KATHERINE CHIDLEY, DAMARIS MASHAM, AND MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A LIBERAL FEMINIST TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

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The main argument of this thesis is that, through an examination of the works of Katherine Chidley, Damaris Masham, and Mary Wollstonecraft, a tradition of liberal feminism emerges which advocated individuality and sociability. The foundation of this liberal feminist train of thought was spirituality. Women who helped to develop liberal feminism used their own religious beliefs to argue for spiritual equality, which thus allowed them to then use spiritual liberation to argue for the expansion of other liberties. I also maintain that each female author’s arguments, which rested upon spirituality, individuality, and sociability furthered both the social and political cause of human liberty and individual freedom. Thus, the arguments made by Chidley, Masham, and Wollstonecraft contributed to the overall project of eighteenth century liberalism during the English Enlightenment.
Dedicated to my husband Jon, who is the best life partner anyone could ever ask for, and to my daughter Isabelle, who gives me joy and laughter after very long work days. I love you both.
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INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant Enlightenment feminists is undoubtedly Mary Wollstonecraft. Scholars continue to find her works inspirational spaces of inquiry, and new interpretations of her texts keep being produced. Some scholars find Wollstonecraft’s philosophy to be lacking. It is not unusual to see Wollstonecraft’s writings lumped together with the works of other Enlightenment liberals and viewed as oppressive.¹ Whether or not she is interpreted as an emancipator of women or as woman’s oppressor, Wollstonecraft has remained pertinent to philosophical, literary, political, and historical examinations. She was brilliant, and has sometimes even been called the mother of modern feminism. Yet, many scholars have already argued that she was not the first woman to argue for the betterment of female life. Indeed, stretching further back we find women calling for changes that they believed would help the human experience progress. Still, women’s writings of the early modern period look markedly different than those of the firebrand Wollstonecraft. Do the early modern works connect with hers? Is there a common bond between early modern female intellectuals and Wollstonecraft? If Wollstonecraft is the most radical and rau cous female rebel of the British Enlightenment, how did her thought develop? Certainly she was influenced by Locke and Rousseau and her dissenter friends, but were there also early works by women which may have influenced her work as well?

Unfortunately, I have found no evidence that Mary Wollstonecraft owned or was able to read older feminist works. We know that she read Locke, Rousseau, and many neoclassical and contemporaneous writings. Yet, of female authors of older periods, I have no proof. Without

¹ Pateman coins the term “Wollstonecraft’s dilemma.” She argues that Wollstonecraft’s philosophy forces women either to become men or they are forced into the private sphere of motherhood and marriage. See: Carol Pateman, Democracy, Feminism, Welfare (New York: Rutledge, 2011), 117. Martin argues that Wollstonecraft’s ideas about reason and sensibility subordinate a woman’s feelings and sexual desires to “self-governance.” Despite evidence to the contrary, Martin claims that Wollstonecraft gave women only two choices: submit to reason and behave like men or submit to the passions and stay feminine. See: Jane Roland Martin, Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman (New York: Yale University Press, 1985), 87-91.
such evidence, this project seeks therefore to answer some of these questions by analyzing the works of women writers prior to Wollstonecraft and mapping their connections to her. Indeed, I will argue that an intellectual tradition is possible and that Wollstonecraft’s radical equality is part of a development in liberal feminist thought. Yet, unlike some scholarship which assumes a connection merely among women who wrote, or that women writers are all part of the same feminist tradition simply because they discussed women, I am writing specifically about the development of one sort of feminist tradition: a tradition of feminism existed which sought to better both men and women and to promote both individuality and sociability. Furthermore, religion played an important role in the development of a liberal feminist tradition: the female authors I examine each relied upon spirituality to create new liberation arguments.

First, I must make it clear that I am examining these works from a particular bias: I am a liberal feminist. As such, I have ultimately rejected the works of Michel Foucault and his followers. Roy Porter has pointed out how "Michel Foucault held that, despite its rhetoric, the true logic of Enlightenment was to control and dominate rather than to emancipate…. yet, these Foucauldian and postmodern readings are willfully lopsided."² Because much of what liberals find so liberating in their political philosophy began during the Age of Enlightenment, not only are its ideas repudiated, but modern scholars mistreat the people who created these ideas and often sully their intents. Thus, my analyses will embrace Enlightenment liberalism’s core tenets of individualism, humanism, progress, and universal human rights. I believe that history can be observed as charting a course, that what precedes an event shapes the future, that history is a process that is linear. Whether the progress made is positive or negative, it still marches on, slowly changes, sometimes steadily, sometimes in fits and starts. But, no time of the past is

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entirely unintelligible to future generations, and trying to understand old ideas and cultures can ultimately teach us about ourselves and help us make better decisions, just as much as it allows us to understand how we have come to see ourselves. Even though I take this view, there will still be information that I present that may be valuable to the postmodern/poststructural reader.

Part of the reason why this project will examine works by women which include a larger community as well as the individual is that I hope to repudiate some of the simplistic and static views of Enlightenment thinking that have resulted from Foucault’s popularity. Modern feminism, which relies heavily on poststructural/postmodern philosophy, leaves much to be desired in an examination of individuality. Individuality is often denied entirely in new feminist traditions, or it is stigmatized as the cause of systemic problems ad nauseam. And those traditions which deny subjectivity still promote group subjectivity through labeling and separation from the larger social sphere. Such exclusion often denies utterly and totally the problems within other groups, between groups, or creates systemic readings of society that indeed do not affect groups outside of the label. Further, as Dena Goodman has pointed out, modern feminism relies too heavily on oppression leaving the triumphs and victories of women and disparate peoples to be

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3 Jasbir K. Puar argues that queers, ethnic minorities, and anyone outside of western, white, heterosexual normativity is oppressed by the dominating power structure of U.S. exceptionalism. Puar believes this is accomplished by a reliance on inclusivity, on trying to bring in those who have been on the outside. The problem with this, Puar claims, is that people keep being taught to believe that they are subjects, autonomous beings with actual identities. Individuality then becomes an oppressive ideology linked to the suffering of many groups. Ultimately, attempts to deconstruct holistic selves results in naming those whom Puar sees as not represented in the dominate power structure: linking together disparate groups both names, defines, and confines them while it argues that the suppression of their identities oppresses them. See: Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007). Judith “Jack” Halberstam argues against normalcy. He/she ties normativity to the concept of “whiteness.” For Halberstam whiteness means heterosexuality (which he/she sees as unnatural), it means marriage, fatherhood, and pragmatism. Halberstam creates a new manifesto which denounces fatherhood (denying that fathers, and essentially straight males, are necessary) and celebrates anarchism, queerness, and not adhering to problem solving. For Halberstam, the conventional, biological male is the oppressor and everyone else has been taught to live by the hetero-man’s perspective and rules. There are so many problems with Halberstam’s conception of the world that I cannot waste time on such a thing here, but his/her text illustrates that adopting the identity splintering philosophy of postmodern/poststructural/queer feminism denies individualism, focuses on oppression, and has no practical application as an emancipatory political theory. See: J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).
denied and silenced. Goodman has also pointed out the problems of modern feminist critiques of Enlightenment discourse: it uses its own modern metric to measure Enlightenment philosophy; it relegates Enlightenment in general to the charge of total individualism; it denies the many intellectual trains of thought which promoted social betterment; it pretends that the private/public sphere dichotomy, which most would see as being constructed during the Victorian age, was caused by the Enlightenment project. Each of these problems that Goodman criticizes in Enlightenment historiography as a whole pervade also the historiography of the British Enlightenment. Also, when many intellectual genealogies of male thinkers still exist, female thought is kept separate both from male thought and from its preceding tradition, at least in the nuanced way of really looking at each author’s individual intellectual project. Finally, there are still benefits to a liberal feminist tradition which does not espouse hedonistic individualism but instead celebrates responsible individualism. Wollstonecraft’s writings promote the ideal of a conscious citizen who fights for her rights but uses her liberty to help other human beings. She can be celebrated for her contributions as an individual and use her freedom of thought yet she is mindful of her obligation to society at large, to use her freedom to expand the freedom of others. She may choose her role in society and execute it beautifully, whatever it is.

The main argument of this thesis is that, through an examination of the works of Katherine Chidley, Damaris Masham, and Mary Wollstonecraft, a tradition of liberal feminism emerges which advocated individuality and sociability. The foundation of this liberal feminist

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train of thought was spirituality. Women who helped to develop liberal feminism used their own religious beliefs to argue for spiritual equality, which thus allowed them to then use spiritual liberation to argue for the expansion of other liberties. I also maintain that each female author’s arguments, which rested upon spirituality, individuality, and sociability furthered both the social and political cause of human liberty and individual freedom. Thus, the arguments made by Chidley, Masham, and Wollstonecraft contributed to the overall project of eighteenth century liberalism during the English Enlightenment.

This project begins with the English Revolution pamphleteer Katherine Chidley (1616-1653), who wrote in a time of upheaval that planted the seeds of British Enlightenment. Chapter one explores her ideas, which I argue began an intellectual tradition starting with her calls for smaller, more democratic churches and her advocacy for the doctrine of spiritual equality for women and men. I argue as well that Chidley’s religious fervor is integral to understanding her ideas. Chapter two is an analysis of the works of the early Enlightenment author, Damaris Masham (1658-1708), who utilized spiritual equality in order to argue that women could learn as well as men and should be educated equally. I will also argue that Masham began a discussion of class inequality, and advocated for those of the lower classes. Scholars have not taken note of Masham’s class consciousness. Finally, Chapter three will discuss Mary Wollstonecraft’s (1759-1797) works, showing how they are not individualistic or misogynistic or entirely feministic, but rather that her work was a very sophisticated articulation of this tradition of female humanism which looked to better the individual and the social world. Furthermore, it is my contention that, without our modern feminist language or gender neutral language, Wollstonecraft used the idea of falsity to equalize both gender and class. As of yet, other scholars have not seen Wollstonecraft’s descriptions of false humans as her way of overcoming gender or class
oppressive language, so this argument is a contribution to debates about Wollstonecraft’s use of misogynist language. What emerges from examining each author’s work is a tradition of feminism which is not about separation from men or other groups, but rather a tradition where the betterment of the individual, whether male or female, is the goal. What also emerges is a tradition of sociability: people are meant to help one another and enrich and improve the lives of those around them. Wollstonecraft’s radical equality, then, stems from a tradition where the individual and the society are symbiotic.

Methodology

Throughout this project I could find no consistent apparatus for examining Chidley’s, Masham’s, and Wollstonecraft’s works. The sources refused to capitulate to theory. There were still several works which proved useful and influential in my readings of each author’s body of thought. Most of the treatises mentioned here are philosophies written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The one exception to that is Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir’s existentialist feminist treatise seemed relevant because it is a secular extension of the transcendental nature of spiritual equality and intellectual equality: spiritual equality elevates the soul from biological sex while intellectual equality separates the mind from it. Therefore, I found it helpful to see each woman’s thought as in some sense grappling with that issue of being equal regardless of sex and that all of these works relate by arguing or implying that to be female is also to be human and that genitalia should not detract from what people saw as the distinctive human characteristics of a soul and the ability to think at any given time.

Another treatise which heavily influences my analysis is Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. As will be discussed, Hobbes's idea of a political contract theory was not amenable to most English people during the English Revolution (or later for that matter). The Cavaliers did not
want to give up a theory of divine right because it would deny the king both the throne and the staff. Parliamentarians advocating for greater political authority would never adopt a theory which represented their efforts as chaos-inducing vaingloriousness. Also, the numerous religious protestors from different Protestant faiths would not attach themselves to a theory that denied religious pluralism and gave the monarch authority over all religious matters. It is precisely because Hobbes was at odds with every school of political and religious thought during the Revolution, the Interregnum, and the subsequent political crises of the 1680s and 1690s that his leviathan of a treatise becomes an important metric for understanding religious and political debates of those periods.\(^5\)

The philosophy which predominantly invades my understanding and connecting of these three authors is undoubtedly John Locke’s *Two Treatises on Government*. Locke certainly influenced Masham and Wollstonecraft and the democratic society of Levellers undoubtedly worked their way into Locke’s thinking as well, whether in reaction to their religious radicalism or by virtue of their early calls for limited religious tolerance. *Two Treatises* argued effectively that women and men were given the earth to rule as equal partners, thus challenging both political and familial patriarchy. Locke’s argument against patriarchy influenced future pro-woman thinkers. Also, Locke’s epistemology, as set out in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, became invaluable for theories of intellectual transcendence, thereby becoming useful for systems of equality incorporating women and the lower classes and for supporting the education of both groups. Locke argues that the mind is genderless, when it begins in its blank state, and thus women could use Locke’s identity theory to argue for female equality. The experiences which Locke believed constituted an individual human being were augmented by

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society’s limits on female education: if all humans could learn, then women should be given the chance to show that they could learn. In fact, my treating each author as an author and as a creative unique human being who contributed to her world and was at the same time influenced by her culture is an analytical usage of Locke’s three hundred year old epistemology.

Finally, Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* has been useful in my analysis. Though Rousseau was reacting directly against Lockean liberalism, he remains part of Hobbes’s and Locke’s contract theory tradition. Most pertinent is Rousseau’s influence on Wollstonecraft. She vacillated between relishing Rousseau’s ideas and deploring them, frequently arguing against him throughout her work. Also, Rousseau, like Wollstonecraft, was a popular and widely read member of the High Enlightenment who benefitted from the early work of others, and therefore Rousseau is another important writer to examine when tracing the development of Enlightenment ideas.

**Historiography**

There has not been, as yet, scholarly work which ties these three authors together in terms of an intellectual tradition. The closest scholarly endeavor to this purpose has been an article by Moira Ferguson, “Feminist Polemic: British Women’s Writings from the Renaissance to the French Revolution,” which suggests that Chidley, Masham, Wollstonecraft, and many other

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6 Locke’s theory of knowledge explains human identity in that we are all unique individuals. He believes that all humans begin with minds that are the same, blank. Through education, sensory experiences and reflections upon those experiences, humans become who they are, and no one has the same exact experiences. Since men and women both begin in this blank state, it provides the logical implication that women can be given the same educational experiences that would allow them to participate in the same occupations as men. Furthermore, though we are each unique, Locke also sees that those in charge (be it political leaders or leaders of mainstream thinking) manipulate the truth and try to control human experiences and knowledge through language as well as through traditions. For more on Locke’s theory of identity see: Ready, Kathryn J. “Damaris Cudworth Masham, Catherine Trotter Cockburn, and the Feminist Legacy of Locke’s Theory of Personal Identity.” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 35, no. 4 (2002): 563-576. For a discussion of how Locke’s political philosophy in Two Treatises influenced feminism see: Butler, Melissa. “Early Liberal Roots of Feminism: John Locke and the Attack on Patriarchy.” *The American Political Science Review* 72, no. 1 (1978): 135-150.
female writers were all part of a “feminist polemic.” “The feminist polemicist writes to urge or defend a pro-woman point of view which includes resistance to patriarchal values,” writes Ferguson. Yet, as will be shown, Chidley does not outright critique or deny patriarchy. Furthermore, Ferguson primarily lumps these women together with many other writers to put them all in the same feminist tradition. She is focused more on the oppression of these women than on their contributions, and makes no connections between one woman’s body of ideas and another’s. Moira’s focus is purely on what can be seen as ‘proto-feminist’ or ‘pro-woman’ writings and not on each woman’s overall philosophical, religious, and/or political ideas. While Ferguson’s work certainly pointed out the quantity of British female writers prior to Wollstonecraft, it does nothing to integrate women’s works into the larger cultural picture of intellectualism.

Katherine Gillespie, in “A Hammer in Her Hand: The Separation of Church and State and the Early Feminist Writings of Katherine Chidley,” argues that Chidley is part of a (undefined) “liberal” tradition, attempting to tie Chidley to Locke and Wollstonecraft. Yet, Gillespie’s interpretation is very problematic. First, Chidley does not argue for a separation of church and state, she argues for religious toleration, and a very limited version of toleration at that. Also, had Chidley been given the chance, her writings make clear that she would have been happy with a more Godly, scripture based state church. Chidley’s concern with state mandated religion was that if Christians always had to rely on a state interpretation of the bible, believers could be at risk of damnation through adherence to a false practice. Gillespie relies very heavily on Freudian/Lacanian theory which is both anachronistic and unsuited to Chidley’s very religious work. Gillespie uses these theories to take the religious and spiritual significance out of

Chidley’s work, positing that Chidley only used biblical images and texts to accomplish a secular goal. Gillespie’s reading thus ignores much of not only Chidley’s own work but also the cultural context of Chidley’s time. More importantly, Gillespie spends no time actually analyzing the work of Wollstonecraft in order to support her claim that Chidley is her precursor. Therefore, we are left without any real understanding as to how both authors are related at all.

