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THE FEMINIST IMAGINATION

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Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

Ruth H. Bloch, *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650–1800* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003)

Barbara Taylor entitles her new book *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. The imagination in question is Wollstonecraft's, but, like Wollstonecraft, Taylor is interested in the imagination more generally, both the problems that the imagination gets women into and the ways in which the feminist imagination can get women out of those problems and help them imagine a more just and equitable future. Ruth H. Bloch's aim in *Gender and Morality in Anglo-American Culture, 1650–1800*, the newly published collection of her essays, is somewhat more modest. Although her chief objective is to analyze the transformation in American views about women, gender, the family, and religion in the era of the American Revolution, she also offers case studies in the use of a culturalist approach to feminist history. Although there are important differences in approach and subject matter between these two books, their similarities and areas of overlap—not the least of which is that their authors are two of the best feminist intellectual historians at work today—make it instructive to review them together.

Both books address roughly the same time period. Although Bloch's title suggests that her book covers a century and a half, the focus is on the Revolutionary era, *c.*1750–1800, the same period covered by Taylor. And while Taylor's book is principally about Wollstonecraft's life in Britain and France while Bloch concentrates on America, both books describe an Anglo-American–French intellectual world. Indeed, that is one of Bloch's points: intellectual currents crossed the Atlantic, rather than flowing only up and down the American coast. The greatest similarity between these two books, however, is their self-conscious feminism. As does intellectual history more generally, feminist intellectual history draws from and engages with theory. In this case, both Taylor and Bloch make contributions to feminist theory and practice both.

In her brilliant 1993 article "A Cultural Critique of Trends in Feminist Theory," with which she opens her book, Bloch argues that "feminist theorists too often reduce culture, and with it the cultural symbolism of gender, to the material relations of class, or some other self-interested assertion of power by one group over another" (p. 23). As she notes in the book's preface, her original purpose was to take issue "with essentialist, Marxist, and Foucauldian approaches to the construction of gender" and argue instead for a "'culturalist' interpretation" (p. 21). In fact, Bloch identifies a "residual Marxism" not only in feminist social science but in feminist cultural analysis as well. This is because, for all the manifest virtues of Foucauldian and other poststructuralist forms of analysis, "its advocates tend either to lack a theory of social change or else to resort to a materialist one" (p. 25). Hence, the opposition that some posit between Marxist and poststructuralist forms of analysis is actually false. Marxist critics typically fault poststructuralism for its abstract idealism, but Bloch thinks its real problem is implicit materialism. Indeed, "the influence of poststructuralism has merely reinforced a tendency among feminist theories to reduce gender to inequalities of wealth and power" (p. 26).

In order to demonstrate her point, Bloch succinctly lays out the history of modern feminist thought. She has a real talent for mapping out the history and development of various lines of thinking, and she uses it well in this article (as well as in a number of the other articles collected in this book). She says that modern feminist thought focused on the "problem of inequality," which it conceptualized in terms either of patriarchy or of capitalism. The argument between these two schools "turned on the extent to which female subordination was caused by men, as a sex, and the extent to which it stemmed from the more impersonal dynamics of the capitalist system." Bloch faults both schools, however, for their failure to consider "gender as culture" (p. 27). By the mid-1970s, feminist scholars had developed a new approach, that of "women's culture." Bloch believes that this approach assumed what it should have interrogated. Instead of examining "the broad patterns of meaning that construct notions of femininity," scholars who wrote of "women's culture" used the concept to describe "notions of femininity itself." It was but a short step from there to using "women's culture" to denominate "a set of beliefs that reflected the distinctive and concrete experience of women as women." In this way "attention shifted from equality to difference . . . " (p. 28). Although she doesn't say it in so many words, Bloch believes that this was a wrong turn for feminist scholarship, bringing it perilously close to an essentialist belief in female biological difference.

