Sense and sensibility:
Mary Wollstonecraft as Active Witness to History

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Si on cherche [aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles] quelque chose qui ressemble un peu à ce qu’on entend par science historique au XIXe siècle, on le trouvera non dans le genre historique mais dans la controverse. (Paul Veyne, Comment on écrit l’histoire : essai d’épistémologie, Paris, Seuil, 1971)

The Revolution [...] was not merely an event that had happened outside [Mary Wollstonecraft]; it was an active agent in her own blood. (V. Woolf, Four Figures, 1933)

The writing of History shall be agonistic or it will not be. Such might have been Mary Wollstonecraft’s motto when composing A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke (1790). This text may at first appear as a less obvious choice than An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has Produced in Europe (1794) for the critic desirous to analyse Wollstonecraft as a historian, but I believe it is a far better option if one’s interest lies in her writing of history. Similarly, « Dame Thucydides », as one of Catherine Macaulay’s admirers nicknamed her when he had a statue erected in her name, would seem more appropriate than the fairly obscure author of educational treatises that Wollstonecraft was at the time. Indeed, Catherine Macaulay (1733-1791) was then the first Englishwoman to ever write a major historical work: her History of England from the Accession of James I to the Elevation of the House of Hanover

1 For an excellent analysis of An Historical and Moral View of [...] the French Revolution, see Isabelle Bour, « Mary Wollstonecraft as Historian in An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has Produced in Europe (1794) », Études Épistémè, 17, printemps 2010, p. 119-28.

was published in eight volumes between 1763 and 1771. However, because she was unknown, Wollstonecraft’s stance was boldly innovative and makes her a very interesting witness to the major historical event of her days.

While it might be somewhat excessive to claim, as Chesterton did, that the French Revolution was « the most important event in English history »3, it is nevertheless true that this « cosmopolitic » event, as Jacques Mallet du Pan was to define it in 1793, had far-reaching consequences on eighteenth-century England, so much so that it « ceased to belong to French people only »4. Recent historiographical studies do confirm that the debate around the French Revolution was « probably the most crucial ideological debate ever to be held in English »5, « an unprecedented ideological war » whereby « the polarization of public opinion » was increased by « the ideological struggle that crystallized around the pamphlet war between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine. On either bank of the political gulf created by the French Revolution stood Burke and Paine, defying each other like « intellectual boxers »6.

Naturally, these « intellectual boxers » were all but exclusively male, since female historians had been made « invisible » after being, in Barbey d’Aurevilly’s gleeful words, « excommunicated from history as well as metaphysics »7, though some women like Christine de Pisan or the Duchess of Newcastle had ventured on what was then regarded as male-only territory. Thus, out of the forty-five written responses elicited by the publication of Burke’s pamphlet in 1790, that is to say the work that triggered the debate on the French Revolution in England, Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft’s were the only two written by women8. And of the two, Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was the one to fully grasp the agonistic mood of the debate, as is evinced by the highly polemic tone of her « letter » to Burke.

As I will endeavour to demonstrate, satire was for her merely the natural extension of the polemic mode because it made it possible to at least partially solve most of the aporias with which any woman writing history was confronted. Leaving aside as an insolvable question the issue of Wollstonecraft’s degree of rhetorical awareness, I would like to offer an oxymoronic definition of her

3 G. K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, New York, Henry Holt, 1913, p. 18
4 Ibid., p. 73 ; my translation. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the French are mine.
5 Thomas Wellsted Copeland, Our Eminent Friend Edmund Burke ; Six Essays, New Haven, Yale UP, 1949, p. 148 ; see also Michael Davies, art. cit., p. 76.
positioning as that of an active witness to history. Though she may not have been « a sophisticated historian »9, I will argue that her work was nevertheless a major discursive event in the pamphlet war that occurred in the 1790s in Britain in response to the French Revolution, and refute the notion that Paine’s essay was « the most relevant response » to Edmund Burke’s pamphlet10. Unlike Paine’s indeed, Wollstonecraft’s text does not sweep under the ideological carpet the issue of the gendering of historical and political discourse but rather, addresses it head-on, albeit in a paradoxical manner, and can therefore be regarded as an even more relevant response to Burke’s implicitly gendered rendition of the French Revolution, and as a significant contribution to the profuse discursive culture of eighteenth-century radicalism.