There are of course several Early Modern feminist readers or collections where snippets of female writings are offered for study, such as, *Kissing the Rod*, edited by Germain Greer, or Moira Ferguson’s *First Feminists: British Women Writers, 1578-1799*, but neither volume makes connections between the authors except to put them all into a feminist tradition. Also, the writers featured in each book are not always the same, making the common feature their femaleness and writerliness but nothing else. Lynda McAlister’s *Hypatia’s Daughter’s: Fifteen Hundred Years of Women Philosophers* provides wonderful essays by various scholars about individual authors. So too does Hilda Smith’s *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition*. While both collections thankfully point out that these women contributed to philosophy and political theory, the subjects are still unconnected in terms of schools of thought or particular value systems. And popular readers like *The Essential Feminist Reader*, introduced by Estelle Freedman, provide a service by introducing people to early feminist writers along with those well known modern standards, yet Freedman’s collection leaves both Chidley and Masham out, and the real differences between “feminisms” are not discussed.

Outside of gender history, women’s history, and literary criticism the larger historiography of the Enlightenment is also a problem. Lengthy and influential cultural and intellectual histories like Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* and Roy Porter’s *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story*
of the British Enlightenment separate women and men into different spheres. Israel’s work, encompassing several hundred pages of in depth cultural and intellectual history contributes only one small chapter to “gender.” Unfortunately, Israel sees Enlightenment discussions of sexuality as covering both women’s contributions to Enlightenment as well as the entirety of gender role discussions. Ultimately, Israel ignores female contributions to Enlightenment thinking and relegates women, yet again, to discussions of sexuality. Roy Porter incorporates much more literature on gender, but he still interprets Enlightenment as a man’s world. While few would argue against the fact that eighteenth century men dominated the political world, Porter could have acknowledged the intellectual contributions of women, not only as contributors to feminism but also to political and social philosophy. One poignant example is that while both Israel and Porter heavily analyze Locke’s works and influence neither references Masham’s works or her correspondence with Locke. One wonders how historians could look at Locke without also looking at the woman who was perhaps his closest friend, long term house-mate, and someone who reviewed his works, giving him suggestions and objections.

As far as problems with interpretations of each writer are concerned, perhaps the largest difficulty is Chidley scholarship, which, as previously mentioned, is rife with anachronism. I have presented parts of this thesis at conferences and more than once have I heard something like “well, thanks to your women, women in the future were forced into the domestic sphere.” It is unfair that other scholars make these accusations about “my” women. Each author used her reason and logic to deal with the problems of her time. For example, it was refreshing to read Jacqueline Broad’s argument that Chidley should not just be lumped into liberal feminism without merit, yet Broad still chastises Chidley for not attacking patriarchy or marriage, calling
her a “conservative Tory polemicist.”

Broad also implies that Chidley’s religious focus means that Chidley’s writings are not political theory and do not “contribute to the birth of modern Enlightenment.”

Must feminism challenge marriage? Patriarchy? Must it be secular? Did nothing seen as conservative contribute to Enlightenment (if indeed it was so very conservative in its time)? Broad’s criticism adds much needed depth to Chidley’s historiography yet she still relies on modern feminist assumptions which she uses to determine radicality and liberality.

Masham’s historiography does not suffer from the same anachronism, since scholars look at her most often in the context of her time as well as in the context of other thinkers. In “A Woman’s Influence? John Locke and Damaris Masham on Moral Accountability” Broad argues that Masham’s work is not just parroting Locke’s work. Broad points out that Masham’s views may have been influenced by some of Locke’s ideas and those of her father, Ralph Cudworth, but that Masham also developed her own distinctly Christian view of morality. Broad concludes that it is not possible to factually prove that Masham influenced Locke, but that her critiques of his work, along with her in-depth knowledge of her father’s moral system likely contributed to Locke’s later work. Broad also appeals to Masham’s own individuality and hopes that historians will treat her work as valuable “in its own right.”

Regan Penaluna takes up this call in “The Social and Political Thought of Damaris Cudworth Masham,” arguing that there are “social and political aspects of her thought” which have been neglected. She also sees Masham as advocating for a Christian society that will uphold “political stability.” Penaluna’s contribution is in examining both of Masham’s treatises together in order to construct this larger political and

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8 Jacqueline Broad, “Liberty and the Right of Resistance: Women’s Political Writings of the English Civil War Era,” 78.
9 Ibid., 78.
12 Ibid., 111.
social philosophy. While Penaluna’s work has certainly been helpful in understanding Masham’s ideas more fully, I contend that Masham’s correspondence with Leibniz cannot be left out as it too constitutes an important part of her whole philosophy. Finally, a significant article, “Love of God and Love of Creatures: The Masham-Astell Debate,” by Catherine Wilson, argues that there were two separate views on female empowerment: contemporary writer Astell sought freedom via a refuge in God while Masham sought a life in Christ through helping others. Wilson’s work is important in delineating two separate pro-woman discourses, and in showing how both Astell and Masham contributed to the larger philosophical discussion about human love.

The scholarship on Wollstonecraft is extensive. Whereas Chidley and Masham have only recently come to prominence as subjects of academia, Wollstonecraft has gone in and out of favor over the last two hundred years almost as if she were a founding father. Upon reflection (and more reading), I saw the difference in Wollstonecraft’s experience compared with Masham’s and Chidley’s: Chidley benefitted from the bourgeois experience of a close-knit family life and a large supportive church community while Masham received far more attention regarding her classical education than most women of her time and was part of the lower aristocracy. Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, had neither a close family, formal education, aristocratic connections, nor a supportive church family. In fact, she was quite unwanted and unloved as a child, and most of her connections to intellectuals and rebels were forged on her own. The bitterness in many of Wollstonecraft’s painful experiences is clear in Janet Todd’s substantive biography, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*. Todd paints a portrait of a woman who was often emotionally abused by others but who overcame such adversities and truly became a revolutionary. Todd is a foremost authority on Wollstonecraft’s life and has
contributed as well by publishing Wollstonecraft’s letters and other personal documents, along with an extensive annotated bibliography of works on Wollstonecraft.

Perhaps another work that has most significantly shaped an understanding of Wollstonecraft is political scientist Virginia Sapiro’s *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Going outside of the mainstream discussions of Wollstonecraft’s feminism, Sapiro argues that Wollstonecraft’s writings are not just feminist, but are also a complex political philosophy. Chris Jones’ article “Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindications* and Their Political Traditions” puts forward the thesis that Wollstonecraft, witnessing the madness of the French Revolution, actually begins the socialist philosophical tradition. Though Wollstonecraft should not necessarily be viewed as a socialist in economic terms, her total equality philosophy and concern for the poor created the critique that influenced later socialism. In another discussion of egalitarianism, “Wollstonecraft’s ‘Wild Wish:’ Confounding Sex in the Discourse on Political Rights,” Wendy Gunther-Canada argues that Wollstonecraft truly sought an end to gender in the political realm. Taking from all of these interpretations, it is my wish to take these egalitarian interpretations even further to show that Wollstonecraft not only was advocating for political equality for women and those of all classes in society but that she also believed in a social philosophy of equality that hinged upon her moral philosophy: people can be equal if they are educated to be equal through humanism. Wollstonecraft’s humanism incorporates an ideal of individualism and sociability, and it is this tradition of increasing individual rights while remaining mindful of the needs of the larger society that connects Wollstonecraft to both Chidley and Masham.
CHAPTER I
KATHERINE CHIDLEY: THE ZEALOT

Katherine Chidley, the English Revolution pamphleteer, used spiritual equality to argue for limited religious toleration and to legitimize her participation, as a woman, in public discourse. Part of the expanding middle classes critiquing English politics, Chidley was born in 1616 to a family of artisans, crafters, and merchants. When she was not busy sewing clothes for her family’s tailor business, she read political literature and wrote pamphlets. After refusing to participate in the Anglican service in her hometown of Shropshire, Katherine and her husband Daniel moved to London. The Chidleys then became members of a community of religious activists known as the Levellers. They attacked the bishops of the Anglican Church, fighting what many Protestants considered Catholic worship and teaching. “Popery,” the nasty word for Catholicism, became synonymous with backwardness. Protestants during the English Revolution sought a religious reformation of the Anglican Church, a church they considered “papist” and a bastardization of “true” Christianity. In this spirit of reform, Katherine Chidley advocated limited religious toleration and independence for Protestant churches. Chidley died in 1653.

Chidley’s England was a time of total cultural chaos, and that chaos contributed to her writings. Religious sectarians, like the Levellers, protested the king and parliament.

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16 For more information about the hatred of Catholics in Protestant England, see Robin Clifton, “Popular Fear of Catholics during the English Revolution”, Past and Present, 52 (1971), 23-55. Anti-Catholicism is also a major rhetorical weapon in English literature of the time, from the pamphleteers to Thomas Hobbes and John Milton.
Parliamentarians usurped monarchial authority, while women left the home and prophesied, preached, and petitioned all over London. It was indeed a “world turn’d upside down.”

Though this new atmosphere certainly brought gender to the forefront of political ideas, women like Chidley were by no means so radical as to ask for total political equality or to challenge entirely the patriarchy which ruled both female roles and the kingdom at large. Rather, what was prevalent during this period was an increasing belief that women were properly suited for religious fervor and thus could be the spiritual guides of their own families. This belief in a morally superior woman provided women with religious legitimacy with which they could then address their grievances and participate in social and political discourse. Though there has been much scholarship which supports the idea that the doctrine of spiritual equality was emancipatory for many women of Chidley’s time, particularly Quaker women, many scholars since have tried to move the debate about early modern feminism during the English Revolution away from spirituality and toward secularity. While this is anachronistic, to be sure, it also makes it more difficult to trace ways that Chidley’s work influenced future thinkers. Also, until the last hundred years or so, women’s freedom language often rested within a spiritual framework. Indeed, as Jeremy Waldron argues in God, Locke, and Equality, even John Locke’s basis for human equality and individual human rights relied on a Christian concept of God, and an actual philosophy for human equality which does not rest in spiritual equality has yet to be argued effectively. Therefore, half a century before Locke, when Chidley advocated spiritual equality, it should not be underestimated how important Christianity was for her, nor that her

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usurpation of public authority through the use of spiritual equality was any less radical than later secular equality arguments.

Scholars agree that Chidley herself published three brief works, and some believe that she probably influenced many other Leveller women and petitioners. In order to understand her thought, only those writings known to be hers will be examined in this chapter. The *Justification of the Independent Churches of Christ* (1641), *A New Year’s Gift or A Brief Exhortation To Mr. Thomas Edwards*, and *Good Counsell* (1644), *to the Petitioners for Presbyterian Government, That They May Declare Their Faith Before They Build Their Church* (1645) each examine issues related to tolerance, church government, and an appeal to proving religious legitimacy through the use of scripture. This chapter sets out to merge Chidley’s political/religious writings into one set of intellectual ideas and to assess how those ideas contributed to the consent tradition in political theory and to the particular liberal feminist train of thought later built upon by Masham and Wollstonecraft. First, the small community focus in the form of an independent church or a religious body politic in Chidley’s writings can be compared to the similar Rousseauean democratic model in order to be better understood. Second, spiritual equality, possible through true “godliness” made arguments possible for gender and class equality based on the equality of souls. Also, Chidley’s discussion of spiritual equality included freedom of conscience. Masham will later adopt and expand the female spiritual equality argument as well as the argument for freedom of conscience. Though spiritual equality and freedom of conscience centralized around specific Protestant Christianity for Chidley, the idea of spiritual equality contributed significantly to a growing consciousness of individual and citizen rights in Revolutionary England. These arguments taken as a whole produce a picture of
Chidley’s foundational contributions to later social contract theories, to the later liberal feminism of Masham and Wollstonecraft, and to arguments for religious tolerance.

**A Small Democracy: The Independent Church**

While Chidley occasionally discusses larger political situations in her works, an examination of her political theory shows that it mainly revolves around the independent government of the small church congregation. Yet, it is through this small community that Chidley’s Christian political theory emerges, a theory which is comparable to the later Rousseauean democratic model. Chidley explains why individual churches have the right to separate from the Church of England. She explains how the people of an independent church are more godly or pure, and how they will collectively make decisions, a Christian collective identity similar to Rousseau’s collective citizen identity, or the general will. Chidley then shows how a smaller congregation which governs itself can better benefit the group and the individual.

Chidley’s argument for independent church government rests on an assertion that Christ, through the proof set out in scripture, has authorized separation. Chidley contends that the “Lord Almighty Christ made so great a difference between the world and the church that hee would not pray for the world; yet would die for the Church.” She called the way of separation “the way that Paul walked in,” since Paul had separated from Judaism in his act of becoming Christian. As is already known, Paul was very important for Protestantism throughout the entire reformation and Chidley uses his letters to show how his ministry to the several early Christian churches was to advise them as separate entities with their own rules and church governments.

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20 Katherine Chidley, “A New-Yeares-Gift or a Brief Exhortation To Mr. Thomas Edwards; That he may breake off his old Sins, in the old yeare, and begin the New yeare, with new fruits of Love, first to God, and then to his Brethren.” 1645
Chidley appeals repeatedly to Paul’s letters and to other parts of scripture to show that Christ intended the separation of the godly from the blasphemers. Also, she uses the individual conscience, in its knowledge of Christ’s will to justify independent churches:

> It is, and hath beene (for a long time) a Question more enquired into than well weighed; Whether it be lawfull for such, who are informed of the evills of the Church of England, to Separate from it: For my owne part, considering that the Church of England is governed by the Canon Lawes (the Discipline of Antichrist) and altogether wanteth the Discipline of Christ, and that the most of them are ignorant what it is, and also doe professe to worship God by a stinted Service-Booke. I hold it not onely lawfull but also the duty of all those who are informed of such evills, to separate themselves from them, and such as doe adhere unto them; and also to joynge together in the outward profession and practice of God’s true worship; and being thus informed in their minds of the knowledge of the will of God (by the teaching of his Sonne Jesus Christ) it is their duty to put it in practise, not onely in a Land where they have Toleration, but also where they are forbidden to preach, or teach in the name (or by the power) of the Lord Jesus.\(^*\)

Since the Church of England seemed merely an extension of the Catholic Church through the continued use of “Canon Lawes” any Protestant would be within his or her rights to protest conforming to Anglican practices. The “stinted Service-Booke” was unlawful in that it preached the Anglican interpretation of the bible and not the bible itself, since, for Chidley, knowing, reading, and understanding and thus using the bible was both a Christian imperative and a means for denouncing authority. Because Chidley, and many other Christians, had found in the scriptures a different way of understanding and practicing their faith, it was their “duty” to spread their vision and to deny the false vision forced upon them by the state religion. Significantly it is Christ who gives this authority to believe as they do and to protest and separate, “informed in their minds” of God’s true message, their consciences cannot allow them to trespass against the “will of God.”

Christ’s will allowed them to separate. Thus, a question arises in discussions of English Revolution religious protests: why not argue against the Anglican Church’s right to exist by

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21 Chidley, “The Justification of the Independent Churches.”
breaking down patriarchy or by adopting secularism? Katherine Gillespie goes so far as to argue that Chidley’s work is an “early feminist theory about patriarchalism, specifically as it relates to natural right,” one where the religious significance is merely a code.22 On the other hand, Jacqueline Broad denies that Chidley challenges patriarchy at all or even that Chidley is part of a “liberal” feminist tradition.23 Both scholars have forgotten the true kernels of liberalism, the actuality, however unfortunate it may seem for some academics, that Lockean liberalism is indeed based on a Christian perspective. Chidley need not attack patriarchy in order to be part of a feminist or liberal tradition, and indeed it would have made little sense for her to do so.

Patriarchy supporters like Sir Robert Filmer defined a king’s right to rule as the spiritual and temporal authority through Christ’s gift of that authority, and by virtue of man’s rule since Adam. Chidley, and many other rebels, needed intellectual ways of disarming the king of that right. Chidley did not outright divest the king of temporal authority (though she did suggest that a blasphemous king perhaps had no temporal right) but she did denude his right to govern the church. This was done, as has already been shown, through the authority of Christ. By making Christ the head of the church, the monarch no longer has authority over Christian souls. To do as Hobbes had done and argue for secular consent would have been to concede any rights to protest because of conscience, to assent to the King’s government and his authority over church leadership.24 Protestant churches like Chidley’s saw the Church of England as an abomination just like the Catholic Church. By making Christ the leader and justifier of religious freedom,

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22 Gillespie, 214.
23 Broad, 78.
24 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ed. by Edwin Curley (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 300: “A private man has always the liberty (because thought is free) to believe or not believe, in his heart, those acts that have been given out for miracles, according as he shall see what benefit can accrue, by men’s belief, to those that pretend or countenance them, and thereby conjecture whether they be miracles or lies. But when it comes to confession of that faith, the private reason must submit to the public, that is to say, to God’s lieutenant.” Hobbes understands God’s lieutenant to be the sovereign, most ideally an absolute king. Here the private conscience is to be silenced by the public, accepted form of worship. Chidley wants freedom to worship publicly and to proselytize.
Chidley took that right from the king and bestowed it upon both the godly individual and the
godly church congregation.