In this context, poststructuralist critiques of essentialism and their attention to the "social construction of gender" brought feminist analysis back on (the cultural) track. But once again, scholars focused not on gender as an open-ended system of meaning (i.e. an aspect of culture as Bloch uses the term) but as a way of representing difference. And once the focus was put on difference, scholars

began examining the differences among women—by race, class, ethnicity—in such a way that gender itself was no longer a critical variable. Indeed, "if women no longer have something in common by virtue of being women—if, instead, we are broken into distinct groups by virtue of the multiplicity of the positions of 'otherness' . . . —why bother theorizing about sex or gender at all?" (pp. 32–3). This is where Foucault leaves us and where Lacan leaves us too, falling back upon analyses of the dynamics of "domination and oppression" (p. 34), whether of capitalism, liberal democracy, or the phallus. The critique of cultural feminism's essentializing tendencies culminates in

> the postmodernist premise that culture essentially embodies power relations. The construction of gendered meaning in response to spiritual fulfillment, aesthetic pleasure, or the anxieties of human existence are either ignored or treated as epiphenomena of a "more real" driving force that is Nietzschean in character: it is a reflection of the quest of theologians, artists, and philosophers for increasing their prestige and the domination of their race or class. (p. 37)

Bloch asks rhetorically: "Is gender more than a metaphor for power?" (p. 37). Clearly, she believes that the answer is yes, and she suggests the means by which the baby of gender analysis can be retrieved from the materialist bath water in which it has been washed. First, recognize "that gender symbolism tends to be at least as much about interconnectedness as about power," for people are "driven not merely by utilitarian interests but also by existential questions of meaning." Second, insist that "gender is embedded in wider systems of meaning" (p. 40) that include religion, aesthetics, and science, none of which operates in isolation. Indeed, feminist scholars ought to pay more attention to these contexts. And with a "stronger theory of culture," one that sees it as "an index to meaning," we may be able to avoid being caught "between the Charybdis of materialism and the Scylla of biology" (p. 41).

Bloch is quite good at practicing what she preaches, and the essays collected in this volume demonstrate her gift for a kind of careful, intellectual-cultural history that—to use one of the metaphors Bloch herself employs—untangles the roots of a particular body of thought. She is particularly sensitive to the nuances of religious thought. Many of the essays in this collection focus on the transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and no one has written more clearly about the ways in which the various strands of thought in this period—classical republicanism, Enlightenment liberalism, Scottish Enlightenment thought, natural rights thought, dissenting Protestantism, evangelical sentimentalism—wound around each other.

In Barbara Taylor's extraordinary study of Mary Wollstonecraft, these strands of thought—along with Romanticism and radicalism—remain somewhat tangled. While discussing the natural rights aspect to Wollstonecraft's thought, Taylor offers a justification of sorts for this kind of muddle: "Like most British

radicals, natural rights was for her not a primary intellectual commitment but one of a quiverful of intellectual weapons to be kept sharp and handy for contestation" (p. 214). Although this explanation is more metaphorical than analytically rigorous, it strikes me as quite useful, a pretty accurate description of how most people who are not analytic philosophers go about their intellectual business, suiting the weapon to the quarry, or, to use a less martial figure of speech, the tool to the task. Another difference between Bloch and Taylor: Taylor does not explicitly, or perhaps even implicitly, follow Bloch's culturalist methodology. Nonetheless, many of its elements are on display: a serious, non-reductionist consideration of religion; a willingness to use appropriate psychoanalytic methods; an attentiveness to interconnectedness—or its absence; an insistence upon situating Wollstonecraft in her broadest historical context. The result is a book that contextualizes Wollstonecraft and transcends its context, by becoming in itself a work in feminist theory.

Taylor uses Wollstonecraft to work through several problems in feminist theory. She starts by noting a paradox at the heart of feminism: "the repudiation of Woman," she observes, "has been a key element of feminism" (p. 19). Acknowledging her debt to psychoanalytic feminists such as Jacqueline Rose and Sally Alexander, Taylor notes that to be a woman—"interpreting oneself as female"—is "an imaginative act," one that is "founded on fantasies of masculinity and femininity" created in relationship to each other and in which female sexual identity is "always partial, defensive, wishful" (p. 20). This impulse, often experienced as a kind of self-hatred, and so recognizable in Wollstonecraft, is the driving force of feminism and its central paradox. "Why would anyone who likes being a woman *need* to be a feminist?" one activist asked several decades ago. The question, Taylor notes, "has lost none of its saliency" (p. 20).