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At no point does Mary Wollstonecraft attempt to conceal that hers is a polemical text. As Virginia Sapiro points out, her work is as much a response to Edmund Burke’s style as it is to his ideas11. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* therefore presents itself not as a historical treatise but as a letter in which *ad hominem* attacks abound. Burke is depicted as a dishonest man12 whose reasonings are faulty – « [Burke] frequently […] draw[s] conclusion without any previous premises » (*Vindication*, p. 10) – and a vain (*ibid.*, p. 7) and even pharisaic individual : « Observe, Sir, that I called your piety affectation. – A rant to enable you to point your venomous dart, and round your period » (*ibid.*, p. 26). In that respect, she is far from being that « spiritualised and invisible » creature free from all « prejudices and preferences »13 that historians are often compared to, and does not even remotely claim to be the detached, « objective » observer of events who according to Lucien Febvre best epitomised the historian : « I don’t take sides. […] Why? Because in history, I see only history »14.

Recent historical research, however, has shown that controversy was one of the many modes of the advent of history. While some critics argue that

14 *ibid.*, p. 2.
eighteenth-century historical practice was not essentially different from that of the Renaissance, and that history was held in high esteem for its « defining quality of truthfulness »15, others consider that [in early modern England] « the forces driving historical inquiry and the development of historical technique and standards arose from impassioned religious and political controversies that informed and drew together seemingly different genres and activities » which, « significantly », did not enjoy « special status as “history” »16.

In Wollstonecraft’s days, then, writing history was not necessarily synonymous with writing in the balanced way that gradually became the hallmark of the true historian: « [In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries] whoever attempts to locate something resembling what in the nineteenth century came to be called historical science should look not into the historical genre, but into controversy »17. Besides, as contemporary historian Hayden White reminds us, « Throughout the eighteenth century, historical studies had no discipline proper to itself alone […] Historical writing, in fact, was regarded as a branch of the art of rhetoric »18. Though polemicists never deliberately aimed to give birth to history as an object of study, their work nevertheless led to its advent inasmuch as the art of controversy de facto implies a critical historicizing of the debate; the necessity to convince thus leads controversists to resort to methods that foreground the historicity of references traditionally regarded as « natural ».

Thus, through controversy, history emerged as both a practice and an object of thought and, somewhat unconsciously at first, opposed itself to what hitherto passed for history, that is to say the normative notion of tradition. Tradition apprehends temporality in relation to an origin, which is a guarantor of truth. Tradition entails a valorizing of antiquity because of the equating of truth with origin and antiquity, as well as a denunciation of novelty, which is indicted as variation and therefore error, as betrayal of the origin. History renounces the normative conception of time that tradition imposes and can thus be defined as

15 Philip Hicks, Neo-classical History and English Culture: From Clarendon to Hume, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1996, p. 11. Both Philip Hicks and Mark Salber Phillip (Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2000) differ from Paulina Kewes in that they share a more traditional approach to generic categories.
18 Hayden White, The Content of the Form : Narrative Discourse and the Historical Representation, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 1987, p. 64.
temporality freed from the primacy of origin. Novelty is the flesh and blood of history, and novelty cannot be referred to a norm that transcends temporality. 19

That is why eighteenth-century controversy can be regarded as the critical enactment of a science in the making, and history as both the practice of controversy itself and the theoretical result of this practice.

Now this conception of history as tradition is precisely what Mary Wollstonecraft opposes:

In the name of the people of England, you say, ‘that we know we have made no discoveries; and we think that no discoveries are to be made in morality; nor many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty, which were understood long before we were born, altogether as well as they will be after the grave has heaped its mould upon our presumption, and the silent tomb shall have imposed its law on our pert loquacity. In England we have not yet been completely emboweled of our natural entrails; we still feel within us, and we cherish and cultivate those inbred sentiments which are the faithful guardians, the active monitors of our duty, the true supporters of all liberal and manly morals. (Vindication, p. 32)

