gertrude Stein has called patriarchal poetry" (Gilbert and Gubar, 188). So intimidating is Milton's presence for Wollstonecraft that she cannot confront him directly as she does Rousseau, but only indirectly, through allusions and footnotes. Her reading of *Paradise Lost* suggests that to assert her independence and the possibility of her creativity requires the ultimate act of rebellion against masculine authority: "I will simply declare, that were an angel from heaven to tell me that Moses's beautiful, poetical cosmogony, and the account of the fall of man, were literally true, I could not believe what my reason told me was derogatory to the character of the Supreme Being: and, having no fear of the devil before mine eyes, I venture to call this a suggestion of reason, instead of resting my weakness on the broad shoulders of the first seducer of my frail sex" (79). In the end, Milton's "bogey" is his theology, his cosmology. Although he did not create the myth of origin which is the heart of Western patriarchy, he gave it a poetic force that has, as Harold Bloom has said, made *Paradise Lost* an inhibiting text for all his successors. It is particularly intimidating for the woman writer since the eighteenth century. For Wollstonecraft, *Paradise Lost* not only represents, but coalesces the invisible network of authorities—both religious and cultural—which have traditionally claimed the power to define female nature, female identity. His history defines woman as secondary—"he for God only, she for God in him"—and other, a "fair defect of nature." By making the ultimate act of creation the sole act of a father, Milton defines creativity itself as a masculine act (Froula 1983). Therefore, to be able to write, Wollstonecraft must rebel against the poem's definition of the feminine in the submissive Eve—"for softness she and sweet attractive grace"—and identify
her creative energies with the usurper of God’s creative potential, Satan. “Similar feelings has Milton’s pleasing picture of paradisiacal happiness ever raised in my mind; yet, instead of envying the lovely pair, I have, with conscious dignity, or Satanic pride, turned to hell for sublimer objects” (25, n.3). Milton’s “paradisiacal happiness” deprives woman of soul, reason, and creativity. More important, it denies her authority and subjectivity. Like her literary daughters in the nineteenth century (including her biological daughter, Mary Shelley), Wollstonecraft, as both writer and woman, can overcome the anxieties created by Milton’s specter only by identifying with his rebel, by opting not for paradise and order but for chaos and noise.

Wollstonecraft’s rebellion against the central text of Western patriarchy and her rejection of the fictions of authority which structure its philosophy reveal the dilemma posed by her writing. The more she struggles to rid her language of the ideologies of her bourgeois upbringing, the more they strangle her creativity, denying her a subject position from which to speak. Because she constructs her rhetorical self to conform to the strictures of male-dominated philosophical discourse, her solution to the problem of feminine dependence must be cast in a language tainted by that dependence. Feminine creativity in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, then, is experienced as a problem, a tension between the text as a creative act, the forging of a new rhetoric, and the text as necessarily parasitic, the site of a struggle with masculine authority. The great achievement of this book is that as Wollstonecraft strives to “make human conventions conform more closely to human need” (Woolf 1932, 176), she reveals just how profoundly those conventions—writing in particular—shape and define human needs and identity. Her text articulates a revolutionary critique of the cultural authorities that have defined woman’s “nature,” but it also shows how difficult resistance can be. In the final chapter I turn from this inaugural text of Western feminism to examine the dynamics of cultural authority which contemporary feminism must resist and revise, to the processes by which cultural values are created and deployed.