In Wollstonecraft's case, it is easy enough to trace the source of this hostility to women. Taylor, incidentally, makes no apologies for examining the personal roots of Wollstonecraft's feminist thought. The personal *is* political, and "the notion of a politics purged of feeling and fantasy is a chimera, a modern myth" (p. 19). Wollstonecraft's father, a failed gentleman farmer, was a hard-drinking bully, abusive to his wife and children both. Her mother was too weak to protect her children in any way. All of her affection went to Mary's oldest brother. Nothing was left for the other children. A bullying father, a weak and withholding mother: these were the sources of Mary Wollstonecraft's abiding hatred of despotism and her tendency to blame women disproportionately for the world's ills. Like the late eighteenth-century radical democrat that she was, Wollstonecraft railed against the excesses of feminine sensibility and held up virility as the standard for men and women both. Trained as we have been by Ruth Bloch, Hannah Pitkin, and other scholars to recognize the misogynist strain in republican thought, it is shocking to have to confront it in Wollstonecraft. Early in her book, Taylor quotes

one of these passages at length. For Wollstonecraft, "women's giddy minds have one fixed preoccupation":

> the desire of establishing themselves . . . by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act—they dress, they paint, and nickname God's creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio! (p. 13)

That this passage comes from *The Rights of Woman* only increases our sense of discomfort. Mary Wollstonecraft, feminist icon, was a misogynist. Indeed, her misogyny was intrinsic to her feminism.

Taylor's subject is the way that Wollstonecraft imagined herself out of this fundamental feminist paradox and the role that imagination played in her imagining. "Denouncing modern woman as vicious and corrupt, what alternative," Taylor asks, "did Wollstonecraft imagine for her sex, what revolution of inner being that would transform Woman from a degraded object of male tyranny into a worthy object of God's love?" (p. 21). In answering this question, Taylor guides us, in roughly chronological fashion, through Wollstonecraft's writings, simultaneously sketching out Wollstonecraft's life history. (Taylor organizes the book thematically, but she examines Wollstonecraft's life chronologically.) In suggesting that Wollstonecraft worked away at the problem over the course of her too-short career and, just before her death, arrived at a kind of answer, Taylor may impose more coherence and more narrative unity on Wollstonecraft's life and work than others may find there. This is a small price to pay, however, for what Taylor has accomplished: a significant contribution to feminist thought. Taylor intertwines history and theory in her own study, letting history inform feminist theory and feminist theory illuminate history. The result is exhilarating, a reminder of what feminist history can be.

Taylor situates Wollstonecraft on the radical end of the late eighteenth-century political spectrum, which was both an intellectual milieu and a social position. Wollstonecraft was one of a group of lower-middle-class writers who depended upon the income from their publications to keep them independent. Having been fired from her position as a governess, a job for which she was temperamentally unsuited, Wollstonecraft began writing for Joseph Johnson, the editor of the *Analytical Review* and the publisher of a number of radical thinkers. He became effectively her patron, and it is worth pondering, as Taylor asks us to, the role of such men in bringing women into the republic of letters. Wollstonecraft's career and writings serve as a testament to the exceedingly difficult position of the female intellectual and the extraordinary difficulties experienced by women then and now as they seek equality. Yet she could not have been a writer at all, or, to be more precise, a writer with an audience, without the active support of Johnson. And "given sufficient market success, a dependant could become an equal"

and "patronage . . . collegiality" (p. 41). In this sense, Wollstonecraft was a creature of the market.

Needless to say, Enlightenment ideas about equality permeated Wollstonecraft's milieu, and in her circle it was taken as a given that women should be better educated. Indeed, this belief was commonplace on both sides of the Atlantic, and in its most general terms, few could argue with it. Yet when one picks at it, the edges begin to fray, its threads unraveling. That is what Wollstonecraft did, and it is what feminist historians have been doing subsequently. Consider only the question of why women's education was necessary: phrased in the right (or, depending upon the perspective, the wrong) way, it could be turned into a critique of women in their present state, which is exactly what Wollstonecraft did. As Taylor notes, *The Rights of Woman* "castigates its female readers in the harshest terms for classic feminine follies: vanity, irrationalism, intolerance, frivolity, ignorance, cunning, fickleness, indolence, narcissism, infantilism, impiety and, above all, sexual ambition" (p. 12). All of these flaws were the result of inadequate education, although Wollstonecraft's condemnation of them was so harsh that it seems almost a condemnation of women's essential nature: "the rhetorical weight of Wollstonecraft's attack falls so heavily on her own sex as to make a reader wonder whether the aim is less to free women than to abolish them . . . " (p. 13).