Yet, by making Christ the head of the Church, an argument against a patriarchal model
made little sense. The standard understanding of Christ’s lineage, which stretched back to
Adam, made Christ king. The way that this appeal to Christ’s leadership, by early modern
Protestants, benefitted a future liberal tradition needs to be reasserted in modern scholarship. In
the leadership of Christ alone, there certainly still existed patriarchal prescriptions for families,
and thus for women. Still, in the realm of equalizing human lives and breaking down
hierarchical forms of government, a theocracy makes the people as a whole equal since a
theocracy no longer gives the Church (and by obvious extension, the government) authority to
make decisions and laws. Since Christ is not physically there, the next logical step in
establishing Christ’s church is in the people as a whole collectively choosing leadership.
Whereas the pope and kings had chosen archbishops, and archbishops the bishops, and so on,
Christ as head of the church allows that ordination comes from the people.25 Thus, under the
banner of a collective will, one that affixes itself to Christ’s will, the people become theoretically
equal in the leadership and governance of the church. When Locke, and subsequently future
liberal feminists, dismantled patriarchy, they were already the benefactors of such decentralized
Protestant churches as well as the intellectual and civil traditions of protesting as represented by
Chidley’s (among others) work.

The argument for a collective will, as representative of Christ’s word, to govern an
independent church is one justification for Chidley’s desire to have the freedom to worship. Just
as Rousseau would later see the small self-governed Calvinist churches in Geneva, so too did
Chidley envision a church which consented to congregate, elected its leadership, and collectively

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25 Chidley, “Justification.”
cared for its members. She first states that a church can forgo leadership altogether, since “the Churches of Christ may be truly constituted according to Scripture, and subsist a certaine time without Pastor and Teacher, and enjoy the Power of Christ among themselves.” She uses the imagery of Christ as husband and the church as his wife to argue that even when Christ is not physically there, it does not mean that the wife cannot effectively manage the family’s affairs and to “prove that the family must not be unprovided for, either for the absence or neglect of a steward,” or to say that the church, being guided by Christ does not necessarily require leadership at all, at least for a “certaine time,” long enough to establish new leaders chosen by the church congregation.

Chidley goes on to explain that, when the need arises for church leadership, Christ already provided rules: “Christ commanded the Apostles to ordain Elders in every Church by election; therefore the Apostles taught the Churches to ordain Elders by election also.” In the Catholic tradition, it is Peter, as rock of the Church and Peter’s lineage of ordination which explains the right of ordination by church leaders. Chidley points out that since the Anglican church supposedly no longer ties itself to the authority of Peter, then there is no longer an argument for ordination through Peter’s line. Furthermore, Chidley sees in the establishment of the original Christian churches, described in Acts of the Apostles and in Paul’s letters, as a blueprint for electing church leaders in each individual church:

Then the apostles, and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas... we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you (Acts 15: 20-25).  

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26 Chidley, “The Justification of the Independent Churches.”
27 Ibid.
Because the apostles and elders taught the “comming together of the Ministers, and Brethren” the church has the right to elect its leadership.29

The right to elect leadership as a religious body, with each member having a voice is also preceded by a right not to have other churches interfere in the governance decisions of each individual church. Chidley explains, rather elaborately, how important the differences between the Jewish tradition and the new gentile Christians were. Paul traveled all over, preaching Christ’s message but also making crucial decisions regarding the observance of older Jewish traditions for gentiles who knew little to nothing about such traditions. A practice such as circumcision, which was of foundational importance to Jews who accepted Christ, was perhaps less important to gentiles who, as Paul saw it, needed only to accept Christ’s grace in order to find salvation. Thus, as Chidley explains, choices regarding whether or not to observe certain practices were the domain of each individual church: “The Church of Antiocha judged it an unequall thing for them to judge the members of the Church of Jerusalem”.30 Paul advised the independent churches “that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God” and instead “we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication (Acts 15: 19-20).”31 Chidley interpreted this as a need for separate churches to follow specifically those rules, such as the Ten Commandments, which were immutable, but that in matters of undelineated practice or everyday leadership each church had the right to define such things for itself. As Ian Gentiles explained, “not only were the laity quite competent to

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30 Ibid.
organize their own churches, but people of the humblest status... were as fit as anyone else for the task.”

This small, democratic theocracy which Chidley avows benefits the individual, who may exercise her conscience by choosing what she believes to be God’s will, also benefits the congregation because it tends to the needs of all of its people. She stresses that the family structures of the independent churches are strong and that the Anglican Church persecutes people and destroys families:

And I know right well that the Ministers of the Separation, have never been chargeable to the Church of England, neither have any of their poor orphans beene left to any of her parishes, though their parents have suffered death (in prison) by the cruelty of the Prelates... yet God turned his hands upon the little ones and provided for them, according to his promise, so that as the righteous parents were never forsaken, neither did their feeede beg their bread.

Chidley contrasts the abuses of the Anglican Church with the care-giving community of the small church. The “hands” of God are the people of God’s church, since Christ is the head and the church is his body. Also, as part of Christ’s body, members of the church are God’s instruments. As such, they can help sinners to repent. A sinner who refused to ask God’s forgiveness could be excommunicated, but not by one person because “Paul took not upon him that power of himselfe, but committed the action to the Church.” Similarly, Rousseau bequeathed the general will with the power to eradicate non-conformists within the group. In

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32 Gentiles, “London Levellers in the English Revolution: The Chidleys and Their Circle,” The Journal of Ecclesiastical History Vol. 9 No. 3, 1978, 284. Gentiles makes a larger argument which heavily points to Chidley’s analysis of class. Chidley consistently berates the Anglican Church for ignoring suffering and lifts up the common craftsman or artisan as the antithesis of the wealthy, greedy clergyman who uses God for gain. Also, though Gentiles work is older, it is important in that it portrays Chidley’s contributions as part of the Revolution, whereas later scholars separate her from the work of revolution and into the separate sphere of feminism.

33 Chidley, “A New Yeares Gift.”

34 Chidley, “Justification.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract, Trans. by Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 74: “If the state, or the nation, is nothing other than an artificial person the life of which consists in the union of its members and of the most important of its cares is its preservation, it needs to have a universal and compelling power to move and dispose of each part in whatever manner is beneficial to the whole.” Rousseau’s understanding of government is similar to Chidley’s in that the sovereign is the general will and that the general will has the authority over everyone.

35 Ibid.
Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, if the majority believed one course of action was best, and only a few protested or refused to conform, then the majority had the right to oust those who threatened the harmony of the larger group. Chidley also argues that a non-believer can harm the larger community, but she emphasizes that the harmful non-believer should not expelled by only one or a few members of the church. The entire community must make such a decision. Though this could appear to be cruel, it seems less so in light of her very real belief that the devil was among them and could cause illness, death, or other calamities: “the malice of Sathan [is] in the seed of the Serpent, as it hath beene, and is now at this day.”

**Spiritual Equality and Individual Conscience**

Establishing spiritual equality, or the belief that all souls are equal before God, legitimized the right of people from every social status to read, interpret, and write about Christianity. This spiritual equity was advocated by women like Chidley in order to authorize their petitions and protests. Chidley used the connected arguments for spiritual equality and freedom of conscience to argue for Protestant religious toleration and the independent government of Protestant churches. As discussed previously, it would have made little sense to Chidley’s understanding of the world to attack patriarchy, but must this be the only criteria for putting her into a feminist genealogy? Certainly there are women around the world advocating for freedoms of various people who perhaps do not challenge directly male authority over women. What is present in Chidley’s equality and conscience discussions is an advocacy for

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36 Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 79: “Moreover, since every wrongdoer attacks the society’s law, he becomes by his deed a rebel and a traitor to the nation; by violating its law, he ceases to be a member of it; indeed, he makes war against it.” For Chidley, a violation of God’s law harms the larger congregation because it puts them at risk of evil. Therefore, in the same sense of giving up a right in order to enjoy the freedom of a community, Chidley’s independent church members constitute a general will, one that follows Christ’s law, and can extinguish law breakers to preserve the individual members as well as the congregation as a whole.

37 Chidley, “Justification.”
what was in her time a disadvantaged group, “the taylors, feltmakers, buttonmakers, tent-makers, shepherds or ploughman,” or, in other words, the common working person.\(^{38}\)

Among the common people were many women, and while Chidley did not advocate female power in civil matters (though religion was very much linked with civil matters), she saw that women possessed equal souls and thus an equal opportunity to be as good or better Christians than their husbands. When arguing against Mr. Edwards, Chidley dismisses his charges that independency would negatively affect families: “Next you say O! how will this [religious toleration] take away that power and authority which God hath given to Husbands, Fathers, and Masters, over wives, children, and servants.”\(^{39}\) Chidley answered, explaining that no one controls the minds of women regarding matters of faith as stated in the bible “which plainly declares that the wife may be a beleever, and the husband an unbeleever, but if you have considered this text, I pray you tell me, what authority this unbeleieving husband hath over the conscience of his beleevying wife.”\(^{40}\) A husband could not “be a Lord over her conscience.”\(^{41}\) If even the husband had no right over his wife’s conscience regarding spiritual matters, then indeed neither did an arbitrary church authority. Ann Hughes, an English Revolution scholar, explained spiritual equality and its effects on family dynamics: “Remarkably, given the restrictions on women’s public participation within these congregations, a believing woman with ‘a husband not in order’ (that is not within the church) was encouraged to defy her household head.”\(^{42}\)

Chidley used the ascendance of women’s spiritual equality to argue with a male theologian and assert her right to religious toleration. The righteous needed to identify evil and Chidley used stories from scripture to justify a believer’s separation from the state church: “the

\(^{38}\) Chidley, “The Justification of the Independent Churches of Christ.”
\(^{39}\) Ibid.
\(^{40}\) Ibid.
\(^{41}\) Ibid.
people were commanded to depart from the tents of those wicked men, then were the children separated from the parents, and those who did not separate, were destroyed by fire.”

While spiritual equality could cut through lines of class and gender, it was still an equality meant for believers, and separatists were the natural and righteous beneficiaries of equality through Christ. Someone outside of God’s light, for example an Anglican or a Catholic, would not have been seen as a spiritual equal, but rather as one not having those same rights: “Be not unequally yoked together with unbeleevers; for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darknesse, and what concord hath Christ with Belial?”

Furthermore, Chidley herself maintains that she does not believe in “a toleration of all religions” which “I cannot conceive to be proper; for there is but one true Religion and that is it which hath Gods Word for rule.” Therefore, the limits of Chidley’s thought were more in her fears of false faiths which she saw as leading toward evil rather than limits on which class or sex of person had the right to be a spiritual equal and to exercise her/his conscience on religious matters.

As a true believer with the knowledge of scripture as her weapon, Chidley constantly differentiated between those like herself and an evil Anglican Church clergyman. “The Lords people” were true believers who “proved what they taught by divine authority” but the bishops used the “practice of the instruments of Sathan.” As a true believer, Chidley could teach Christ’s gospel. Being equal in Christ also came with a responsibility to do good things for her community. In her study of women who utilized religion for self-liberation and access to education, Diane Willen explained how spiritual equality became a necessary measure of Protestant or separatist sects:

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44 Ibid.
45 Katherine Chidley, “Good Counsell, to the Petitioners for Presbyterian Government, That They may Declare Their Faith Before They Build Their Church,” Women’s Writings Online.
46 Chidley, “The Justification of the Independent Churches of Christ.”
The requirements of godly behavior - rigorous study of Scriptures, daily prayer, reliance on preaching, strict observance of the Sabbath, religious instruction of children, good works, fellowship and counsel within the godly community - were both obligation and privilege, the means to feel and reflect assurance, and they must therefore be accessible equally to men and women.\(^47\)

For Chidley and separatists like her, authority through the use of scripture and the doctrine of spiritual equality improved a woman’s ability to achieve an individual self while contributing to the betterment of the congregation.

Religious freedom of conscience, as part of an individual identity as a Christian soul, was crucial when parliamentarians and many other thinkers constantly engaged in verbal rebellion during the 1640s. Christopher Hill remarked that “the Church, then, defended the existing order, and it was important for the government to maintain its control over this publicity and propaganda agency... that is why political theories tended to get wrapped up in religious language.”\(^48\) While Hill is correct in seeing the Anglican Church authorities and the royalists as needing constantly to reassert the status quo, the religious language which rebels like Chidley used was not like our modern concept of propaganda: Chidley, and others like her, held deep religious beliefs which could not be separated from views on politics or the institution of marriage and family. For all the various religious sects who were turning the world of seventeenth century England upside down, protests were equally made because of fears of being cast into hell for practicing a false faith as well as to gain control of politics. While shrewd, and perhaps even secular men and women may have used the chaotic atmosphere of revolution to attain power and privilege, Chidley’s argument for freedom of conscience represents the very

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real concerns of early modern English people about the absolute supremacy of religion in daily life.

Conclusions

In his article, “Women and the Civil War Sects,” Keith Thomas discusses the immediacy of Chidley’s works. Conservative monarchists like Filmer feared the logical outcomes of spiritual equality, such as children, women, and every other member of society realizing the political potential of religious freedom. Women read Milton and began believing in divorce. Many men feared that women’s calls for religious freedom of conscience would cause divorce or that women would no longer obey their husbands in any matter. “The Leveller principle that men and women were born free and equal and could only be governed by their own consent had implications for the family as well as for society in general.” Yet, even upon analyzing the socially revolutionary significance of the spiritual equality doctrine on political theory and the family, Thomas still concluded that the “sectarian insistence upon women’s spiritual equality” did not “seem to have been of very great importance in the later history of female emancipation in general.” This could not be further from the truth.

Though Chidley did not attack patriarchy or utilize secular arguments for female equality, her work belongs in both the lineage leading up to more modern feminist traditions and Lockean liberalism. As will be seen in the next chapter, Damaris Masham’s argument that women have


50 Keith V. Thomas, “Women and the Civil War Sects,” Past and Present Vol. April No. 13, 1958, 54. Keith’s text is unique in that it discusses spiritual equality. Though Ann Hughes discusses the importance of spiritual equality to early modern women’s advocacy, as do other studies of Quaker women, most of the recent scholarly work on Chidley ignores spiritual equality or downplays its significance. Thomas, though he makes a thorough case for the importance of spiritual equality for women, denies in the end that it was at all important.

51 Ibid., 56.
the equal intelligence of men begins with an appeal to spiritual equality. After all, arguing that one’s immortal soul possesses equal significance opens the door to arguing that the mind can also achieve intellectual transcendence. In terms of Lockean liberalism, Chidley argued for religious toleration for Protestant churches before Locke, and later Mendelssohn, expanded religious toleration to Catholics, Calvinists, and Jews (for Locke, every religion could be acceptable except for atheism). More importantly, Locke’s concept of religious tolerance is based on the same foundation of religious freedom of conscience. Whereas Hobbes desperately feared the outcome of calls for the religious freedom of conscience which he himself witnessed in the years of the Revolution, Locke saw observing one’s conscience in religious matters as tantamount to individual freedom. Furthermore, the very democratic social contract which Chidley devises for an individual church congregation is comparable to Rousseau’s very similar political contract, and indeed, they both experienced the dynamics of a decentralized Protestant community. Instead of a general will, the will of the people is a collective will representing Christ’s word. By virtue of being godly people, Chidley believes that the congregation can easily solve its own problems, just as Rousseau’s general will always tends to make good choices for the group. Chidley’s works portray a picture of the beginnings of Enlightenment, not through wholly secular thoughts but rather through a Christian consciousness which questions the legitimacy of authority and creatively invents new arguments to undermine authorities that limit freedoms. In that tradition of liberal thought, Chidley becomes a forerunner to many great thinkers in the age that follows.

Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 72: “the general will is always rightful and always tends to the public good; but it does not follow that the deliberations of the people are always equally right... the people is never corrupted, but it is often mislead; and only then does it seem to will what is bad.” Rousseau believes that the sovereign or general will shall always make the right choices. Only when a false prophet comes along and distorts the truth can the general will make decisions that can harm the community.
CHAPTER II
DAMARIS MASHAM: THE PENSIVE

As discussed in the previous chapter, the English Revolution created a chaotic space for women in England to begin a tradition of questioning society through the written word. Chidley exemplified this tradition. Yet, by the end of the seventeenth century, the rebellious voice of religious women lost some of its potency as it became mainstream for women to write about religion. Although most women of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century England still lived in extreme poverty and the majority of all English people remained illiterate, English women of the aristocracy and the middling sort began finding their voices and inserting them into the discourse of the age. By the time of the British Enlightenment, hailed by the accomplishments of the Cambridge Platonists and by famous philosophers such as John Locke, many middle class women participated in a flourishing culture of philosophical inquiry, branching out from scriptural arguments to ones which were rooted in logic and reason.