The recurring first-person plural pronoun points to the true object of Wollstonecraft’s charge: contrary to what Burke would have his readers believe, he is not the sole keeper of historical truth. Thus, the ironical disparaging of the man is but the first stage of a delegitimizing strategy which aims not at the person, but rather at the vision of history that he exemplifies. This is not so much a battle of wills as the epic of two antithetical conceptions of history embodied by Burke and Wollstonecraft: « prescription », that is to say the « immortal boundary against innovation » erected by « the few [who] have sacrificed the many to their vices » (Vindication, p. 10) is opposed to a teleological vision of history as progress unfolding over time. What is ultimately at stake is the relationship between civilization and democracy, which the two writers interpret in antagonistic ways. That is why the argumentative logic of Wollstonecraft’s text can only be profoundly agonistic: she speaks to silence her opponent by crushing him under the sheer weight of her reasoning so that her definition of history as « glorious change » (Vindication, p. 46) might prevail20.

Such a conception of history is a highly politicised one and A Vindication of the Rights of Men has rightly been called « the key moment of Wollstonecraft’s

20 The OED defines « agonistic » as « striving to overcome in argument. »

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breakthrough as a political thinker » 21. Here is a woman who adamantly refuses to
write history differently from men because that would be tantamount to condoning
what has since then been termed the « myth of passive womanhood »  22. She
therefore never acts as a mere witness to history playing the role of the dedicated
but passive female spectator willing to suffer in the name of truth. Her stance might
oxymoronically be described as that of an active witness, that is to say not the
author of a testimony, but a participant in the redefinition of the Whig party
undertaken by the English Radicals of the 1790s.

The latter may be regarded as the last example of an indigenous tradition of
political and moral thought which equates Whiggery with ‘true’ and ‘honest’
politics ; the 1790 Radicals looked back to the Commonwealthmen of the English
revolutions of the seventeenth century and interpreted the French Revolution as a
re-play of 1688, a parallel made explicit in Wollstonecraft’s text :

You further proceed grossly to misrepresent Dr Price’s meaning ; and, with an
affectation of holy fervour, express your indignation at his profaning a beautiful
rapturous ejaculation, when alluding to the King of France’s submission to the
National Assembly ; he rejoiced to hail a glorious revolution, which promised an
universal diffusion of liberty and happiness. (Vindication p. 25 ; my
emphasis)

Besides, the historico-political thought of A Vindication is based on the
foundational text of Whiggery, that is to say John Locke’s Two Treatises of
Government (1690). Thus, Wollstonecraft’s claim that :

The birthright of man, to give you, Sir, a short definition of this disputed right, is
such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of
every other individual with whom he is united in a social compact, and the
continued existence of that compact. (Vindication, p. 9)

clearly echoes Locke :

The only way whereby any one devests himself of his Natural Liberty, and puts on
the bonds of Civil Society is by agreeing with other men to joyn and unite into a
community, for the comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another
[...]. Every Man, by consenting with others to make one Body Politick under one
Government, puts himself under an obligation to every one of that Society, to
submit to the determination of the majority, and to be concluded by it ; or else this

21 G. J. Barker-Benfield, « Mary Wollstonecraft : Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthwoman », in
Race, Gender, and Rank. Early Modern Ideas of Humanity, Maryanne Cline (ed.), Library of the
22 Ellen Pollak, The Poetics of Sexual Myth : Gender and Ideology in the Verse of Swift and Pope,

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original Compact, whereby he with others incorporates into one Society, would signify nothing, and be no Compact.  

It is within this specific context that Wollstonecraft’s denunciation of « the sophistry of asserting that Nature leads us to reverence our civil institutions from the same principle that we venerate aged individuals » as a « palpable fallacy » (Vindication, p. 49) takes on its full meaning:

We are to reverence the rust of antiquity, and term the unnatural customs, which ignorance and mistaken self-interest have consolidated, the sage fruit of experience: nay, that, if we do discover some errors, our feelings should lead us to excuse, with blind love, or unprincipled filial affection, the venerable vestiges of ancient days. (Vindication, p. 10)

She identifies undue respect of tradition as the main obstacle to the natural progress of history and propounds instead a vision of the body politic as Lockean social compact:

And what has stopped its progress? – hereditary property – hereditary honours. The man has been changed into an artificial monster by the station in which he was born, and the consequent homage that benumbed his faculties like the torpedo’s touch; or a being, with a capacity of reasoning, would not have failed to discover, as his faculties unfolded, that true happiness arose from the friendship and intimacy which can only be enjoyed by equals; and that charity is not a condescending distribution of alms, but an intercourse of good offices and mutual benefits, founded on respect for justice and humanity. (Vindication, p. 10)

A Vindication thus not only refutes the notion of Burke as the sole keeper of historical truth, but gradually offers the alternative figure of Wollstonecraft as a better, purer, and more genuine embodiment of it.

« A surgeon would tell you that by skinning over a wound you spread disease through the whole frame; and, surely, they indirectly aim at destroying all purity of morals, who poison the very source of virtue, by smearing a sentimental varnish over vice, to hide its natural deformity » (Vindication, p. 25). This emphasis on purity points to a major shift in Wollstonecraft’s text, that from the antagonism between tradition and history to the opposition of virtue to corruption, and, even more significantly, the sexualization of both notions. The quasi incantatory denunciation of « property » throughout the Vindication – « Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty! » (Vindication,  

p. 14-15) – is but the prelude to the more radical charge of the corruption of society by luxury and false refinement.

In that respect, her denunciation of the « idiotism » that « luxury and effeminacy » introduce « into the noble families which form one of the pillars of our state » (Vindication, p. 24) is clearly indebted to the Scottish Enlighteners and their account of historical development, more particularly to Adam Ferguson’s Essay on the History of Civil Society (1767) in which he castigates the « effeminacy, contracted in the enjoyment of ease and conveniency »24, a view that in turn informed James Burgh’s view of society in his Political Disquisitions (1774)25. There is abundant proof in Wollstonecraft’s texts of the imprint of Scottish Enlightenment ideas on her thinking and, as the author of « the first book-length account of the clash between Burke and Wollstonecraft » demonstrates:

The clash between Burke and Wollstonecraft over the meaning of the French Revolution developed from a Scottish Enlightenment language of politics structured broadly around « moral sense » philosophy and the closely connected historical narrative of a « civilizing process » in which the Scots understood that moral sense to be embedded.26

Both writers « freely adapted, melded, criticized, and fundamentally transformed certain broadly shared Scottish Enlightenment ideas and the language in which they were articulated, from their own theoretical perspectives and for their own particular political ends, which were those of repudiating or defending the French Revolution »27. This is particularly conspicuous in Wollstonecraft’s foregrounding of the implicit sexualization of the debate on hereditary property. Though she briefly mentions the « equally pernicious effects on female morals » of this « system » (Vindication, p. 23), she never lays the emphasis on her gender, quite the contrary. What she attempts to do from the outset is break into the hitherto exclusively male preserve of rational discourse. « Quitting now the flowers of rhetoric, let us, Sir, reason together » (Vindication, p. 9). Innocuous though this address to Burke might sound to our modern ears, Wollstonecraft is here no less than claiming for women everything that had so far been reserved to men: the (masculine) language of reason, the public arena, the political disquisition28.

27 Ibid.
28 On this specific point, see Mary Poovey, The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer. Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1984, especially p. 56 sq. Also see Bonnie Smith (op. cit. p. 101), who
While Poovey is right in identifying « Wollstonecraft’s attack on self-indulgence and submission » as « preeminently a bourgeois assault made, in the name of individual effort and proven merit, against aristocratic privilege and passivity »29, what matters possibly even more is her understanding of Burke’s invidiously sexualized aesthetic categories and, more crucially still, her insight that the aesthetic theoretician cannot be distinguished from the politician. Indeed, in Burke’s previous text *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), aesthetic categories were highly, albeit implicitly, gendered: the sublime was equated with the great, the strong and the majestic, and, as such, regarded as a male category, whereas the beautiful was ‘naturally’ associated to the small, the delicate, and the fragile, and therefore envisaged as feminine; similarly, the language of dispassionate reason was, equally naturally, on the side of men while women were left with feelings only. As Tom Furniss points out, « Wollstonecraft’s Vindication is particularly attentive to the way that Burke manipulates conventional ideas of gender and class »30; and in her own version of the French Revolution, she transgressively redefines the beautiful and the sublime along non-gendered line: « truth, in morals, has ever appeared to me the essence of the sublime; and, in taste, simplicity the only criterion of the beautiful » (*Vindication*, p. 7)31.