Just as the problem of women's education could be turned into a critique of women themselves, so the suggested remedies might veer off in unexpected ways. In the introduction to her collection of essays, Bloch writes that she has "always been struck by the inadequacies of unilinear models of women's history." Hence, the glorification of domesticity can be seen either as a "harbinger . . . of the worst aspects of the modern oppression of women"—or as the foundation for the eventual improvement in women's status. Likewise, Enlightenment claims about women's rationality can be seen as the foundation for women's equality—or as the instrument for marginalizing women's domestic responsibilities. For these reasons, Bloch prefers to focus on "creative contradiction and paradoxical change" (pp. 16–17).

Bloch herself has written with great insight about the creative contradictions in Enlightenment arguments for women's education. In two of the most important essays in the collection, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785–1815" and "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," she documented the growing belief in the late eighteenth century that women were more moral than men, more virtuous, and the increasing identification of virtue and morality as feminine attributes. Such views, as Bloch has shown and Taylor suggests, provided the intellectual basis for what Taylor calls the instrumentalist argument for the education of women. Women must be educated to prepare them to fulfill their domestic roles, primarily as mothers and wives. Here, Wollstonecraft cut against the grain. She was skeptical

of women's moral superiority, and she had little interest in or temperamental affinity for domesticity. Authenticity interested her considerably more.

As Taylor notes, Wollstonecraft's biographers often present her as "an exceptional figure, a heroic pioneer" (p. 31), and that is, in fact, how she presented herself. But this self-presentation cannot be taken at face value. The concern for authenticity and the feeling that one was alone in the world were characteristic of the early Romantic world view, and they were widely shared in Wollstonecraft's milieu. She was a member of a community all of whose members, with only slight exaggeration, thought themselves unique. But for Wollstonecraft to appropriate these notions and feelings and to claim them for herself was a radical move: women were, or were thought to be, completely embedded in their relationships with others. The whole *Sturm und Drang* of the alienated intellectual was a man's thing, not a woman's. Women lived for others, not for themselves. It was this belief, shared by women's critics and advocates both, that Wollstonecraft challenged. To put it another way, Wollstonecraft despised weak, fashionable women, women who suited themselves to men's desires. But she would have none of the reformist refashioning of women, which turned them into instruments of masculine betterment and justified their education on those grounds. Either way, women's purpose was to serve others, not themselves.

As Bloch has shown, the claim that women were virtuous overturned the centuries-long belief that they were weaker than men morally, unreliable, dangerous in their frailty. Bloch, in two essays written while she was still a graduate student at Berkeley and published in 1978 and a third one published nine years later (all collected in this volume), was one of the first historians to draw our attention to this sea change in the way women's nature was understood.[1] Bloch has never seen this change as unambiguously good. Rather, it is an instance of the "creative contradiction and paradoxical change" that she notes in her introduction. Taylor's work on Wollstonecraft only heightens the contradiction and paradox: it is as if contradiction and paradox were multiplied, more than simply added together.

Here is another example: Wollstonecraft's paradoxical misogyny gave her a (paradoxical) affinity for Rousseau. Both of them, after all, were modernists in their evocation of an "alienated subjectivity" (Taylor, p. 85). Most scholars, as Taylor observes, have regarded Wollstonecraft as Rousseau's adversary. "That Wollstonecraft *was* a Rousseauist is indisputable," Taylor asserts, however (p. 73). The chapter in which Taylor makes her case is perhaps the most exhilarating in

1 See also Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850," *Signs* 4 (1978), 219–36, for another early and influential formulation, and somewhat more recently, Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

her book. She entitles it "The chimera of womanhood": the imagined woman, the counterpoint to the female imagination. Taylor begins the chapter by analyzing Wollstonecraft's engagement with Burke, the adversary against whom she wrote her *Vindication of the Rights of Man*. The issue that gives shape to the chapter, imagination, is the key issue, Taylor argues, in Wollstonecraft's work. We err if we think of Wollstonecraft and other Enlightenment thinkers as super-rationalists. Reason for them encompassed the imagination; there was no necessary contradiction. Indeed, the imagination animated reason. Fantasy or fancy was another matter: a debased or lower kind of imagination, it wrought nothing but havoc. This division between the creative imagination and the destructive fancy "was, predictably, mapped onto the distinction between the sexes" (p. 61). This distinction was manifest in Burke when he described the sublime as "'great, rugged, and negligent'," and the merely beautiful as "'small . . . smooth, and polished'" (p. 63). The sublime inspired respect, the beautiful only love. Wollstonecraft turned Burke's categories against him, accusing him of "the romantic excesses usually attributed to women," which "freed" her "to take to herself a position of rhetorical masculinity—stern, stoical, reflective" (p. 67).