One such woman, Lady Damaris Cudworth Masham, lived an extraordinary life and left a legacy of important, albeit posthumously neglected, philosophical works. *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Virtuous or Christian Life* was thought, during Masham’s lifetime, to be penned by Locke, and thus was read more widely than perhaps other women’s texts may have been. She was born in 1658, and unlike many women of her day, Masham was fortunate to receive the encouragement of her father, Ralph Cudworth (a Cambridge Platonist himself), concerning her education. Masham also benefited from growing up in the company of the most contemporaneously notable school of philosophy, reading and learning about her father’s work as well as that of his colleagues, and learning about empiricism and the new sciences. Masham corresponded with other great thinkers of the day, which contributed as well to her blooming
intellect. As a very young woman, she began an exchange with John Locke, which ripened into a deep, enduring friendship. She also corresponded with the famous German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. She married Sir Francis Masham in 1685. They had one son, Francis Cudworth Masham. In 1692, Locke came to live out the rest of his life at the Masham Estate, Oates, and even bequeathed his personal library to Masham’s son. She passed away in 1708. Masham’s early educational experiences, her rich correspondences, and the many brilliant visitors at her estate, including Locke, Sir Isaac Newton, and the illustrious Lord Shaftsbury, contributed to her ability to study and write philosophical works of her own.

This chapter examines Masham’s work and how it fits into the development of liberal feminism in Enlightenment England. By analyzing Masham’s work, I posit that Masham’s philosophy anticipates much of what Wollstonecraft would later write. Like Wollstonecraft, Masham’s work is sophisticated not only because it addresses issues important to women, but because it addresses them within the context of a real world populated by men and women, children, various social classes, and various faiths. Therefore, this chapter will try to assess Masham’s work in its entirety, examining her remaining private letters and the two treatises she wrote: *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (1696); and *Occasional Thoughts in Reference*
to a Vertuous or Christian Life (1705). This chapter will also point out the ways in which Masham’s work, through intellectual meaning, connects to her successor, Wollstonecraft.

All of Masham’s work centers around a few simple, yet significant themes. Her work is grounded, first and foremost, in her belief and faith in God. Thus, each train of thought must connect back to God’s magnificence in her mind. Her foundational belief in human individuality rests in her certainty that human free will is a gift from God. Masham also deals with the importance of female personhood, or the equality of women spiritually and intellectually. She opens a discussion of class, one where she is concerned with philosophies or theologies that somehow disadvantage lower, less privileged classes. Like Chidley before her and Wollstonecraft after her, Masham’s overall philosophy is cohesive through the concept that individuality and sociability exist together to assist one another. Masham’s concept of human sociability rests primarily in her assertion that God created humans to be social creatures.

Christianity as the Basis of an Equal and “Vertuous” Society

For Masham, all roads lead back to Christ. Through her work, it is clear that her philosophy stems from Christianity, where she recognizes the goodness that a Christian morality gives to society and she attempts to make Christianity become a natural part of philosophical reason. Masham was not alone in her basic Christian foundations, since most women of her time, including the famous Mary Astell, saw Christianity, and participation in bringing followers to one’s own Christian belief system, as truly liberating.58

58 A contemporary of Damaris Masham, Mary Astell wrote about various philosophical topics including metaphysics, theology, female freedom, and epistemology. She is best known for her work, A Serious Proposal to the Ladies (1694), which suggested that women who did not want to marry could find freedom by establish ladies’ retirements. These retirements, akin to the Catholic convent, would allow women to work and pursue intellectual, especially religious, pursuits free from men. For more on Mary Astell’s life and work see: Sowaal, Alice, "Mary Astell", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/astell/>.
Masham’s writings cleverly blend philosophy with Christianity. *Discourse on the love of God* entered an important public debate about the nature of human love, and its intended purpose by God. In this debate, Masham argued against Father Nicholas Malebranche, a contemporary philosopher and theologian, who developed the philosophy of *occasionalism*. An occasionalist philosophy sought to expound upon Descartes’ dualism in order to show that God creates and causes all of our feelings and sensations.\(^{59}\) Fanatically (in Masham’s view) following Malebranche’s work, the English philosopher John Norris argued further that, since it is God who creates human thoughts, all forms of matter (material and immaterial), and human sensations, he thus creates human pleasure and joy, therefore people must love him alone.\(^{60}\) In some sense, an ideal Christian life, as built upon the principle of loving God alone, would see human beings living in quiet places of reflection and devotion, doing everything for the pleasure of God, on a quest akin to nirvana.\(^{61}\)

In *Discourse*, Masham disavows occasionalism and argues instead that God created human beings for the purpose of loving both God and all of God’s creatures. Arguing against proponents of occasionalism, Masham begins with epistemology, first discussing how human beings acquire knowledge. She adopts a Lockean stance, positing that "all knowledge derives from the experience of sensation and reflection."\(^{62}\) Though good flows from God, it makes little sense that God would go to the trouble of creating a rational human intellect, with the powers of

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61 Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest* (London: Printed for Richard Wilkin at King’s Head in St. Paul’s Church-yard, 1697), Available from Archive.org: Astell suggests that women who want to devote their lives to reflection on God can enter what she terms a “retirement,” a Protestant version of a Catholic nunnery. Astell sees this lifestyle as relevant, and even ideal, precisely because she believed that God alone deserves our love and uttermost attention.
discovery, only to control each sense and guide all human thought. To Norris and his followers, Masham purports that a theory of love of God alone makes people heathens by ignoring the human capacity to search for understanding:

Without having a great Opinion of their own Faculties, or a very small one of the Power, and Wisdom of God. And they must also be clear sighted, if they can discern how this Hypothesis of Feeling all things in God, helps us one jot further in the Knowledge of our Ideas, and Perceptions; which is the thing it was Primarily pretended to be designed for. They who advance this Notion, do only fetch a Circuit, and then return where they were before, without gaining any advantage, by Derogating (as they do) from the Wisdom of God, in framing his Creatures like the Idols of the Heathen, that have Eyes, and see not; Ears, and hear not, &c.63

Masham thus argues that a non-dualist epistemology does not take away from God, but rather proves that God created rational beings who can learn, using a philosophical discovery to substantiate her Christian beliefs.

Another way in which Masham blends Christianity with philosophy is in her position that Christianity is the best moral system that can shape society for the good. In *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life*, Masham provides examples of ways that people who turn from God can cause chaos and immorality. She argues that without Christian education people can have no hope of being successful in this life or the next.64 For Masham, “vertue...for its extent is equal to our liberty of Action,” or in other words free will.65 If human beings have free will, then it makes sense that “the belief of a Superior, Ominipotent Being, inspecting our Actions, and who will Reward or Punish us accordingly is... the only stable and irresistible Argument for submitting our Desires to a constant Regulation.”66 While some philosophers, most notably Spinoza, had begun to question Christianity and the existence of God

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
altogether, Masham saw that philosophical reason and human free will should be amenable to Christian religion; specifically because complex systems of secular morality did not yet exist.67

Free Will

Free will is important to Masham’s overall philosophical body of work because each argument she makes is based on this principle. As stated above, Christian morality has no purpose without human liberty of thought and action. Masham herself was a relatively rare gem participating in such a discussion. Most English women writers, at least until the eighteenth century, tended to confine those writings to theology. Arguments made by women were grounded heavily in scriptural citations and proofs. Deeper philosophical issues, such as the metaphysical versus material debates were considered out-of-bounds for female thinkers. Masham’s work straddles those worlds. Her writing shows her to be a devout Christian, sometimes using scripture to support her work, yet she also bravely tackles materialism (or total denial of spiritual substances) as well as metaphysical theories that do not adhere to reason. Her blending of Christian consciousness with philosophical reasoning displays itself well in Masham’s letters to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

The letters between Masham and Leibniz center on Leibniz’s “New System.” Leibniz’s system sought to expand Descartes’ work on metaphysics.68 Leibniz theorizes that the immaterial substance that God put into all human beings must have associated substances, which also animate and direct other animals and plants. Furthermore, these immaterial substances (the name of these substances, Leibniz states, does not matter) have their own natural laws just as do laws that govern corporeal substances. He argues that neither can change or affect the other, a

principle he calls ‘unextended substances.’ The laws of immaterial substances impose themselves on the body so that “bodies are subjected to souls in advance.”\textsuperscript{69} That is to say, that even though no changes actually take place between the material and immaterial, the body has been made to fit the soul, in what Leibniz calls “pre-established harmony,” and as restated by Masham, the body “does yet always correspond to the passions and perceptions which the soul hath.”\textsuperscript{70} Leibniz asserts that the soul is indestructible, but that the soul never exists without a body, nor body without a soul, living in a sort of unconnected symbiosis but by the supposed pre-established imposition of the soul upon the body.

Masham saw many problems with Leibniz’s system. Though she praised him for laboring so hard to conform his theory to God’s goodness, she believed there were two reasons that his theory was no “more than a hypothesis.”\textsuperscript{71} First, she posits that it makes little sense for the body and the soul to have each their own separate laws without any possibility of one substance changing the other:

they must have some extension, which you deny them; who, I think, also place the union of the soul with its respective body in nothing else but that correspondence or conformity whereby, in virtue of a ‘pre-established harmony’, souls and bodies acting apart, each by their own laws, the same effects are produced as if there was a real communication betwixt them.\textsuperscript{72}

If there are two sorts of substances, corporeal that can be observed and explained, and incorporeal which cannot, then both substances must be capable, if they live in symbiosis, of extending toward one another, of interacting.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 209.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 210.
\textsuperscript{73} Robert C. Sleigh, Jr., “Reflection on the Masham-Leibniz Correspondence,” Early Modern Philosophy, eds., Christia Mercer and Eileen O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 124. Sleigh explains that not only was Masham criticizing Leibniz’s theory, she was also proposing one of her own. Rather than see two separate
The second reason that Masham finds Leibniz’s ‘hypothesis’ inconceivable is that it damages the concept of free will. Leibniz asserts that the soul is a sort of first mover, like the engine that sparks a machine (body) to life (still without an explanation as to how the soul does this without some sort of ability to alter corporeal matter). The great mover of the soul in this system is, obviously, God. Masham addresses this notion as inconsistent with free will:

I will, however, now mention to you one difficulty (as I conceive) in your hypothesis, which I think not that I could ever extricate it from without your assistance, and it is to me a very material one. Viz. how to reconcile your system to liberty or free agency; for though in regard of any compulsion from other causes we are according thereto free, yet I see not how we can be so in respect of the first mover... Though as being persuaded that I felt myself a free agent, and that freedom to act is necessary to our being accountable for our actions, I do not conclude we are endowed therewith, but am very tenacious hereof, whence I should be sorry to find from any new hypothesis new difficulties in maintaining of this.\(^74\)

For Masham, we cannot be responsible to God without having the freedom of choice that necessitates a belief in right or wrong action. As she points out later, Leibniz’s own belief in God’s gift of human liberty goes against his own hypothesis, “since what you have said in print persuades me that you have the same belief with the same bias...”\(^75\)

Not only is the discussion here focused on God, but also Masham’s own desire for all philosophical work to “further discoveries therein of his Divine perfections,” rings clear.\(^76\) This exchange also highlights Masham’s Christian belief in free will, one that is necessary for her to form opinions about human virtue, God’s purpose for us, and the ways we should treat one another. Believing in free will allows Masham to hold men responsible for mistreating women, to hold theologians accountable for drawing up systems which are inequitable to all human souls,

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\(^76\) Ibid., 207.
and to theorize that we are accountable to ourselves, others, and God for our actions. Also, free will fits into a world where God created laws governing both nature and human beings. Reason leads human minds toward the goods rewarded from following God’s laws. Thus, with no first mover and therefore with the will to choose our actions, the formation of human beings based on their interactions with other beings becomes of the utmost importance.

**Female Personhood**

In light of Masham’s discussion of free will, her defense of female personhood extends that concept, and shapes her ideas about human individuality. Masham views human beings as both free agents and as flawed creatures often hampered by bad education. Her discussion of female humanity often echoes Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, with Masham consistently describing the negative ways in which humans are acculturated, yet still maintaining that humans can choose to improve themselves. Poor education, of both practical and religious instruction, causes many social problems that Masham addresses. While she treats society at large, she also pays close attention to the inequitable education of women.

There are several key ideas in Masham’s works regarding individuality, and particularly female individuals. A central thread in Masham’s works seeks to show that women are human beings, both spiritually and intellectually. First, Masham utilizes the idea of the total spiritual equality of souls to explain how women are equal. She criticizes the treatment of women as sexual objects. She then connects the intellect with both the soul and with the Christian imperative of educating oneself in order to preserve and protect the soul. She is concerned as well with women developing a real sense of self not attached to physicality. Finally, Masham

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77 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin Books, 1997): Locke develops his theory of human knowledge and makes some criticisms of how human learning is exploited by leaders, civil or religious, through every level of education. Mothers are often too uneducated to teach their children properly. Clerics develop ideas that serve themselves and keep people ignorant.
argues that women have a great capacity to educate children (a job typically managed by men of the time) and thus to greatly benefit society.

Arguing that women have souls may appear antiquated or unnecessary, but throughout history, many theologians and philosophers blamed women for the induction of evil into the world based on Genesis and the origin of sin. This supposed guilt of Eve necessitated a constant reassertion that God created souls equally. Furthermore, during Masham’s time, many social discussions sought to reclaim some of the waning female autonomy gained fifty years earlier during the English Civil War, where female preachers and writers like Chidley began running rampant in England.78 Masham cleverly uses female spiritual equality as an already agreed upon premise from which she will build an argument regarding female education:

For if Christianity be a Religion from God, and Women have Souls to be sav’d as well as Men; to know what this religion consists in, and to understand the grounds on which it is to be receiv’d, can be no more than necessary Knowledge to a woman, as well as to a Man.79

Women have souls that must be saved and protected. In order to do this, women must have a clear understanding of Christian religion, must be able to reflect upon it, and think freely about it. Women must be educated.

Before Masham discusses good ways for women to receive educations, she expounds upon the ill-conceived ideas taught to most women of her time. Rhetorically, Masham wonders why women should be kept from understanding a faith that they are forced to believe and are told to live by:

What then should those who would cure, or prevent all Mistakes prejudicial to the right understanding the Christian Religion so carefully do, as to perswade and ingage People diligently and with unprejudic’d Minds to study the Scriptures; and not (as is usual) to

embrace Opinions concerning Religion first, and then consult the Scriptures only to fortifie from thence their preconceiv’d Sentiments?  

If people do not study the scriptures on their own, then they are not individuals, but merely foolish followers, being led “blindly upon the Teachings of Men, and such Men too as blindly follow’d others.” Masham sees nothing barring women from understanding the scriptures, since women can use reason to understand them, and instead, Masham postulates that “Religion is necessarily included, as being the Duty of all persons to understand, of whatever Sex, Condition, or Calling they are of.” If women have not been taught how to reason, then society is constructing irrational women. Masham explains that if women do not use reason, then “we degrade our selves of being Rational Creatures; and Deprive our selves of the only Guide God has given us for our Conduct in our Actions and Opinions.”

Even arguing that women possessed the reasoning faculties which would allow them to study anything critically, including the scriptures, flew in the face of accepted culture. Just as Malebranche’s occasionalism caused problems with free will and sociability, his theories denigrated any idea of female ability to reason. As Jacqueline Broad describes in her book, Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century, Malebranche believed in the traditional idea that masculinity meant intellect (the mind), the divine and spiritual, while femininity represented the common, earthly, and material nature of human existence. God endowed men with reason, and the use of it by women seemed vulgar and challenged the very basis of societal normality. Katherine Ready explains in her essay, “Damaris Cudworth Masham, Catherine Trotter Cockburn, and the Feminist Legacy of Locke’s Theory of Personal Identity,” that women in

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80 Ibid., 218.
81 Ibid., 218.
82 Ibid.
83 Masham, “Occasional Thoughts.”
84 Broad, “A Woman’s Influence?” 136.
Masham’s time suffered the popular view of female irrationality. Women supposedly had weak brains and could not reason as men could, and most women considered to possess atypically sound mental faculties, or the ability to use masculine reason, were treated with “condescension.” Therefore, Masham’s use of and advocacy for female reason was quite radical and necessary. Ready explains that:

Granting women the same form of rationality as men was a necessary first step in advancing the situation of women, both for moderate early modern feminists whose interest was in improving women’s education and in discouraging women’s preoccupation with fashionable and frivolous pursuits, and for those whose interest was also in the achievement of equal social, economic, and political rights.

While reason challenged masculine identity, so too did spiritual equality. English men became preachers, ministers, and occupied high clerical offices. They also studied theology, creating and philosophizing the scriptural understanding of Christian beliefs espoused in England. Religion also still tied itself directly to patriarchy, with the king/queen being the patriarchal head with divine authority, and the clergy duplicated that fatherly role in each church and parish across the country. Masham’s actual act of writing and challenging commonly held beliefs about women besmirched patriarchy. Perhaps as Ready suggested, Masham felt empowered by Locke’s ideas about identity and the illegitimate nature of patriarchy. Either way, by transcending the stereotypical weak and ignorant woman through the act of writing about topics that society had designated as male spaces, she actively proved herself to be a philosophical authority. Masham’s work shows how reason is simply human, and the rest of womanhood also possesses the capacity for it.