Wollstonecraft’s insight is at its most visible in her parodic depiction of women as « little, smooth, delicate, fair creatures » who « should « learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, and nick-name God’s creatures » (*Vindication*, p. 45). In appropriating « the ‘effeminacy’ theme of Commonwealth thought »32, Wollstonecraft deliberately shuns the role of witness to history in favour of a far more active one: she politicizes the cult of sensibility by defining civic virtue as a turning away from the private to the political, which naturally applies to women far more than it does to men. By thus extending to women the principles of true Whiggery and political radicalism, she subverts the « predicative distribution »33 that condemns women to the realm of feelings while claiming the rational faculties for men.

demonstrates that until very recently the historian was regarded as « the embodiment of universal truth, who […] emerges as a genderless genius with a name that radiates extraordinary power » whereas in fact, for historically explicable reasons, there is an « authorial presence » in the historian and this authorial presence has been gendered as masculine.

29 Mary Poovey, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
32 G. J. Barker-Benfield, *op. cit.*, p. 197

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As a result, *A Vindication* is pervaded by a double movement of textual self-legitimizing and delegitimizing of Burke along gendered lines: she clearly identifies with the rights of *man* (« I reverence the rights of men », *Vindication*, p. 7) and « our constitution », « our liberty », « our government », « our church and state » (*ibid.*, p. 11 ; 12 ; 14 ; 34). She also repeatedly applies the adjective « manly » to herself (*ibid.*, p. 7 ; 36) and concomitantly confines Burke to the field of sensibility traditionally reserved to women, the better to occupy the field of reason; he is but « the slave of impulse » (*ibid.*, p. 26) a creature whose « pampered sensibility » (*ibid.*, p. 9) and « unman[,]ness » (*ibid.*, p. 13 ; 19) make him unfit for intellectual work, as is evinced in a strikingly ironic preterition: « If I were not afraid to derange your nervous system by the bare mention of a metaphysical enquiry, I should observe, Sir… » (*ibid.*, p. 16)

This would seem to confirm Wendy Gunther-Canada’s analysis that *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* marks Wollstonecraft’s transformation « from female novelist into manly polemicist »35. It might however be more accurate to say that the choice of the rhetoric of reason points to a desire to desexualize language and reach for an ungendered one, something that Wollstonecraft conceptualized in her following *Vindication*, where her admiration for Catherine Macaulay is attributed to the fact that « in her style of writing […] no sex appears, for it is like the sense it conveys, strong and clear » (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 175). While this quest for an ‘unsexed’ kind of language is not devoid of contradictions, it nevertheless enables Wollstonecraft to break into the field of history and to assert that men and women are equally capable of, and entitled to, the writing of it, a fact implicitly acknowledged by the *Gentleman’s Magazine*’s anonymous reviewer when the second edition of the *Vindication* was published: the text, he claimed, could not possibly have been written by « a real, and not a fictitious lady »36.

Wollstonecraft could thus be regarded as anticipating modern feminists’ argument that sexual difference is no indicator of social, intellectual, or political

34 The aporia to which this definition of the language of reason as « manly » leads would deserve further analysis. Suffice it to say here that the meaning that Wollstonecraft imparts to the adjective is complex: it retains its traditional gendered meaning while also transcending it by being associated to ungendered characteristics such as « true dignity of character » (*Vindication*, p. 24) and rationality: « But should experience prove that there is a beauty in virtue, a charm in order, which necessarily implies exertion, a depraved sensual taste may give way to a more manly one – and melting feelings to rational satisfactions. Both may be equally natural to man ; the test is their moral difference, and that point reason alone can decide (*ibid.*, p. 46).