But having effectively indicted Burke for his feminine sensibility ("nothing more than a posturing narcissist," in Taylor's words, p. 69), Wollstonecraft slipped easily from indicting his views on women to an indictment of women themselves. If Burke's encomiums to womanhood were nothing more than sweet seductions, then perhaps women themselves were culpable for being so easily seduced. "The overt message of the *Rights of Man* is that the male sexual imagination is to blame, but the insistently idealizing tone in which true masculinity is evoked (as contrasted to Burke's effeminacy), combined with the hostile tone in which women and Burke's womanliness are described, suggests otherwise" (p. 71). Here was the danger of the feminine imagination: erotic desire, turned away from the world and in on itself, in the fantasy of being seduced. (Here, too, was the danger posed by reading fiction.)

This was the problem that Wollstonecraft had to imagine herself out of: how could a woman claim, or discover, an imagination that was neither chimerical and fantastic nor wholly masculine and of necessity misogynist? Such an imagination would be, as the title of Taylor's book hints, truly feminist. It was through her engagement with Rousseau that Wollstonecraft began to think herself out of the problem that she had made for herself in her critique of Burke. "'I love Rousseau's paradoxes,' [Wollstonecraft] wrote . . . and not the least paradoxical aspect of this encounter between the notorious exponent of female subordination and his leading feminist opponent is how within it a new vision of womanhood began to be forged" (Taylor, p. 74).

In Rousseau's fictional heroines Julie and Sophie, Wollstonecraft found, according to Taylor, "the *fons et origo* of female oppression." These lovely creatures

were wholly fictional, chimeras, the creations of Rousseau's imagination, the love-objects he conjured up. But what was love, anyway—and here Taylor quotes from *Emile*—"if not a chimera, lie, and illusion? We love the image we make for ourselves far more than we love the object to which we apply it. If we saw what we love exactly as it is, there would be no more love on earth" (p. 76). Taylor argues that here Wollstonecraft recognized "the fictionalizing processes by which 'females . . . are made women' through contemporary culture. A chimera of womanhood, rooted in erotic imaginings, has been created that entrances both sexes—women in narcissistic self admiration; men in objectifying passion—to the point where real women disappear into its seductions. The Rousseauist woman," she adds, "is a phantasm, and in this she exemplifies the female dilemma" (ibid.).

It should be noted that the critique of Rousseau, which is quite brilliant, may be as much Taylor's as Wollstonecraft's. To put it another way, Taylor reads Rousseau through the lens of Wollstonecraft, in the process helping Wollstonecraft to solve the problem of the female imagination. But for much of the chapter, Wollstonecraft recedes, her place supplanted by Rousseau's fictional women, in particular the captivating Sophie. It is almost as if Wollstonecraft has become one of Rousseau's women, her personality overshadowed by his.

Taylor explains that Sophie is the creation of Rousseau's imagination, the imaginary object of his desire. But Rousseau's imagination was such that he could imagine Sophie's desire, too; after all, for Rousseau, men and women were equal and the same, except for—and this is a huge exception, of course—sex. But once having imagined a desirous woman, he feared her. What if her sexual desire proved insatiable? Once having imagined an autonomous, desiring woman, Rousseau had to imagine his way into controlling her and her dangerous sexuality. Hence Sophie must be married, her desire harnessed in the service of her husband. As Taylor notes, Rousseau was working through not only the problem of (or rather, his problem with) female desire, but also the problem of modern subjectivity. "The process through which females become Sophies are those by which all men and women, born free and equal, are shackled into the bear-dance of modern society. Becoming a modern citizen—that is, entering into that condition of psychic and political unfreedom that characterises contemporary life—is for both sexes becoming Woman: a being deprived of all inner authority, whose life is one of duplicity and dependence" (p. 84).

Taylor's point is quite striking. It is a commonplace of modern political thought that the citizen of modern democracies has been gendered male. Bloch has made this point in her essay "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue," and Taylor touches upon it in the seventh and eighth chapters of her book. But Rousseau is not the only thinker to have imagined himself a desirous woman or to have gendered the political subject female. Flaubert famously said, "Mme Bovary, c'est moi," and John Adams once observed that "the people are Clarissa." On Rousseau, Taylor

quotes Terry Eagleton: "If 'the task of political hegemony is to produce the very forms of subjecthood which will form the basis for political unity,' then such a subjectivity for Rousseau is realized under the sign of the Woman" (p. 90). If modern citizenship requires some sacrifice of self, some channeling of desire, then is not this sacrifice made by women, on men's behalf? Women are enthralled, but this is no cause for joy. In the name of civilization women are at once punished—having to sacrifice their freedom—and mourned.