As well as presenting a defense for female spiritual and intellectual capability, Masham felt the need to defend a woman’s body. In Discourse, Masham defends women against the

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86 Ibid., 566.
occasionalist charge that the female body is evil. Proponents of occasionalism claimed that the female body creates a perceived need to children: by needing their mothers to survive children need and depend on the female body. Through pregnancy, breastfeeding, and by literally being the body that cares for children, the female body introduces a false notion that children should love their mothers, and, for Norris and Malebranche, turns children’s love from God. This supposed false love is considered by Malebranche and Norris to be a sinful distraction from loving God, ultimately making the female body the site of sin. Here Masham argues against the idea that desire for other humans “is the punishment of sin” and instead advocates that desire is a part of God’s design in nature. Since Malebranche and Norris believe that all appropriate sensation, desire, and love are caused directly by God (and meant to be directed toward God), all replications of such feelings are considered by them to be false. Masham explains that this hypothesis is false, since God has created us in such a way that allows us to desire many things, to enjoy those things, including the company of other people, and indeed, loving them:

But the Author of this Hypothesis tells us, That this is that indeed which makes Sin to be so exceeding sinful, viz. That we oblige God in Virtue of that first immutable Law of Order, which he has established (that is, of exciting Sentiments of Pleasure in us upon some operation of Bodies upon us) to Reward our Transgressions against him with Pleasure; and Delight. It is strange that we cannot seem sinful enough, without having a Power of forcing God to be a Partner in our Wickedness!

If it is natural to interact with other creatures and, in so doing, to react to those creatures with pleasure, then it makes little logical sense to say that love of one’s mother by virtue of her body’s life giving ability, or the joy she gives in caring for her child can be the product of a God who requires all pleasure to occur through direct interaction with him alone. Masham explains instead, with scriptural support from the Gospel of John, that “the more we Love God, the more

87 Masham, Discourse, 72-76.
88 Ibid., 74.
89 Ibid., 102.
we shall Love his Creatures” and that “by the Existence of the Creatures, we come to know That of their Author, and to Love him.” 90 Through our first experiences with other humans, most often our mother, we learn of the concepts of pleasure, desire, and love, and through our love of others so learn to love God. Without other human beings, our belief in and love of God would be impossible. By asserting that other human bodies teach us of love and God, Masham ultimately disentangles the female body from being a site of sin and shows it rather to be a starting point on a journey toward becoming a Christian.

After affirming the need for other human beings, and thus creating sanctity for bodies, especially female ones, Masham addresses as well unfair notions of chastity which have been superimposed upon female bodies, just as Wollstonecraft does later on. According to Masham, the “Notion of Honour” is always propagandized to women and young girls “as if the praise of Men ought to be the Supreme Object of their Desires.” 91 Chastity is then considered by society as the most important virtue that women can aspire to. Virtue becomes synonymous with chastity specifically when discussing the female sex. The problem that Masham identifies remains clearly entrenched in our modern society; women are defined and entire expectations of female behavior are constructed based on female anatomy. Masham explains that this definition is unjust:

Vertue: *A Term* which when apply’d to Women, is rarely design’d, by some People, to signifie any thing but the single Vertue of Chastity; the having whereof does with no more Reason intitle a Lady to the being thought such as she should in respect of Vertue, than a handsome Face, unaccompany’d by other Graces, can render her person truly Amiable. Or rather, *Chastity* is so essential to, singly, so small a part of the Merit of a Beautiful Mind, that it is better compar’d to health, or Youth, in the Body, which alone have small Attractions, but without which all other Beauties are of no Value. 92

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90 Ibid., 81, 65.
91 Masham, “Occasional Thoughts.”
92 Ibid.
Rather than be identified with intelligence, kindness, forbearance, or any other positive attribute of one’s personality, women are known and identified only by their restraint from inappropriate sexual acts. Masham viewed this essentialism as one cause of vain and foolish women, who believed they achieved all that was necessary by staying chaste, a specific criticism that Wollstonecraft still felt it necessary to expound upon almost a hundred years later. Yet, considering her time, it would seem ridiculous to expect Masham to eschew chastity altogether. Instead, Masham expresses her belief that women and men must both be chaste:

チョスティ (for example) is, according to the Gospel, a Duty to both Sexes, yet a Transgression herein, even with the aggravation of wronging another Man, and possibly a whole Family thereby, is ordinarily talk’d as lightly of, as if it was but a Peccadillo in a Young Man, altho’ a far less Criminal Offence against this Duty in a Maid shall in the Opinion of the same Persons brand her with perpetual infamy.93

In other words, men and women must be equally forgiven, punished, or shunned by society for inappropriate actions.

Masham explicates another facet of the chastity myth, “a farther Folly and ill Consequence in Men’s intitling Ladies to Glory on account of Chastity.”94 Masham identifies a false dichotomy: if a woman’s value and virtue are based on being either chaste or unchaste, then the results, in terms of a positive or negative effect on society, should obviously be different. Not so, says Masham. In both cases, the value to society is the same: whether a woman is chaste or unchaste, both result in unhappy marriages. Chaste women become conceited, such that overabundant self-admiration “does ordinarily produce in them Pride and Imperiousness, that is very troublesome to such as are the most concern’d in them.”95 In short, the vainglorious wife is unbearable. Yet, on the other hand, while an unchaste wife may seem the “Idol one of Men’s Invention,” she causes jealousy and other grief, or is exactly the type of

93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
woman it would be inappropriate to marry. Neither ideal works in a woman, because it is premised upon false chastity. Neither type of woman has any identity but that which is connected to her biological sex. If marriage becomes “a state in which a Man can no way be happy, it appears then how much Vertue is prejudiced by this foreign Support.” A woman’s character or virtue cannot logically be tied to this one characteristic, since her chaste or unchaste behavior equally results in misery.

Instead of further advocating a female identity based on false virtues, Masham returns again to the idea that God created us as social creatures to suggest a unique and individual role for women that will help shape a moral and productive society. Understanding the scriptures also becomes necessary when Masham examines the value of women’s roles. The idea of social creatures, combined with the idea of identity and the acquisition of knowledge are signified by Masham to redefine femininity by asking women to assume masculine duties. For Masham, if women educate themselves, they can then serve an important role in the community by educating their children. This was radical since men traditionally assumed the role of educator. As Ready states; “To some extent, assuming responsibility over education involved a usurpation of masculine prerogative, as women took over what had formerly been the job of male tutors, and gave them potentially unprecedented influence.” In John Locke’s treatise, Some Thoughts Concerning Education, he put forward the idea that a child’s most important years of development are the earliest. Both men and women served in meaningful roles in educating

96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
children, but it was the woman’s role, as possibly educating the child in its early years, which became the most important.⁹⁹

In light of Locke’s ideas, Masham’s ideal, that women should educate young children, is truly useful in terms of establishing a female role that envisions women as active participants in society. This call for mothers educating their small children, typically until the age of eight or nine, suggests a unique feminine character:

For that softness, gentleness and tenderness, natural to the Female Sex, renders them much more capable than Men are of such an insinuating Condescension to the Capacities of young Children, as is necessary in the Instruction and Government of them, insensibly to form their early Inclinations. And surely these distinguishing Qualities of the Sex were not given barely to delight, when they may so manifestly, be profitable also, if joyn’d with a well informed Understanding.¹⁰⁰

Any argument that women have the greater capacity to accomplish a task than men would most certainly have seemed radical at the time Masham wrote this. She explained it was “neglecting the Direction of Nature for the well breeding up of children, when the Ladies are render’d uncapable hereof.”¹⁰¹ Women have a natural capacity for teaching children, not rote learning, but the meaningful foundations of rational thought. In order to fulfill this feminine vocation, women too must be educated to think and reason, thus becoming capable of sharing such talents. Masham also utilizes God’s delegation of human gifts to legitimize her call for female education: if God intended that women, by their nature, are the best suited to educate children, then any man who disagrees becomes complicit in the disobedience of God. Since God is fully rational, and created only rational creatures, then no principle of nature can be corrupt. Reason, nature, and God disrupt the notions of woman as the natural and sinful. Woman is now the one chosen by God to spread rationality to children by virtue of her impeccable nature. While future feminists

⁹⁹ Ibid., 568-569.
¹⁰⁰ Masham, “Occasional Thoughts.”
¹⁰¹ Ibid.
argue that this role of mothering and teaching is damaging to women, Masham saw it as a liberation, not only for the benefit of society, but for women and their personal identity and personal value.

Problems of Class

Just as Masham is concerned with female education, which was particularly grounded in Christian education, Masham was also concerned with education and how it affected class. Other scholars have not pointed toward Masham’s discussion of class. Yet, her attention to class is an important component of her ideas about human sociability, and her mindfulness of class concerns presents another connection to Wollstonecraft’s later in depth class critiques. For the lower classes who could read, pamphlets and books offered them the opportunity to learn new things, but this was rare. Since most of the lower classes did not have the privilege of education, most lower class education still resided in the weekly sermons for churchgoers. Those who did not attend church received no education at all. Masham saw that the debates in contemporary theology and philosophy would trickle down to weekly sermons in parishes all over England. So, for Masham, theology needed to be concerned with philosophies that purported to benefit each level of society, not just those who could afford to think in the purely theoretical.

In beginning her discussion of class, Masham explains that there are two main purposes of “natural religion.” First, religion should be concerned with preparing human beings for virtuous lives and the protection of their souls. Second, in order to be worthy of eternal life, human beings must help one another, “the chief Aim of Christianity” being “a good Life.”\footnote{Masham, \textit{Discourse}, 2.} Regardless of various opinions about Christianity, everyone should agree “That we ought to be a
People zealous of good works,” or that the most important duty of Christians is to aid one another.103

Once she has set out this standard of doing good works and helping others, she interrogates the theological call for inward contemplation, of hiding away from the concerns of the world in order to come closer to God, another negative outcome of occasionalist philosophy. She associates this behavior with “popery.” Masham utilizes anti-Catholicism to point out how religious introversion allowed people to deny their duties toward fellow humans. Malebranche’s and Norris’ works implied that only those who could devote their lives to God alone would be saved and enjoy God’s grace. Social works become something “belonging to those of the lower class” making them unfit for God.104 In all actuality, Masham explains, “we are here taught, that the Love of God, and of our Neighbor, comprises the whole of our Duty.”105 Moreover, in our duty to God, we are obliged to do our neighbor “as little Harm, and as much Good, as thou desirest should be done to thy self.”106

Norris, in particular, harmed the lower classes by developing theological concepts that assumed the necessity of advanced education. Masham argues that the bible was meant to be somewhat simple in its message in order that more people could understand it. Norris, on the other hand, takes biblical passages out of context and creates new complex meanings for them, which cannot be easily understood nor carried out by uneducated people. Masham shows Moses to be an excellent example of a prophet who gives commandments in a common manner so that all can understand. She also points out Moses’ direction that the law of God is not separated by rich and poor, but that it applies to everyone, “that they should not only take care of his

103 Ibid., 2.
104 Ibid., 5.
105 Ibid., 14.
106 Ibid., 16.
Temporal Wellfare, but also of his Spiritual.”

Theological doctrines for only the privileged ignore not only the social works commanded by God but also endanger the souls of those who cannot afford to lead a life of pure contemplation.

As stated earlier, this trickle down of bad philosophy causes bad education, “to which we owe most of the Mischiefs we suffer and usually charge upon Nature.”

Teaching poor guiding principles to the masses and then blaming their condition in life on their behavior is unjust. Masham questions the ability of people far removed from the real concerns of the world to determine what to teach people of that world. She quotes John 3:17: “But who so has this World’s Goods, and Seeth his Brother have need, and shutteth his Bowels of Compassion from him, how dwelleth the Love of God in him?”

Since the bible discusses guiding principles in simple terms, and since overly complex theology is not taught to women or lower class people “What may satisfie the Wife, and what the Weak (whose Souls are Doubtless of as much value and They as much concern’d for them) may easily comprehend.”

Again, spiritual equality moves from purely dealing in souls and becomes immediate. Creatures created by God are created with reason and a soul, both of equal value and use. Yet, when people abuse those who are economically disadvantaged through spurious teachings, the poor are even more disadvantaged by it. Masham reiterates that Christ brought down the proud and wealthy and raised the obedient and lowly, so that assuming some sort of superior knowledge which will keep people out, is clearly against the equality that Christianity should bring.

**Conclusions: Equality in Human Sociability**

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107 Ibid., 41, 47.
108 Ibid., 58.
109 Ibid., 61.
110 Ibid., 104.
111 Ibid., 114, 6.
As the order of Europe had previously viewed biblical knowledge as legitimacy for hierarchy, Masham views scripture as proof that God created all people as spiritual equals. She argues that humans have a purpose in the temporal realm, one of helping one another. She advocates education so that people may more fully make free choices as beings created with the will to choose. She repurposes Christianity to hopefully shape a more equal state. She shows that women are humans, with rationality and the unique temperaments to teach and educate: they are not simply sexual objects.

Though Masham’s work is not as sophisticated, in some respects, as later feminist works in terms of identifying larger structures of disadvantage, or in creating a more systematic political philosophy through which some of her social improvements might be implemented, there are obvious links between her thought and that of Chidley before her and also of Wollstonecraft after her. Masham expands Chidley’s advocacy of spiritual equality, showing that woman’s spiritual equality is a foundation for female intellectual equality. Like Wollstonecraft, Masham was concerned with how elite philosophies might harm the lower classes and women, whom she knew to be primarily uneducated. Though her class analysis is rudimentary, she is striking out at a separation between spiritual equals and mortal hierarchy, pointing out the sheer hypocrisy of it. Though she makes no calls for economic equality, calling for theoretical works that were conducive to the experienced daily life of everyone, women and the poor, presents an argument for equality and points out an elite abuse of power. Wollstonecraft, as will be discussed in Chapter three, takes discussions of class much further, but it is significant that Masham began the discussion. In addition, Masham’s analysis of female inequality, based on biological essentialism, precedes Wollstonecraft’s weightier arguments for female education. Masham is asking people to stop denying a woman’s rationality and to give her fair education.
and spiritual training. Wollstonecraft takes this concept even further. Like Chidley, Masham’s attention to the connections between the individual and society opens the door for Wollstonecraft’s political philosophy. Wollstonecraft will tear down everything, society and the individual, in order to imagine a stronger and more egalitarian world. Still, as much as Masham’s philosophy presages Wollstonecraft’s rebellious, fiery argumentation style and ideas, Masham’s unique position on so many important philosophical and theological issues are ultimately important in their own right as part of a larger intellectual atmosphere which looked for change and hoped for progress.
CHAPTER III
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: THE LAWGIVER

As has been shown, Chidley’s argument for the spiritual equality of believers opened a space for Masham to argue that if human souls are created equally, and if Locke’s idea of genderless minds was true as well, then it made logical sense that women could be educated and learn just as men could. Masham also heavily critiqued a woman’s virtue being tied to sexual abstinence and she extended spiritual and intellectual equality to those of disadvantaged classes. Wollstonecraft builds on these ideas. She further confounds the idea of male and female difference to create a new human ideal. Benefitting from Chidley and Masham, who were both concerned with the individual’s harmony with society, Wollstonecraft developed the important philosophical tenets of female independence and a new brand of humanism, specifically a humanism that included women. These two main ideas, individualism (self) and rational, romantic humanism (social), are often considered to be at odds with one another. I will show that Wollstonecraft envisioned the self and the social as two halves of a whole, not separate but equally important to each other.

When compared to what is left of the writings of Chidley and Masham, Wollstonecraft’s writings are voluminous. She published several books, including both philosophical treatises and philosophical fictions. Some of her private letters were published during her lifetime and historians of the twentieth century have compiled all of her remaining letters. Although this chapter will touch on some of her letters, it primarily deals with her philosophical treatises:

*Mary* (1788); *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790); *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792); *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794); and the novel *Maria or The Wrongs of Woman* (Posthumous, 1796). Though *Maria* is a novel, unlike the other works, it
is significant to Wollstonecraft’s philosophy because Maria is a dramatic portrayal of how Wollstonecraft believed that women were treated in her society. Also, since it was written at the end of her life, it represents much of the knowledge she had already learned, and thus encompasses many of the ideals explicated in her philosophical works. These specific writings present a cohesive picture of Wollstonecraft’s overall philosophy.

There are several themes throughout these works which demonstrate Wollstonecraft’s synthesis of the self and the social being. First, she establishes that women have been denied subject status and explains some of the reasons why this has been so. Second, she explains that men are also often kept from attaining self, and her examples show men from every level of society who have been enslaved just as women have. Third, Wollstonecraft shows how society as a whole, and the people in it, are false, and she rails against the debauchery and amorality that this falseness has created among humans. Fourth, Wollstonecraft provides detailed visions which, using acceptable as well as subversive ideas, redefine the ideal female and male selves. In this, she envisions both the female and male as one in character, even if not always in their duties, a subversive philosophy of gender in the eighteenth century, when the powers in every nation attempted to create new gender definitions and wield them for advantage. Finally, from these ideas, Wollstonecraft creates the possibility of an ideal society, one where the fully nurtured heart and intellect in both men and women leads to a true humanism and a more perfect society.