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capacity. Yet, her self-appointed mission to not write history as a woman does not entail her writing it like a man. Rather, as she wrote to her sister Everina after her publisher and mentor Joseph Johnson had suggested that she might live off of her writings, she was to be « the first of a new genus – I tremble at the attempt yet if I fail ». What the context of this oft-quoted phrase suggests is not that she would be the first woman writer, which she knew not to be the case, but that she would, however, be the first woman to publicly define herself as a writer. Her fear that she might fail is proof enough that she was fully aware of the eminently transgressive dimension involved in becoming the first professional woman writer: both gender and genre distinctions had to be overcome, since the equation of rhetoric with manliness was as old as rhetoric itself and therefore put Wollstonecraft in a situation « that commanded either her sexual obliteration or textual failure ».

Obliterated she was not, and her initial address to Burke whereby she dared him to « reason together » is echoed in a subsequent rhetorical question whereby she requests from her opponent the permission to « allow [her] to expostulate with [him] » (Vindication, p. 18). In doing so, she repeatedly and determinedly asserts her refusal to be marginalized as a historian, and her systematic deconstruction of Burke’s epistemology and aesthetics leads to both the invalidation of Burke’s vision of history and the promotion of Wollstonecraft’s.

« Let us, Sir, reason together ». But are ad hominem attacks and, more generally, vocal denunciations, compatible with such a discursive foregrounding of rationality? For a number of scholars, therein lies the main contradiction of the text. The question is, evidently, one that deserves critical analysis, as it might seem rather natural to consider that Wollstonecraft’s claim to legitimacy as a historian is somewhat undermined by the emotional violence that pervades her entire text. In that respect, Isabelle Bour’s remark about An historical and Moral View of the French Revolution that « the theatricality of some of Wollstonecraft’s language », which is so unlike « the balanced assessments of the historian », « is

40 Wendy Gunther-Canada, op. cit., p. 130 ; Virginia Sapiro, op. cit., p. 205.
analogous to the artificiality she deplored in French society »41 might be thought to apply to *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* as well.

There is, however, ample textual evidence to suggest that *A Vindication* may be read as a satirical pamphlet and that such a rhetorical mode makes for an aesthetic sublimation of the violence inherent in polemical discourse. The satiric mode is what makes it possible for *A Vindication* to reconcile sense and sensibility or, in Wollstonecraft’s words, « the culture of the heart » with « that of the mind »42. A woman « with very bright eyes and a very eager tongue »43, Wollstonecraft was certainly not afraid of polemic and did become one of the English « intellectual boxers » that argued over the interpretation to be given to the French Revolution44. And while she was initially prompted to write her text in defence of *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1790) by Richard Price, whose interpretation of the French Revolution as a replay of the Glorious Revolution that would in turn inspire the British people and lead to the emancipation of Dissenters had come under attack in Burke’s own account of the event, it would however be erroneous to reduce *A Vindication* to a personal refutation of Burke45.

What has been defined as Wollstonecraft’s « inclination […] to see some events in terms of individual behaviour, occasionally in terms of individual plotting », which makes the feminist’s argument « psychological and personal rather than systemic and universal »46, is best envisaged as a powerful satirical strategy. Her text offers a prime example of the « paranoia that constitute[d] both the paradigmatic mood of the 1790s in England and the most effective rhetorical strategy for containing – in the modality of an embattled, lucidly defensive inwardness – the anxious perception of history as a welter of uncontrollable and malevolent forces »47. In other words, far from yielding to uncontrolled emotions, Wollstonecraft consciously and vigorously resorts to the explanatory model of conspiracy to present Burke’s aesthetics and politics as a symbolic plot aimed at securing the perpetuation of constitutional monarchy, the conspiracy of the past against the present, of tradition against progress.

41 Isabelle Bour, art. cit., p. 126.
44 See supra.
45 Burke mockingly compared the Dissenters to « half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern [that make] the field ring with their importunate chink » (Reflections on the Revolution in France, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968, p. 181).
46 Isabell Bour, art. cit., p. 124.

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Satire is not here to be understood as part of the generic tripartition established by Marc Angenot – satire / polemic / pamphlet – but as a mode that makes it possible to turn paranoia into « a vicarious mode of historical cognition ». As has been demonstrated, polemic was part and parcel of the discursive culture of English radicalism in 1790 England, but I believe that it is the specifically satirical dimension of Wollstonecraft’s pamphlet, rather than the polemic one, which accounts for both its efficiency and its very structure. Wollstonecraft’s textual strategy can be analysed in the very terms that a critic used to define satire, namely, the « ethical regulation and […] aesthetic sublimation of the violence and cunning inherent in the social use of language ».