And it was this bargain that Wollstonecraft wanted no part of. Taylor says that she understood it, and recoiled from it. She accepted Rousseau's Sophie—desirous, simpering, tamed—as if she were real, not the chimera of Rousseau's imagination. Almost as much as Rousseau, Wollstonecraft feared the female imagination, feared that it would be seduced by the promise of indirect influence over men. Wollstonecraft had yet to imagine herself out of this dilemma.

According to Taylor, the path lay through religion. We live in an age so torn by religious fundamentalisms that it may be hard for us to recognize other non-fundamentalist religious impulses or beliefs as truly religious. We would do well to remember Bloch's suggestion that feminist scholars should consider religion as one of the systems in which meaning is embedded.[2] If we do, we will not be skeptical when Taylor tells us that Wollstonecraft's God-talk was not "just pious conventionalism. This affirmation of women's capacity to apprehend and identify with the divine . . . was so fundamental to women's sense of ethical worth, and so far-reaching in its egalitarian implications, that it can properly be described as one of the founding impulses of feminism" (p. 102). God was the source of woman's equality, even—or especially—for Rational Dissenters such as Wollstonecraft. And a woman could achieve grace only by a direct relationship with God. This relationship—the love of God—was at base erotic, and a diversion of the erotic impulse to men alienated woman from her Creator. "This alienation from grace is the nadir of female oppression, since it denies to women that inner mirroring of God's sublimity which is every soul's proper achievement" (p. 105).

Of course, Wollstonecraft learned about the dangers of erotic love the hard way. No one who writes about Wollstonecraft can ignore her disastrous love affair with the feckless American Gilbert Imlay. It reads like one of the era's cautionary seduction tales, and that is certainly the way many at the time read it, using it to discredit the body of Wollstonecraft's thought.[3] Taylor, however,

2 Bloch follows her own advice, admirably, in her essay "Women, Love, and Virtue in the Thought of Edwards and Franklin." The essay is an object lesson, too, in what can be learned when gender analysis is applied to canonical male figures.

3 See for example Chandos Michael Brown, "Mary Wollstonecraft, or, the Female Illuminati: The Campaign Against Women and 'Modern Philosophy' in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (1995), 389–424.

uses her subject's personal life to illuminate her thought. Here she makes her psychoanalytic perspective explicit:

> If, as William James once claimed, 'the gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and on one another', then the primary demand we make of ourselves, each other and our gods . . . is the demand for a self-identity that is psychically and culturally viable.

Hence, we cannot overlook or dismiss a person's love life or personal connections—remember Bloch's injunction that feminist scholars be attentive to interconnectedness as much as they are to power—because "for all of us the vicissitudes of love play a decisive part in our self-formation." Like a Rousseauian heroine jumping out of the frame, Wollstonecraft "realized that it was the evaporation of the imaginary perfections with which she had invested [Imlay] that was a major source of her pain" (p. 128—all quotations).

In religion, Wollstonecraft found not simply the consolation for this and other pain—and here Taylor makes a gentle criticism of Mary Poovey[4]—"but a revolutionized ethical subjectivity." This is what the chapter on Rousseau, in which Wollstonecraft almost disappears, was leading to: "The male erotic imagination"—e.g. Rousseau's—posits a fundamental biological difference between men and women and then conjures up an ideal female "to fit the scenario . . . A female self . . . so saturated by masculine fantasy that it appears to lack any independent moral personality—or even a soul." Wollstonecraft imagined an alternative, "the possibility of a female moral subjectivity founded in amatory identification with God." Such an identification offered Wollstonecraft a means of rising above not only her recent romantic hurts, but the wounds she had carried from childhood. As an unloved child, Taylor suggests, Wollstonecraft could not help creating idealized and exaggerated images of goodness and badness, but "a love directed away from other people toward a transcendent, perfect object can seem to bypass these painful issues of personal identity" (pp. 130–1).