It is important to understand some of the essential beliefs of the society Wollstonecraft lived in.112 Eighteenth century England assigned both a legal and social secondary subject status

112 Many of the legal and social beliefs discussed here were being debated not just by Wollstonecraft, but also by other moralists and philosophers. Many other female writers, including Mary Hays and Hannah More, discussed these topics. Both men and women wrote significantly about the proper behavior and the formation of the character of women in “advice literature.” See Vivian Jones, “Mary Wollstonecraft and the Literature of Advice and
to women. As stated in William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, women, once married, were completely under the authority of their husbands, a passing of female subjugation from the rule of the father. This was the law of coverture, where any legal status of the woman as an individual was dissolved and she was “under the protection and influence of her husband, her baron, or lord” and with this disappearance “a man cannot grant anything to his wife, or enter into covenant with her: for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence; and to covenant with her, would be only to covenant with himself.”

Woman did not legally exist as a private person with all of the rights this entailed. Furthermore, Blackstone stated that divorce could not be attained by women, but only by men, that the law “expressly assigns incontinence as a cause, and indeed the only cause, why a man may put away his wife and marry another,” divorce itself being frowned upon altogether. Essentially, women who committed adultery could be divorced by their husbands, but the law made no similar qualifications for women who were abused by the licentiousness of their husbands. Women could rarely inherit their own wealth, a serious problem discussed by Jane Austen in her novels because of the financial problems it caused for wives and unwed daughters. Just as if wives were servants, husbands had the right to beat them for whatever reason. Because husbands were considered the sole legal entity in marriage, wives could not get custody of children in a divorce, an injustice which Wollstonecraft admonished often.

While the law explicitly granted no rights to women in marriage, Christianity and philosophy consistently assigned women an inferior intellectual status. As had been a problem while the law explicitly granted no rights to women in marriage, Christianity and philosophy consistently assigned women an inferior intellectual status. As had been a problem

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114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.
for both Chidley and Masham, Wollstonecraft still had to answer arguments that claimed women were considered the natural half of human nature, while men were considered divine, in the Christian and Aristotelian metaphysical sense. As Mary Catherine Moran explains, “the association of women with nature is of course an ancient one: according to a conception that can be traced back to Aristotle, it is the identification of the female with the natural which marks women as inferior, for it is precisely the extent to which he escapes from the realm of necessity that man is fully human.”

Society defined women as objects related to their reproductive functions. Men, who lived in autonomy from their generative biology, always exemplified divine nature. In the Age of Enlightenment, the creative properties of humanity, the ability to use reason and common sense became attributes of man alone for some thinkers. Woman thus became the opposite, insensible, irrational, a being who could not be an intellectual. Rousseau’s work of philosophical fiction which discussed his beliefs on education, *Emile*, propagated that women literally had no capacity for deep enlightenment through learning: “The quest for speculative truths, principles, and axioms in the sciences, for everything that tends to generalize ideas, is not within the competence of women.”

In the light of these social problems, Wollstonecraft herself was raised in the object status of many women, witnessing her mother’s enslavement as well as the awful state of marriage of her closest friend, Fanny Blood, and her sister, Elizabeth. Wollstonecraft was born in 1759. Her father, Edward, and her mother, also Elizabeth, both treated Wollstonecraft as immaterial because she was not a boy. She would inherit no property nor be apprenticed to any trade, and so

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117 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1979), 386. Rousseau believed that women were meant to be objects for the sexual gratification of men, for the use of creating children, and for establishing and keeping a man’s home. Women were not possessed of the intellect to “go out into nature” and create anything other than children. Wollstonecraft spent a fair amount of time equally agreeing with and disagreeing with Rousseau’s philosophy, which as regards men, was quite liberal and forward thinking.
her education and upbringing were somewhat neglected. In her youth, Wollstonecraft moved from place to place, an appendage to her father, who constantly chased a better financial situation since he often lost money on the sensual pleasures of drinking and whoring.

Wollstonecraft’s loneliness manifested itself in close, “romantic friendships” with her girlhood friends, Fanny Blood and Jane Arden. Wollstonecraft had one child outside of marriage, Fanny Imlay. She married the radical William Godwin and the two had another daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, later known as Mary Shelley. Wollstonecraft died in 1797.

Because Wollstonecraft felt no true love from most of her family members, her relationships with her sisters being pursued out of a sense of pity or necessity, she placed the highest worth in true friendship. Wollstonecraft believed all relationships should be egalitarian friendships, including husbands and wives, men and women, and parents and children. Each work of Wollstonecraft’s echoes equality for all members of society. Her ideal of equality is first centered on an ideal of the self, and the personal growth of the self. After all, “a genius will educate itself.” She believed the problems in society were caused primarily by the inhibitions of people, especially women, being denied a self.

**Denial of the Female Subject**

Wollstonecraft recognized and described the ways that women were denied an independent identity. While masculine identity dominated society and the eminence of men’s improvement remained of the utmost importance, all improvements to women were denied. Her first explanation of female enslavement is in her understanding of female sexual objectification.

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She also explains that if women have souls, then indeed they must be more than brute animals.

And, yet, society treats women like brute animals, meant only to breed. Incensed by the advice literature, popular in Wollstonecraft’s culture, that propagated this objectification of women, Wollstonecraft asks “how grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes!”

Wollstonecraft defines the problem of a lack of female identity or autonomous self as slavery.

The slavery of women is of a particularly sexual nature. It is based on “the unnatural distinctions established in civilized life,” or in other words, women are socially constructed to believe that they are biologically essential inferiors. Male thinkers, such as Rousseau, create ideals which women are meant to copy:

Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquetish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself.

Wollstonecraft is describing the way that female manners are crafted so that pleasure becomes their only object, and not their own pleasures but giving pleasure to men. Women should plume themselves for man’s desire, thus becoming purely sexual objects and “obedience is the grand lesson which ought to be impressed with unrelenting rigour.”

This sexual obedience, Wollstonecraft explains, comes from the differences in definitions of female virtue. As pointed out earlier by Masham, Wollstonecraft also indicates the ridiculousness of the idea that a modest woman is synonymous with one who is chaste. Again, Wollstonecraft sees that the major virtue which women learn and imitate is directly tied to a woman’s biological sex. In the philosophical novel Mary, Wollstonecraft defines the typically

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123 Ibid., 91.

124 Ibid., 91.
held definition of chastity, speaking of Eliza, Mary’s mother, she describes her as “chaste, according to the vulgar acceptation of the word, that is, she did not make any actual faux pas; she feared the world and was indolent.”\textsuperscript{125} This chastity is not an active virtue. Women do not adhere to ideals of chastity as an active part of their character, rather they lazily, foolishly submit to doing nothing because they have been acculturated to do so. Chastity, as it is always ascribed to the hidden and protected female anatomy, is a false virtue:

\begin{quote}
Truth is the only basis of virtue; and we cannot, without depraving our minds, endeavor to please a lover or husband, but in proportion as he pleases us. Men, more effectually to enslave us, may inculcate this partial morality, and lose sight of virtue in subdividing it into the duties of particular stations; but let us not blush for nature without a cause!\textsuperscript{126}
\end{quote}

Here Wollstonecraft’s character Maria laments her terrible circumstances, problems she has suffered because of the false virtue of chastity. Maria sees that there is no “cause” for chastity to be the chief virtue of women. The “blush for nature” is unnatural since there is no “cause” or reason why women’s bodies must define who they are.\textsuperscript{127}

Biological essentialism is created by men, whose desire to make women sex slaves is explicit in the way that women are educated:

\begin{quote}
Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness or temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least twenty years of their lives.\textsuperscript{128}
\end{quote}

Education is used to construct a female notion of propriety, duty, and purpose, yet this purpose is empty, it is based solely on the premise of sex. Obedience is drilled into the female mind and

\begin{itemize}
\item[126] Mary Wollstonecraft, \textit{Maria or The Wrongs of Woman} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 136. In this passage the main character, Maria, is describing to her estranged daughter (who has been taken from her and she imprisoned in a mental institution) her life story. Within this narrative, Wollstonecraft uses Maria to carefully weave in advice to the daughter, ways to develop her own character, and truths about the ways that men have enslaved women to suit their purposes.
\item[127] Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, 193.
\item[128] Ibid., 84
\end{itemize}
Wollstonecraft sees the whole greedy venture of female instruction as ridiculous, because women are seen as a public joke, “reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavor satire to improve them.” They are helpless, totally dependent on men, and on the education which has been offered to stifle their subjectivity. If they are educated that they have but one purpose, and that all in their life depends on male protection, all of the knowledge given to them serves that purpose, since “everything that they see or hear serves to fix impressions, call forth emotions, and associate ideas, that give a sexual character to the mind.” Women are denied reason and “if they be not allowed to have reason sufficient to govern their own conduct- why, all they learn- must be learned by rote!” Wollstonecraft is pointing to the lack of individual identity that is the result of this rote learning.

The most significant denial of subjectivity, in both the way women are educated and governed, rests in Wollstonecraft’s conception of the human soul. As discussed previously, female philosophers like Chidley and Masham argued for female ensoulment during the seventeenth century, and by the end of it, influential thinkers including Daniel Defoe and John Locke, accepted that women possessed divine souls just as men did. Many of Wollstonecraft’s arguments about female subjectivity begin with an assertion that the soul of woman is denied by her abject enslavement. In reference to the denial of an afterlife to Islamic women, Wollstonecraft explains that in Europe as well women “are treated as a kind of

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129 Ibid., 74.
130 Ibid., 132.
131 Ibid., 192.
132 Ibid., 193.
subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species.”\textsuperscript{134} Enslavement, subordination, and unthinking obedience are all required of beasts, not humans with souls. In \textit{Maria}, Maria contemplates her very unhappy marriage, where none of her wants, desires, or needs have been attended to by her husband. She is completely detached from him because he cares nothing for her. In submitting daily to his disrespect and neglect, Maria loses any sense of self which she previously established. This idea of self in Wollstonecraft’s works is equal to the notion of an immortal soul, or in metaphysical terms, an immaterial spirit or essence:

\begin{quote}
I seemed to lose, in his society, the soul, the energies of which had just been in action. To such a degree, in fact, did his cold, reserved manner affect me, that, after spending some days with him alone, I have imagined myself the most stupid creature in the world, till the abilities of some casual visitor convinced me that I had some dormant animation, and sentiments above the dust in which I had been groveling.\textsuperscript{135}
\end{quote}

Maria, left to her own devices as a child, developed a hunger for knowledge, and a sense of self. Yet, in her marriage, she has been deceived in the nature of her husband’s character. Her uncle matched them because of social class, not because they understood or truly loved one another. Once his real character is discovered, once slavery has become realized for Maria, she begins to lose the divine spark which makes her human. By forcing women to “run into legal prostitution,” Wollstonecraft argues that women lose their souls.\textsuperscript{136} A woman loses her soul or self when she is given no choices: “I cannot discover why, unless they are mortal, females should always be degraded by being subservient to love or lust.”\textsuperscript{137} Making a woman’s only purpose marriage denies female subjectivity and enslaves her soul. As will be explained later, Wollstonecraft connects the soul with the mind and intellect, making the improvement of the latter of the utmost importance to the former.

\textsuperscript{134} Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, 71.
\textsuperscript{135} Wollstonecraft, \textit{The Wrongs of Woman}, 129.
\textsuperscript{137} Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, 93. Here, she sees mortality as a description of a person without a soul.
Man’s Subjugation

While women have been subjugated by men, most men have been lowered to the same status as women. Wollstonecraft expresses throughout her works a new understanding of social classes, which some scholars have called socialistic. In “The Vindications and Their Political Tradition,” Chris Jones argues that Wollstonecraft’s humanism, equality, and Romanticism all influenced later “communitarian experiments” such as those of Robert Owen.\(^{138}\) Wollstonecraft chastises the aristocracy throughout her works, including the *nouveau riche* who purchased titles and government offices. Yet, she sees these wealthy people as also enslaved by a lack of understanding and a falseness of character in general. Slaves, women, and the poor she classifies as one class, a class of slaves. The only social group which possesses any freedom to learn, grow, and become individuals with distinct identities are the middling sort, in whose political involvement “we find the shades of despotism becoming lighter.”\(^{139}\) The language Wollstonecraft uses to describe the thralldom of slaves, women, as well as poor men, is the same in that they, “existing like mere animals, the tyrants of the world have continued to treat them only as machines to promote their purposes.”\(^{140}\) Just as women are brutes or animals, and used like birthing and sexual gratification machines by men, most men of the world, peasants, soldiers, and the growing class of factory workers, are machines working to create revenue for the wealthy.

Though the kings of the world and the wealthy, or aristocrats, be tyrants, the enslavers of the rest of humanity, they are not full human beings. Wollstonecraft dispossesses the wealthy of any “manliness” or masculinity by redefining them as tyrants who are themselves enslaved. She

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\(^{140}\) Ibid., 338.
provides the example of Rousseau’s belief that women should not be educated like men, which is tied to his idea of a feminine tyrant of beauty: “‘Educate women like men’ says Rousseau, ‘and the more they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us.’”141 Women of beauty and grand allurements, can make all men slaves, and “exalted by their inferiority...they constantly demand homage as women.”142 Men, who are consumed and controlled by sensuality, by their own inclination “to tyrannize over, and despise, the very weakness they cherish,” become slaves to lust. Because they have objectified the female sex, and because they are controlled by those passions for the pleasures derived from the sexual object, men lose a sense of their self. Wollstonecraft’s explanation of the tyranny of female beauty and sex over men shows that men, in an effort to compensate for a latent fear of the female intellect, become enslaved by the constant feeling of necessity to objectify women and act as if their affections and minds are immaterial: “The passions of men have thus placed women on thrones, and, till mankind becomes more reasonable, it is to be feared that women will avail themselves of the power which they attain with the least exertion and which is the most indisputable.”143 Wollstonecraft sees that men have no genuine affection for the female mind, because she has been reduced to her sex, yet this “adoration” of male passions enslaves both men and women.

Even without the tyranny of the female sex object, most men are denied subject status in other ways by society. Patriarchal hierarchy steals away the self. The system of heredity does not choose based on merits:

For if, excepting warriors, no great men, of any denomination, have ever appeared amongst the nobility, may it not be fairly inferred that their local situation swallowed up the man, and produced a character similar to that of women, who are localized, if I may be allowed the word, by the rank they are placed in, by courtesy?144

142 Ibid., 124.
144 Ibid., 127.
Just as women have virtues based on nonsense, men of the nobility also have “virtues incompatible with any vigorous exertion of intellect,” they do not “acquire that strength of character on which great resolves are built.”\textsuperscript{145} Wealthy men lower themselves beneath human dignity by not using the human gift of reason. Even the angry French mobs, creating immediate change by believing and imagining it to be possible “knew more of human heart and of legislation than the profligates of rank, emasculated by hereditary effeminacy.”\textsuperscript{146} Though they have all of the opportunities to make positive changes in the world, their status as noblemen, their life of idleness, and their disconnect with people beneath their ranks makes them just as useless as women.

The best example of denied male subjectivity comes from Wollstonecraft’s description of the French. “If for a relish for the broad mirth of \textit{fun} characterize the lower class of the English, the French of every denomination are equally delighted with a phosphorical, sentimental gilding.”\textsuperscript{147} In other words, French people in general are easily impressed with nonsense. “Their national character is, perhaps, more formed by their theatrical amusements... after this kind of education, is it surprising that almost everything is done for stage effect?”\textsuperscript{148} Using Voltaire’s historical description of the vain, despotic Louis XIV, Wollstonecraft pushes the image of a greedy father-king further. She describes absolutism as an enslavement of all French people, but she also sees the violent character of the common people, of the uprising of the French Revolution, as a partial awakening from slumber, as proof that, since they did not learn how to think or make changes sensibly, they erupted as a group into heinous, murderous sensuality:

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{146} Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Men}, 40.
\textsuperscript{147} Wollstonecraft, \textit{An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution}, 298.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 298.
When the body is strong, and the blood warm, men do not like to think, or adopt any plan of conduct... Ignorant people, when they appear to reflect, exercise their imagination more than their understanding; indulging reveries, instead of pursuing a train of thinking; thus grow romantic, like croisaders; or like women, who are completely idle and restless.\footnote{Ibid., 296.}

French men, first as the king’s “machines” under despotism, and then in an uneducated attempt to recreate a new society, are “yelping curs pampered by vanity and pride.”\footnote{Ibid., 319.} Men, just as women, are the brute beasts society has created them to be.