Her indignant vehemence should thus not be read as the transparent expression of a genuinely felt emotion, but as a rhetorical posture consonant with Juvenal’s dicta that Facit indignatio versum and that Difficile est saturam non scribere. While Wollstonecraft’s own version of this stance is less witty than Pope’s, who claimed that « Fools rush into [his] head, and so [he] write[s] » , it is as straightforwardly clear as Juvenal’s precept: « If, therefore, in the course of this epistle, I chance to express contempt, and even indignation, with some emphasis, I beseech you to believe that it is not a flight of fancy » (Vindication, p. 7). Here is indeed satire as « militant irony » both because of the tone of her text, but also because of the constant, if often implicit, underlying presence of the moral norm according to which she indicts Burke: satire is used by Wollstonecraft as a mode of historiography to the extent that it subverts the gravity of the historic sermo and delegitimises the competing historian’s credibility by exposing his account as an imposture. In a modern critic’s words, Burke’s rendition is « less a representation of the Revolution than the textual enactment of a revolution which it imagines and stages ».

Exposing an imposture: such is the essential underlying logic of A Vindication, which presents itself as the unveiling of Burke’s hypocrisy and the revealing of historical truth. Wollstonecraft’s militancy is clearly perceptible in tersely ironical sentences such as « I perceive, from the whole tenor of your

49 Thomas Pfau, op. cit., p. 78.

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Reflections, that you have a mortal antipathy to reason » (Vindication, p. 10). But even more significant is the charge of « affectation » that she levels at Burke (ibid., p. 25). Indeed, as Henry Fielding has taught us, herein lies « the only source of the true Ridiculous »54, since it points to the discrepancy between profession (what is said) and performance (what is done). Hence the satirist’s self-assigned mission and his or her self-proclaimed legitimacy: the satirist’s role is to expose such hypocrisy, which is precisely what Wollstonecraft claims to be doing. Her text is pervaded by a dichotomy between her own clear-sightedness – her eye is « undazzled » and « steady » (Vindication, p. 58) – and Burke’s deliberate concealment of historical truth – « You should have hinted to them [the people of England], that property in England is much more secure than liberty, and not have concealed that the liberty of an honest mechanic – his all – is often sacrificed to secure the property of the rich » (Vindication, p. 15) –, and imbued with metaphors pertaining to the rhetoric of unveiling: her mission is to correct Burke « wilful » and « gros[s] misrepren[ations] » (Vindication, p. 19 ; 25) and to make the reader see beyond the « shallow sparkling stream » of his rhetoric (ibid., p. 59) by « strip[ping] » (ibid., p. 48) the « veil » (ibid., p. 15) and the « drapery » (ibid., p. 15, 37, 48, 60) behind which he has concealed the truth, and by scraping off the « varnish » (ibid., p. 25) that he used to « colour [it] over » (ibid., p. 59).

This leads to a quasi eschatological vision of history whereby the forces of good and evil are engaged in a fight to the death whose outcome is not to be known to humankind: « The good that time slowly educes from [present calamities] may be hid from mortal eye, or dimly seen » (Vindication, p. 18). This accounts for the series of binary oppositions that are scattered throughout the text, notably hereditary property against liberty – « when you call yourself a friend of liberty, whether it would not be more consistent to style yourself the champion of property, the adorer of the golden image which power has set up? » (Vindication, p. 13) and poverty against wealth: « Yes, Sir, the strong gained riches, the few have sacrificed the many to their vices » (ibid., p. 10). Nowhere is Wollstonecraft’s conception of history clearer than in the well-known vignette in which the fate of Marie-Antoinette is opposed to that of poor French women:

A sentiment of this kind [« pity which borders on contempt »] glanced across my mind when I read the following exclamation. « Whilst the royal captives, who followed in the train, were slowly moved along, amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women ». Probably you mean women who gained a livelihood by selling vegetables or fish, who never had had any advantages of education; or their vices might have lost part of their abominable deformity, by losing part of their grossness. The queen of France – the great and small vulgar, claim our pity; they

have almost insuperable obstacles to surmount in their progress towards true
dignity of character; still I have such a plain down-right understanding that I do
not like to make a distinction without a difference. (Vindication, p. 30)

The passage epitomises the discursive staging of history which is both the main
characteristic and the strong point of Wollstonecraft’s text. The women described
here are more masculine than Burke’s ideal women, the very antitype – socially,
politically, and aesthetically – of Marie-Antoinette and, as such, to be excluded
from the kind of society advocated by Burke. Wollstonecraft’s implicit point that
these women’s animality is not anatomical but cultural is part and parcel of her
historical analysis, but is rendered even more powerful by the aestheticizing of
violence that defines the satiric mode. This is the very quality which, unlike what
has been claimed\textsuperscript{55}, makes her text far more convincing than Paine’s because it is

the only reply to Burke which is adequate on the emotional side […] ; for Burke’s
strength was due as much to the intensity of his feelings as to the power of his
mind, and the antagonist [Wollstonecraft] who was sufficiently sympathetic to
meet him on his ground had manifest advantages over the other controversialists.\textsuperscript{56}

Now, the traditional notion of the historian’s neutral, detached vantage
point has recently been undermined by numerous philosophers, who have rejected
the very possibility of objective historical knowledge, but also by leading historians
such as Hayden White, who not only argues that the reality of past events is not
contradicted by their literary portrayals, but also claims that good, even analytic
history inspires emotion and in doing so may serve important psychological
functions\textsuperscript{57}. That is why nothing would be more erroneous than to take
Wollstonecraft’s « indignation » as the unleashing of uncontrollable emotion when
she intones: « I glow with indignation when I attempt, methodically, to unravel
your slavish paradoxes, in which I can find no fixed first principle to refute »
(Vindication, p. 10 ; my emphasis) : emotion is both the means and the end of her
method as a historian. Shocking readers into awareness is the most efficacious
prelude to making them accept her version of historical truth.

« I war not with an individual when I contend for the rights of men »,
claims Wollstonecraft at the outset of her text (Vindication, p. 7). Far from being
an empty rhetorical disclaimer whose validity is de facto annihilated by the ad
hominem attacks pervading the Vindication, this statement points to an essential,
constitutive dimension of her text: her conception of history as emotional

\textsuperscript{55} See supra.
\textsuperscript{56} George Stead, The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform, Hamden, Conn., Archon Books, 1965 [1913],
p. 167.
\textsuperscript{57} See H. White, op. cit.
involvement. This makes her a very modern historian indeed, showing that a historical event never entirely exists independently of, and detached from, the subjectivities of historians. As Tom Furniss puts it, the « inbuilt instabilities in Burke’s discursive project simply get foregrounded or dramatised in the textual struggle between Burke and his liberal and radical antagonists »; in that respect, Burke is arguably « a still more powerful interlocutor [than Rousseau] whose texts paradoxically empower Wollstonecraft’s thought even as she seeks to displace them » 58. Her critique of the interplay between aesthetics, gender and politics in Burke’s Reflections here make her challenge conventional assumptions about gender characteristics and sexual anatomy and will later lead her to formulate the wish that « [women] may every day grow more and more masculine », in which masculine is to be understood as « the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raises females in the scale of animal being » (Vindication of the Rights of Woman, p. 74). It is indeed « significan[t] » that Wollstonecraft’s first extensive production as a self-supporting professional and self-proclaimed intellectual took the form that most people would have considered the least appropriate for a woman – the political disquisition. Requiring knowledge of government (in which women had no share), analytical ability (of which women theoretically had little) and the ambition to participate directly in contemporary events (of which were supposed to have none), political disquisition was in every sense a masculine domain. 59

And indeed, though « Wollstonecraft’s [second Vindication] is not always seen as strictly a part of the Revolution controversy, yet its arguments clearly relate to the egalitarian and radical case she had already advanced against Burke ». 60

58 T. Furniss, « Gender in Revolution : Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft », p. 66.
59 M. Poovey, op.cit., p. 56-57.