This is not to suggest that Wollstonecraft resolved her conflicts, and, by extension, those of all women, by fixing her gaze on God. Rather, this was the ideal, the goal, or perhaps a process: the creative spirit is always restless, and it is always in danger of being seduced by unworthy objects. This danger is particularly acute for women, who are always susceptible to romantic dreams, "women's own contribution to their enslavement" (p. 133). Yet the imagination, as it was for all Romantics, was a good, "the poetic dimension of mental life, the realm of original genius and sublime invention" (p. 139), "the God within" (p. 140). Eros

4 Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

was the means to the sublime. And it was also—this is the connection between Wollstonecraft's theology and her politics—what drew the soul to "humankind in general" (p. 141).

Having explained Wollstonecraft's thought, Taylor spends the second half of her book placing her in her world. Of course, this is not the way Wollstonecraft's life unfolded—first coming to terms with the hurts of her youth, then figuring out painfully how to love and be loved, and finally connecting to the world. This is only the way life unfolds in the imaginative world of the successfully psychoanalyzed. Taylor is not Wollstonecraft's psychoanalyst but the author of a book about her, and hence Wollstonecraft cannot have profited from Taylor's insights. Moreover, one cannot help being concerned that Taylor's "successful" psychoanalysis of Wollstonecraft—she moves beyond her childhood hurts, she stumbles through several terrible relationships, she finds a mature love with William Godwin—may distort our retrospective view of Wollstonecraft's life: perhaps Wollstonecraft never quite got things together in the way that Taylor implies. Still, this is an elegant way to organize a book, and it gives it a dramatic thrust unusual for intellectual histories.

Steeped in the writings of Rousseau and men of his cast of mind and still reeling from the emotional blows she had sustained, Wollstonecraft was slow to cast off her misogyny. Her political vision—the radicalism of Britain's petty producers—was fundamentally male. That is, she envisioned "a society of small, independent farmers and domestic craft enterprises, all with sufficient resources for modest comfort but none with a surplus" (Taylor, p. 169). All of these independent farmers and artisans were implicitly male. When Wollstonecraft thought of women, she did not imagine their female counterparts. Instead, she focused on women who could (literally) afford the luxury of "artificial manners [and] corrupt tastes." Indeed,

> the pages of the *Rights of Woman* are so crammed with caricatures . . . that the reader, looking up from them, finds it hard to recall the more mundane reality, that in 1792 the vast majority of British women were not rich dilettantes but poor women who spent their days labouring in field or home, tending their children, worrying about bread prices, rents, unwanted pregnancies. (p. 174)

Wollstonecraft was so fixated on what Taylor calls Emblematic Woman that she could not see the real women before her eyes.

As Taylor explains it, here, in a nutshell, was the problem: in Wollstonecraft's milieu, masculinity was admired and femininity was problematic. "Womanliness, in both sexes, as a political ill for which manliness—again in both sexes—was the cure: this notion, so common within eighteenth-century radicalism, was to prove exceptionally longlasting" (p. 214). How could Wollstonecraft construct a feminist analysis or program out of such unpromising materials? She had

to swim against the tide as the misogyny that was part of the atmosphere at the time was codified in the French Revolution, when, for the first time, a European government "explicitly identified biological manhood as a qualification for citizenship" (ibid.). That Revolution, and the questions about citizenship it raised, presented Wollstonecraft—and every feminist since—with a particular challenge: how to "recruit" women "to citizenhood without either repudiating their womanhood or—as Rousseau had done—turning it into a sex-specific category. . . . Sexual distinctions have no place in political life, Wollstonecraft repeatedly insists. But if this is true, what becomes of womanliness, once the figure of Woman disappears into the independent citizen?" (p. 228). In other words, could women be both different and equal? (This, of course, is the problem Bloch addressed in "A Culturalist Critique of Feminist Theory.")

Taylor shows us how Wollstonecraft worked this problem through (although, once again, what we may be seeing is as much Taylor using Wollstonecraft to work through the problem for herself). The answer Wollstonecraft arrived at was independence, which is not surprising, considering her radical background. But figuring out that women could and should be independent, and without sacrificing their (proper) womanliness, was, for both Wollstonecraft and feminism, a significant achievement. Some who have written about Wollstonecraft have suggested that she advocated a sex-specific political role for women, that is, that their citizenship should proceed from their biological role as mothers. Taylor notes, however, that Wollstonecraft charted a similar path to citizenship for men. It was the private virtues, inculcated in the family, and exhibited by fathers and husbands as well as mothers and wives, that were critical to the state, not gender-specific roles. And lest anyone think that there was something "intellectually novel" about "rooting public spirit in private virtues in this way," Taylor points out that "Protestant radicalism had always regarded personal righteousness as the foundation of a virtuous and just polity" (p. 222).[5]