But, what does it mean that Wollstonecraft degrades males by using female stereotypes as insults toward men? Her use of deprecatory feminine language is debated by scholars. Barbara Caine interprets Wollstonecraft’s language as the use of derogatory feminine conventions. By using the language of diminutive femininity to describe men, Wollstonecraft adopted masculine language, argues Caine. Furthermore, by adopting the language of superior masculinity, the use of reason and the improvement of intellect, Caine believes that Wollstonecraft’s admonishments against women as a whole ultimately essentialized them down to the function of giving birth.\footnote{Barbara Caine, “Women,” in An Oxford Companion to The Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832, Edited by McCalman, Iain, Jon Mee, Gillian Russell, Clara Tuite, Kate Fullagar and Patsy Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 44-47.}

Yet, Caine herself recognizes that in the eighteenth century, Wollstonecraft had none of the modern language which could describe gender in a purely feminist way.\footnote{Ibid., 50.} On the contrary, Miriam Brody argues that rather than use language to adopt for herself a superior masculinity, Wollstonecraft was creating a new rhetoric of superior language which would fashion herself, and other women of a similar mold, as superior female authors, thereby taking the language of authority from men and giving a new language of superior writing and intellect to women.\footnote{Miriam Brody, “The Vindication of the Writes of Women: Mary Wollstonecraft and Enlightened Rhetoric,” in Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 112-115.}
Caine makes an important point about the way that Wollstonecraft chose to feminize the male subject and to completely denigrate the female subject: the language of feminism did not exist. Brody equally contributes to the understanding of Wollstonecraft’s language in order to show its subversiveness, and the way she utilized language to undermine gender roles and confound normative power structures defined by sex. Yet, in this tearing down of both females and males of various ranks in society, it appears that Wollstonecraft wanted to create something altogether different than a masculine woman or a superior woman. She wanted to eradicate gender differences in order to establish a fully actualized human being, one which could transcend class, race, and especially gender. By feminizing the working class, the peasants, African slaves, the aristocracy, the beautiful tyrant, and even male philosophers she admired, such as Rousseau, Wollstonecraft used the culturally inscribed negative connotations of femininity, to make all human beings linguistically equal in stupidity and lack of understanding. In order to build them up into a new egalitarian vision of perfect humanity, she had to first make them equal in the basic sense of a Hobbesian state of nature, full of vile instincts and short-sightedness.

The False Society

Scholars have examined many times before the way that Wollstonecraft obliterated gender difference. In particular, Wendy Gunther-Canada argues that Wollstonecraft confused gender norms by the act of writing, by anonymously publishing *The Rights of Men* and then taking public credit for the achievement, thus proving that women could do what men could do. This subverted male authority. Andrew Elfenbein explains that Wollstonecraft’s experiment with gender was even more inventive. Elfenbein argues that Wollstonecraft queered the fluid term “genius” by divorcing it of any purely masculine meaning, and created, with herself as an
example, a meritocratic term which could transcend gender to allow for female freedom of expression. This applied both to intellectual, artistic, and creative pursuits but also to freedom from hetero-normative marriage. While both interpretations are useful in understanding Wollstonecraft’s gender confusing language, Wollstonecraft does something much broader and more radical, applying a new exalted human being to not only herself and a few other women of genius, but to everyone including men.

After explaining the sad state of society in separate, gendered parts, showing the deficiencies of both female and male characters, Wollstonecraft connects all of society’s unsuccessfulness in her abhorrence for everything false. Almost all of society is false. A fake “gothic drapery” is everywhere hiding the human ability to understand itself. Wollstonecraft uses the language of simulacrum and mimeticies to everywhere show that the social construction of all of humanity is done to create empty people, not autonomous souls. So, though feminist language had not yet been invented for attempts at equalizing gender, Wollstonecraft uses falseness as a class and gender equalizer. There are several significant themes here; the false parent; the false philosopher; the false monarch and the corresponding false aristocracy; the fake soldier; the false husband; and false virtues, especially charity. Tied to each of these artificial caricatures is an even more spurious system of education.

Throughout her works, the false parent is everywhere ridiculed by Wollstonecraft. In Mary, Mary’s mother Eliza is described as completely void of any real feeling. She lavishes attentions on her little dogs, yet she makes no time for educating and loving her daughter:

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This fondness for animals was not the kind of *attendrissement* which makes a person take pleasure in providing for the subsistence and comfort of a living creature; but it proceeded from vanity, it gave her an opportunity of lisping out the prettiest French expressions of ecstatic fondness, in accents that had never been attuned by tenderness.\textsuperscript{155}

Here the pretended love of animals is meant to attract male attentions, to appear sophisticated to the upper sort in society. France, as previously illustrated, was considered by Wollstonecraft as a base society where impressions made on others were more important than any substance of character. Here she utilizes the French to call Eliza a simulacrum: she is literally a copy of the French, who are mere imitators of fine things. Also, if Eliza does not have the internal passion to care intimately for animals, then she certainly has no concern for children since “she never imagined there were any relative duties for her to fulfill.”\textsuperscript{156} Eliza allows her servants to do her work, including the work of being a parent, thereby rendering herself completely useless to society.

Wollstonecraft admonishes as well the false philosopher. If anyone represented false philosophy for Wollstonecraft, it was certainly Edmund Burke. Though Burke gained, contemporaneously, more fame for his works than Wollstonecraft did for hers, and though he was a distinguished member of the parliament, and she was merely a woman, she had no trouble calling him out for teaching false doctrines to the people. Wollstonecraft tears down Burke’s status of ideal manliness, as government official and thinker, calling his *Reflections* “another Chinese erection,” rife with language that is fashionable and pretty yet has no substance.\textsuperscript{157}

Using the negative stereotype of dull minded women, Wollstonecraft rebukes Burke’s attempt at philosophy: “Even the Ladies, Sir, may repeat your sprightly sallies, and retell in theatrical

\textsuperscript{155} Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, 7.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{157} Wollstonecraft uses this curious phrase to mean that all of Burke’s arguments are built without a solid foundation. The analogy would be that, similar to the light, easily destructible, pretty buildings in China, Burke’s arguments are meant for show rather than being built to last: Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, 7.
attitudes many of your sentimental exclamations.” As historian G. J. Barker-Benfield writes, “To make men more sensitive, more delicate, was, in the eighteenth century’s own terms, to bring them closer to women and to run the risk of making them too ‘effeminate’ or ‘feminine’.” Women were considered far more sensitive than men, easily wooed by sentimental novels which were meaningless. Burke, like the vain, empty peacock of a lady, is strutting his “mortal antipathy to reason.” What is more, just like the false parent, Wollstonecraft abuses Burke for refusing his responsibilities to his fellow human beings. Burke cares for the wealthy, for monarchs, for people of good breeding, but he cares nothing for, and does nothing for, the poor and destitute:

Our penal laws punish with death the thief who steals a few pounds; but to take by violence, or trepan, a man, is no such heinous offence. For who shall dare to complain of the venerable vestige of the law that rendered the life of a deer more sacred than that of a man? But it was the poor man with only his native dignity who was thus oppressed—and only metaphysical sophists and cold mathematicians can discern this insubstantial form; it is a work of some abstraction—and a gentleman of lively imagination must borrow some drapery from fancy before he can love or pity a man. Misery, to reach your heart, I perceive, must have its cap and bells; your tears are reserved, very naturally considering your character, for the declamation of the theatre, or for the downfall of queens, whose rank alters the nature of folly, and throws a graceful veil over vices that degrade humanity; whilst the distress of many industrious mothers, whose helpmates have been torn from them, and the hungry cry of helpless babes, were vulgar sorrows that could not move your commiseration, though they might extort alms...

The law provides more redress to the nobleman than to the ordinary person. Burke, as one who made and shaped the world Wollstonecraft lived in, had a responsibility to other human beings who tried to fulfill their duties. Yet, Burke, in his Reflections, saw it as more degrading to threaten a king and queen than to deny people bread. Wollstonecraft believes that if there is any

158 Ibid., 6.
160 Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Men, 14.
161 Ibid., 14.
reason for wealth or higher offices in life, then it must be to provide for people who have nothing. Furthermore, even in his office as a minister to the king, Burke does not fulfill his duties: “Impressed as you are with respect for royalty, I am astonished that you did not tremble at every step, lest heaven should avenge on your guilty head the insult offered to its vice-regent.”

Burke tried to make a power play in parliament while King George III suffered “madness.” Burke attempted to take advantage of the king’s illness, when his duty was to the king. Again, like the false mother who does not care for her children or fulfill her duties to her husband, Burke becomes a feminized character, who is easily impressed by pageantry and who succumbs to the senses, in this case a sensuality of greed.

If the philosopher who justifies the existence of an ingratiating system of hierarchy is fallacious, so the monarch and his or her nobility are even more bogus. Wollstonecraft believes that Louis XIV of France proved himself to be the most false, the most overcompensating. With grand palaces, huge investments in the supreme fictitiousness of the theatre, and of course the creation of the fashion of wit, Louis XIV embodied the erroneously erected emissary of the eternal:

The court of Versailles, with powers the most ample, was the most busy and insidious of any in Europe; and the horrors which she has occasioned, at different periods, were as incalculable, as her ambition was unbounded, and her councils base, unprincipled, and dishonourable.

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162 Ibid., 27. Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*, 163. In Janet Todd’s account of this power play episode from Burke, Todd explains that Wollstonecraft thought Burke “was a venal opportunist who had once gathered statistics from asylums to prove George III indelibly mad so that his unsavory son could seize power and make Burke paymaster-general.”

163 It is important to remember that Wollstonecraft has no language which can describe pusillanimity of character other than the language of gender. While she is treating everyone equally by tearing them down, she must do so in the most insulting terms available to her. Those terms would have been the language of the feminine stereotype, weak, sensual, vain, and false. Wollstonecraft does not believe women must be this way, but that they are because of how society has created them. But, men have been formed just as vain, weak, and sensual. In order to resurrect a perfect, de-gendered human, she must destroy the mortal body of each person, man and woman, and each station in life,

The crown was a whore or a libertine, a totally false creature with no reason, who had no discretion in pursuing sensuality. This greedy atmosphere is thus extended to the great imitators of Louis, his nobles. Both the English and French nobles lived lavishly, and the greed and opulence they exhibited trickled down to all ranks in society:

The prevailing custom of living beyond their income has had the most baneful effect in England, as well as in France; so that whilst they have lived in habits of idleness, they have been drawn into habits of excesses, which, proving ruinous, produced consequences equally pernicious to the community, and degrading to the private character. Extravagance forces the peer to prostitute his talents and influence for a place, to repair his broken fortune; and the country gentleman becomes venal in the senate, to enable himself to live on par with him. The most pernicious, perhaps, is its producing an aristocracy of wealth, which degrades mankind, by making them only exchange savageness for tame servility, instead of acquiring the urbanity of improved reason.\(^{165}\)

Wollstonecraft uses the same descriptions of the idle mother, the laziness of mind in Burke, and prostitution (in the typical sense as well as legal prostitution, or marriage) to establish a weak, spurious character in the nobility. They are empty, useless people. They have lost the ability to reason and have confounded their lives with the sensuality of materialism. Trying to impress peers and mirror the wealth of others is another way to show how the monarchy and aristocracy have debased themselves below the human character, not having a shred of their own reason, but bent on the pursuit of material pleasure and false reputations.

While the French king at the top of the social hierarchy is extremely false so too are those at the bottom. The best example Wollstonecraft offers is the soldier. Generally soldiers come from the lower sort, and having little to no education, are taught the movements of behavior, and the outward appearance of good graces, but they learn no morals nor are taught to think about the knowledge presented to them, because “every profession, in which great subordination of rank

\(^{165}\) Ibid., 369.
constitutes its power, is highly injurious to morality.”\textsuperscript{166} “A standing army, for instance, is incompatible with freedom; because subordination and rigour are the very sinews of military discipline.”\textsuperscript{167} Soldiers copy the manners and etiquette of the officers, and being drawn from the nobility, the soldiers are again simulacrum of immoral copies. “Under gay ornamental drapery,” soldiers are often hiding vicious behavior. A vision of “superficial young men, whose only occupation is gallantry,” describes men such as Jane Austen’s character, Mr. Wickham, a soldier in \textit{Pride and Prejudice}.\textsuperscript{168} Mr. Wickham, fooling Elizabeth Bennett’s family, and even the intelligent Elizabeth herself, is actually a dissolute man, who once tried to trick a young girl of fifteen into an elopement to steal her fortune. Once his dishonest character is revealed to Elizabeth, she realizes that whatever goodness she believed Wickham to have was only in appearances.\textsuperscript{169} Trying to steal children from the protection of parents, fooling young women without common sense into illicit behavior, these are exactly the vices which Wollstonecraft sees as “dangerous” to civil society.\textsuperscript{170} Because they have no ability to reason, think, or understand how to temper natural passions, the lower sort, represented here as the typical enlisted man, is just trouble in a fancy red coat.

Involved in equally salacious activity, the cruel man who dupes a stupid woman into marrying him, promising love, affection, and protection, is the false husband. In \textit{Mary}, Mary

\textsuperscript{166} Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, 81.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 81. Though \textit{Pride and Prejudice} was published 15 years after Wollstonecraft’s \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, both authors experienced the same problems associated with standing armies. For Wollstonecraft, the French soldiers whom she saw rallying to the side of “the people” during the French Revolution were engaged in immoral behavior. She was also aware of the problems that British soldiers had caused in the American Revolution, which were frequently discussed in the national and international newspapers. Jane Austen also saw the problems of standing armies while the Napoleonic Wars were raging. Soldiers who were stationed all over England often attended social functions and lived in towns with the local populace. Wickham provides an excellent example because he embodies the ignorant soldier that Wollstonecraft is admonishing: a poor man who copies the manners of his superiors but does not understand the purpose of such manners.
\textsuperscript{170} Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, 81.
recalls her father’s gross behavior, visiting whorehouses, seeking “amusement in country sports,” and “eating an immoderate dinner.”

Everything about the husband is excessive. Janet Todd, an expert Wollstonecraft biographer, sees Mary’s father as Wollstonecraft’s recreation of her own father. Edward Wollstonecraft was naught but a merchant social climber. He had little money, and gambled most of it away, trying to impress and imitate the aristocracy by gambling and whoring. Because of his behavior, his entire family was shoved from place to place. Wollstonecraft’s mother meekly put up with his drunken binges and bad behavior, but she died completely miserable and exhausted, unhappy and lonely.

The dangers of trickster men, fooling women into marriage only to discover their evil personalities later is greatly revealed in Maria’s husband, George, in Maria. Maria wanted an equal marriage, one where she could love and respect her partner, finding equal respect from him. The absence of this in George made Maria depressed and miserable. Any masculinity or real power which George believed he exercised over Maria, Wollstonecraft rips away from him, seeing that power as illegitimate because

His intimacy with profligate women, and his habits of thinking, gave him a contempt for female endowments; and he would repeat, when wine had loosed his tongue, most of the common-place sarcasms levelled at them, by men who do not allow them to have minds, because mind would be an impediment to gross enjoyment. Men who are inferior to other men, are always anxious to establish their superiority over women.

False husbands are here denied autonomous identity by Wollstonecraft because they have none of the strength of mind which she grants to the character Maria. Excess, “drapery,” vice, the sensuality of materialism in a person all deserve denials of subjectivity.

Each character portrayed as deceitful and misleading by Wollstonecraft is lacking true virtue. The most important virtue that Wollstonecraft expresses as false is charity. Charity is

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171 Wollstonecraft, Mary, 5.
172 Todd, Revolutionary Life, 5, 8, 11, 14, 38-40, 41, 75.
full of false meaning. People in society, men and women, pretend to be charitable by donating money. Yet time, feeling, humanity are all missing. The character Maria tries to help a poor woman who is caring for a physically disabled child. The child’s mother, destitute and without any way to care for her child, a bastard (as she was tricked by a Wickham type), is “thrown on the town,” forced into prostitution. The better sort might give money to the child and her caregiver, but where was the real charity when the pregnant woman needed help? Why was she treated like a disposable creature? Similarly, the character Mary watched as her wealthier family turned away the poor and needy: “She was miserable when beggars were driven from the gate without being relieved; if she could do it unperceived, she would give them her own breakfast...”

Even those with money sometimes feel the material desire to hoard it, rather than use it for the benefit of other human beings. This lack of true feeling for all of humanity is Wollstonecraft’s most important point: society is false when things are done only for appearances, for the show of it, and society cannot really be improved when people do not invest time, money, and *themselves* into the enterprise of bettering their fellow humans:

> Misanthropy is ever the offspring of discontent. Let not the happiness of one half of mankind be built on the misery of the other, and *humanity will take place of charity*, and all the ostentatious virtues of an universal aristocracy. How, in fact, can we expect to see men live like brothers, when we only see master and servant in society? For till men learn to mutually assist without governing each other, little can be done by political associations towards perfecting the condition of mankind.

The falseness of charity, of the notion of controlling the fortunes of other human beings through material things, has thrown all of society into a sort of civilized state of nature. Every person

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174 Ibid., 133.
cares only for their own self-preservation, for what they can achieve, conquer, and own.\textsuperscript{177} “The demon of property” forces virtue to rely on material conditions, on human creations, not on human beings.\textsuperscript{178} Wollstonecraft wants to wipe all of this away to see a genuine love for all human beings restored to society.