Wollstonecraft was too critical of the family ever to see it as the foundation for the state, either for women or for men. Indeed, confinement within the family

5 Taylor's endnote clarifies that she is criticizing Linda Colley, although implicitly she is questioning Bloch's argument in "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue," which, like Colley's, may depend too much upon J. G. A. Pocock's "writings on the republican dimension of eighteenth-century political thought [which] . . . tends to underplay the religious element in late eighteenth-century radicalism" (300, n. 34). Bloch herself seems to have come to a similar realization, which she explains in "Gender and the Public/Private Dichotomy in American Revolutionary Thought." Her nuanced discussion of love in this essay, as well as in several others, suggests that ideals of "mutual identification and the dissolution of emotional boundaries" (166) developed along with notions of fundamental gender difference. This is a provocative example of the kind of "creative contradiction and paradoxical change" that Bloch believes cultural analysis can help us uncover.

and dependency upon a husband was the root of woman's problem. Although she did not say it in so many words, Wollstonecraft believed that "family life narrows women's horizons, constricts their affections, curtails their sense of public responsibility" (Taylor, p. 224). Hence, women could and should be wives and mothers, but they had also to be citizens; they had particular obligations as a sex, but they also had "the duty, common to all humanity, to fulfil individual potential." Here was "the paradox that was to characterize all subsequent feminisms: the simultaneous affirmation and denial of the 'peculiarity', the specificity of women's destiny" (ibid., p. 226).

And here's another paradox: in order to be good wives, mothers, members of families, women had to be liberated from the family. That is, they had to be independent, free from dependency on husbands, brothers, fathers, and from romantic fantasy as well. Only if they were independent and self-reliant could they then be women. To suggest such ideas, which ran counter not only to the conservative trends of the day but also to the misogynist strain in radicalism, was a profound act of imagination: to imagine women who could be wives and mothers and independent persons at the same time.

Taylor asks us, however, not to pounce on such paradoxes as revealing some disabling inconsistency in Wollstonecraft's thought. Instead, we might "adopt a less donnish, more psychologically generous view of intellectual creativity" in which "paradox and contradiction are no longer embarrassments to be brushed aside, but keys to a realm of hidden meanings" (p. 21).

And so, in one final act of generous intellectual creativity—to rearrange her terms—Taylor offers a reading of Wollstonecraft's final major (and unfinished) work, *The Wrongs of Woman, or, Maria*. Taylor admits that "the idea of a feminist alliance among women seems never to have occurred to her, or to any other British woman radical of the period" (p. 238). Yet Taylor finds just such an imagined alliance in *Maria*, in the friendship between the elite Maria and the working-class Jemima. In a sense, Taylor finishes the novel for Wollstonecraft, or at least leaves it hopefully open-ended: "Together yet apart, the women escape their prison for an uncertain future. Hardly a utopian vision then, but a prescient one: a century further on, it was alliances like these—fragile, bias-ridden, courageous—that were to become the driving force of a mass feminist-politics" (p. 255). It is only by recognizing and accepting women—in all their particularities and dispositions, especially those of class (and presumably race and ethnicity)—that we may transcend the paradoxical repudiation of Woman at the heart of modern feminism.

Taylor concludes her book with a brief chapter on "The Fantasy of Mary Wollstonecraft," by which she appears to mean several things. First, each generation, feminists and anti-feminists alike, has had its own Mary Wollstonecraft, focusing upon this or that element in her life or thought. In this context, Taylor's

Wollstonecraft may be yet another fantasy, this one representing "women's hopes of a society free from misogyny and sexual injustice." And so we conclude with another paradox: a Mary Wollstonecraft firmly rooted in her time and place, yet for all that, relevant still: she has become a feminist icon "constantly re-moulded in feminism's changing image" (p. 253), the historical Mary Wollstonecraft and what we need to make of her.

If Taylor's book is not precisely the sort of cultural analysis that Bloch recommends—the final nod to class, and perhaps a bit more concern with the dynamics of power and the relations of class than Bloch herself might manifest—still, both of these fine books are testaments to the power of the feminist imagination.

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