This lengthy list of society’s lesions must first be shown, society itself must be destroyed, before Wollstonecraft can rebuild it, and with it the subject of the human individual. She proves that people in society are false, that everyone is imitating thoughtless laws and rules, etiquette and manners, which have no positive effect on society and actually enslave most of it. She has shown how women, by the establishment of social restrictions and ill education, have no personal identity or selves. They are the others, a void, an absence. Yet, here too, she has shown the same of men, of great philosophers like Burke and Rousseau, of many husbands who try to tyrannize women only to become slaves to sensuality, of the common man who follows the herd, not knowing where he goes, and of the basis of patriarchy, of the monarch, who flashes fine feathers and finery yet does nothing to improve the lot of his subjects. “Soldiers, as well as women, practice the minor virtues with punctilious politeness. Where is then the sexual difference when the education has been the same?”\textsuperscript{179} The spurious education for Wollstonecraft is the social construction of all humans, and she sees that it has not been done well. In short, Wollstonecraft’s equal mistreatment of men and women as parts of a false society shows that Wollstonecraft was not a misogynist nor was she simply trying to be like a man by taking on a male voice: she wanted to be human and hoped that all ranks and sexes could be human too.

\textsuperscript{177} Hobbes, \textit{Leviathan}, ed. Edwin Curley (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), 74-89. Wollstonecraft may not have read or been familiar with \textit{Leviathan}, yet she has painted this picture of Hobbesian self-interested people. Whereas Hobbes sees the inherent natural law of self-preservation in the state of nature, Wollstonecraft sees that humans have been socially constructed by society to care only for themselves, and not for others.

\textsuperscript{178} Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Men}, 7.

\textsuperscript{179} Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, 89.
A New Ideal Individual

“A wild wish has just flown from my heart to my head... I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society, unless where love animates the behavior.”

In her disestablishment of society, by painting the civilized world as a sort of false state of nature, Wollstonecraft has positioned herself as the Rousseauian lawgiver. In the way that she has raised herself from obscurity through her own exertions and talents, so too can she raise women and men from baseness to something more divine. There are several ways in which Wollstonecraft reestablishes a new world. First, humans have souls and those souls are connected to the mind and intellect, and in nurturing the intellect individuals nourish the soul. Second, she advocates the cultivation of the heart, of feeling, because if everyone truly loves humanity, a real humanism can abolish viciousness from the human character. Third, it is necessary to temper the heart with reason and intellect in order to establish a human subject. These perfections on the human being can create a progressive society. The parts make the whole and the whole makes the parts. Wollstonecraft’s overall project joins the individual, which, when cultivated for individuality and capacity for thought, transcends the distinctions of biological sex and society itself transcends the material and constructs norms which are conducive to the growth of the individual.

The political theorist, Virginia Sapiro, posited that Wollstonecraft’s works are not separate. Each of her ideas, each work, progressed, yet they were all connected. Wollstonecraft did not have real distinctions for her brand of humanism as separate from feminism, from the

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180 Ibid., 126.
181 Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 84-90. “The lawgiver is, in every respect, an extraordinary man in the state. Extraordinary...because of his genius.” Wollstonecraft, as pointed out by Elfenbein saw herself as a “genius,” as someone who is extraordinary and could rise above her social class and material means through the exertions of her mind. Because people do not know how to conduct themselves for the benefit of the general will, Wollstonecraft must step in and explain how.
political organization of society: “Wollstonecraft thoroughly integrated women and gender into her broader concepts of nature and human society.”\textsuperscript{182} This idea of social integration was the main purpose of Wollstonecraft’s work. For Wollstonecraft, Sapiro explains, the most important way to integrate women and men into a more “enlightened” society is through education. Echoing Masham, and inspired by the work of the Dissenters, and especially Locke and Rousseau, Wollstonecraft understood education as “the development of habit of the mind that would give the person the independent ability to reason toward virtue.”\textsuperscript{183}

This education of the individual could create a society where the burdens of class, gender, and even race in the case of Wollstonecraft’s abhorrence for slavery, were greatly lessened. Before all of society could be improved, the individual must be improved: “The Happiness of the whole must arise from the happiness of the constituent parts, or the essence of justice is sacrificed to a supposed grand arrangement.”\textsuperscript{184} Happiness comes from the improvement of the soul or the mind. Wollstonecraft’s language denotes a unique blend of metaphysics and a pragmatic Lockeian understanding that neither God nor spirit can be proven. Thus she sees the mind as the soul, and the improvement of the intellect as an improvement of the immortality of human nature. Wollstonecraft also believed that people are in some sense responsible for their own active learning, even though they have been acculturated to be obedient.\textsuperscript{185}

Catriona Mackenzie terms this idea of the mingling of the soul and mind the “doctrine of perfectibility.”\textsuperscript{186} As it regards women specifically, Wollstonecraft is consistently “allowing

\textsuperscript{182} Virginia Sapiro, \textit{A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xxv.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 240, 237-249.
\textsuperscript{184} Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, 89.
\textsuperscript{185} Sapiro, \textit{A Vindication of Political Virtue}, 53.
\textsuperscript{186} Mackenzie, “Reason and Sensibility,” 186. This idea of the soul, the conscience, is explored also in: Barbara Taylor, “The Religious Foundations of Mary Wollstonecraft’s Feminism.” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft} (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2002).
them [women] to have souls.”\textsuperscript{187} The soul is neutral to gender, so that the basic premise that 

women have souls, makes the perfectibility of the mind and intellect, which are connected to the 
soul, a perfectly logical argument. Women cannot have less use of reason or a lesser possibility 
of improving their minds since the mind is part of the divine spark of human existence and does 
not experience or act in gender. Consequently:

If it be allowed that women were destined by Providence to acquire human virtues, and 
by the exercise of their understandings, that stability of character which is firmest ground 
to rest our future hopes upon, they must be permitted to turn to the fountain of light, and 
not forced to shape their course by the twinkling of a satellite.\textsuperscript{188}

Wollstonecraft’s very original understanding of spirituality, and her understanding that all 
societies in her time believed in God, made her appeal for political and social equality, \textit{based} on 
spiritual equality, both logical and clever. No one would deny that the “nature of reason must be 
the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the 
Creator.”\textsuperscript{189} If women, as well as men, have divine souls given by God, and reason is thus 
connected to the soul, all people must have such a capacity.

Thus, then, the perfection of human virtue, of the soul and mind is done through a growth of understanding. As has been seen, Rousseau, Burke, and many other false characters have 
been attacked by Wollstonecraft for a lack of understanding. “The most perfect education, in my 
opinion, is such an exercise of the \textit{understanding} as is best calculated to strengthen the body and 
form the heart.”\textsuperscript{190} Wollstonecraft wants to see all people educated to be individuals, 
autonomous subjects, so that there is no othering. This understanding is the ability to think, to 
associate ideas freely, to understand how behavior and the adoption of personal virtue is good for 
the self, for the happiness of the independent individual. She envisions an education of the mind

\textsuperscript{187} Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, 84.  
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 85.  
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 122.  
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 86. My emphasis.
that values a marriage of reason and sensibility, of the heart and the mind, so that whatever natural desires reside in human beings, the choices they make regarding those passions receive instruction from a well developed sense of reasoning. The material lasciviousness which degrades human beings will be gone when men and women, who are both modest (as opposed to a false sexual modesty only advocated for women), can respect the modesty of one another. Instead of being consumed by sensuality, Wollstonecraft believes that the duties and responsibilities to other people will be accomplished, and above all, humanity, the real charity, can flourish.  

The notions of humanity and friendship are the most significant for Wollstonecraft’s application of this individuality. The character Mary exhibits these qualities best. Since she was left to her own devices, she became a “solitary walker,” someone who spends time in nature and reflects on knowledge and experience, perfecting reason, feeling, and virtue. Because society (her parents) have failed her, Mary perfects herself through good works that help others, through associations with people of “genius” quite like herself, and through the formation of strong friendships. Wollstonecraft conceives that all relationships, including parenthood and marriage, should be egalitarian friendships, an expansion of the ideal friendship between man and man. In one example of Mary’s influence for good on others, Mary befriends an older gentleman, who had once been enthralled by sensuality, and very abusive of female weaknesses, yet: “In Mary’s company he doubted whether heaven was peopled with spirits masculine; and almost forgot that

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he had called the [female] sex ‘the pretty play things that render life tolerable.’”\textsuperscript{194} A soul and mind which perfects itself can help to perfect others through friendship.

Mary also exhibits an “uncommon humanity,” since God made “her one of His benevolent agents, a messenger of peace.”\textsuperscript{195} Disgusted by the violence of the French Revolution, which she witnessed herself, Wollstonecraft saw the new human being as possessing both qualities which had traditionally been associated with men, such as reason and intellect, with the positive female qualities of sensibility and feeling. Mary is an example of a combination of these characteristics. Because the common people who rebelled against the French government lacked both reason and virtue, the overwhelming masculine sensual desire to commit violence overtook the people. The newly perfected human being, modeled in Mary, could feel the pangs of injustice, but she could also reason a solution to those problems. Wollstonecraft also raises the farmer, and the independent worker, because he “who is his own master is so much more steady than the servant of a servant, that it is unnecessary to ask which proves by his actions he has the most independent character.”\textsuperscript{196} And, she exalts, as a whole, the “Anglo-Americans [who] appeared to be another race of beings, men formed to enjoy the advantages of society, and not merely benefit those who governed.”\textsuperscript{197} Thus, the enlightened woman is not a masculine woman nor is the enlightened man an emasculated man. Each possesses what Wollstonecraft defines as an independent character, one where reason and feeling are harmonious, and where those qualities in each person reflect a good for the whole society.

\textbf{Conclusions}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{194} Wollstonecraft, \textit{Mary}, 50.
  \item \textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 54.
  \item \textsuperscript{196} Wollstonecraft, \textit{An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution}, 370.
  \item \textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 292.
\end{itemize}
Where Chidley and Masham had used specifically Christian spiritual equality to argue that women are human beings, Wollstonecraft does something radically different with a similar concept. She connects a divine soul, which does not confine itself to a specific Christian meaning, with the mind and intellect. She connects the intellect, the use of reason and the ability to grow human understanding, with the virtue of feeling, redefining charity as humanity. She equates all of these qualities to all of human nature. She displaces gender, not allowing these qualities to be inherent in one sex or confined to sex at all. She positions herself, through the characters Mary and Maria, through her authorial work, through her acceptance as a lawgiver, of social law, the basis of all civilization, as the new perfect subject human she has herself defined. She then, instead of asking to be accepted into the realm of a purely manly world, extends the hand of equality to men and women alike. Just as Wollstonecraft saw the education and “perfectibility” of the soul as active, she herself was active in trying to change the way that society constructs itself.

Wollstonecraft also philosophically obliterated gender difference by beginning with a demoralizing critique of each gender role in society, showing the weaknesses and avarices of both. She then showed throughout her work that society, in every rank and role, was false. The “gothic drapery” of the social world was both the cause and the symptom of a lack of human agency and an absence of autonomous individual power. A woman who chooses to be a mother, with marriage or without, can respect her choice, herself, and her child enough that her reasoning led her to it. In the same train of thought, a woman who chooses the path of science or philosophy can do so because her mind is valued, not her sex. By virtue of Wollstonecraft’s reasoning, a father who wanted to be the primary caregiver to his child could also do so, since an ethical imperative to a particular duty would be based on his feeling and reason, not on his sex.
By tearing each order down, Wollstonecraft made it possible to redefine a genderless human being who could be placed in any duty in life and execute those duties with self-respect, honor, and dignity without risking the loss of dignity or the deserved respect of other members of society. By reappropriating ideals to a neutral soul/mind rather than to a being defined by sex, Wollstonecraft created a philosophy of equality that synthesized Enlightenment feminism with a new humanism. Women, men, and every caste of society could become autonomous and still promote the common good.
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSIONS

One purpose of this exploration of early modern feminism has been to connect Wollstonecraft with past female thinkers, to see a development in thought, to find the beginning of an idea and to see it evolve into something more radical. While it is often shown how male thinkers contribute to one another, female thinkers of the early modern period often remain disconnected. Also, it has been my intent to show that while these women certainly contributed to feminism in their own way, they also contributed ideas which sought to help all of society. Though modern scholars have examined other aspects of Wollstonecraft’s philosophy, Chidley and Masham are continuously looked at through only a feminist lens, and their other contributions thus are often ignored. Examining the other ideas in their texts shows that these thinkers were not merely women who wrote or published, rather they were thinkers, idea makers, problem solvers. Chidley’s writings produced theology and political theory, which are just as important as her contribution to early modern feminism. Masham’s two treatises deal with coordinating philosophy and religion, making them bedfellows rather than enemies, and showing that Christianity is a viable moral system. She did not contribute only to feminism. And Wollstonecraft’s philosophical treatises and novels present a social, moral, and individual philosophy that transcends gender: she seeks to free women from bondage just as she seeks to free men.

What connects each of these thinkers together is a constant consciousness of the importance of both the greater good and the subject: Chidley, Masham, and Wollstonecraft all seek to improve society and the individual. For Chidley, a woman or a poor person must be given the individual freedom to pursue everlasting life. In order to do this, as a Protestant Christian, Chidley sees that it is necessary for Protestant churches to have control over their own
affairs and that they should be tolerated by the English government. As a woman, she broke tradition and challenged gender norms, even if unwittingly, by advocating for her own spiritual equality as well as for the political right to free worship. A spiritually equal soul could benefit the church community by helping needy families, by guiding those with weak faith, and by helping to keep the community safe from the faithless. Thus, her Christian ideas served the purpose of both building and strengthening the larger church community while nurturing the individual believer and supporting an individual’s freedom of conscience.

Masham improves upon Chidley’s spiritual equality. She extends a woman’s equality in the spiritual realm to an equality of mental capacity. She connects education to inequality between the sexes and classes, seeing many thinkers in her day as perpetuators of inequality because of the selfish and elitist doctrines they espoused. For Masham, Christianity has value as a moral system just as philosophy and science can expand and improve the human mind. Again, Masham’s concern is making sure that the individual human experience can be developed so that it benefits society. If Christians are taught only to value an intimate personal relationship with Christ but are not taught to value doing Christ’s works, the value of Christianity diminishes as it no longer helps the community. Masham connects the selfish imperative of elites who advocate for loving God only and not loving one’s fellow human beings to the real impossibility of the uneducated and poor being able to spend any time cultivating such a totally individual relationship with God. Masham also critiques chastity as woman’s only necessary characteristic for personal goodness, introducing the idea that women are not merely sexual objects, and that if they act that way it is only because they have been taught to do so by self-serving men.

Wollstonecraft builds upon Masham’s critique of biological essentialism. She rails against the way that women are raised to be vain, foolish, immoral, and servile. She also takes
Masham’s logic, that men are equally unhappy due to this false virtue in women, even further to show that men who want such silly helpmeets are equally as devoid of reason as the women they covet. Wollstonecraft also advances Masham’s critique of class inequality, seeing that the upper classes are educated to be empty and materialistic which then trickles down to every rung of society creating ever greater social problems. And, just as Masham believed that equitable education could solve social problems and social immorality, Wollstonecraft argues fiercely that if each person is taught to think for herself or himself, is taught to value other human beings, and is taught to be a unique person who does not simply follow the herd, that such a person will then feel the inescapable moral importance of helping others and of endeavoring to improve society. Wollstonecraft’s individual and social human being is responsible to herself or himself as well as to the larger world. Such responsible individualism protects both human liberty, choice, and freedom but also seeks to expand that freedom to all, not merely a few elites.

Also, as I worked on this project, I became increasingly aware of how important religion and spirituality have been to people throughout history. For each writer, Chidley, Masham, and Wollstonecraft, religion and spirituality were liberating and a space for self exploration and identity building. Spiritual concerns were the seedlings that sprouted new ideas about how to shape and improve human life. Chidley’s religious faith was zealous, unyielding, yet it allowed her to publish her ideas and get involved in political protests. Masham’s views were more inclusive, but her Christianity was foundational to her entire philosophy. Wollstonecraft branched out from a specific Christian dogma and still a “divine spark” infused her work with a spiritual consciousness. If we are to incorporate race, gender, and class into our examinations of the past, we must also include religion as a specific category for examination. Sometimes, in our hope that secularity can free people from undesirable social norms we fail to see how spirituality
can be liberating. Furthermore, these categories of race, class, and gender are those which modern scholars are interested in. For seventeenth and eighteenth century thinkers, religion and spirituality were extremely important spaces of intellectual inquiry. This is supported by the primary documents I studied for this thesis. To better understand seventeenth and eighteenth century thought, we cannot deny the significant role that religion played in British culture during these periods.

Moreover, there is also a great benefit to showing that there are specific intellectual traditions connecting female thinkers. This is important because it maps the ideas that link those female thinkers and it suggests that not all of the ideas utilized or expanded by female thinkers came from male thinkers. Scholars have examined the way that Locke was influential for female philosophers like Masham and Wollstonecraft, yet scholars have not examined the possibility that Wollstonecraft’s ideas may have been influenced by Masham. I have argued here that Wollstonecraft was the beneficiary of Masham’s ideas and that Masham benefitted from Chidley’s discussion of spiritual equality. And, though I have yet to find proof of influence, the works of these three writers has shown how ideas about female equality with men evolved from the time of the English Revolution to the later Age of Revolutions: by examining these three authors, we can see how women’s equality philosophies developed over time. The ideas of Chidley and Masham had been imbibed by English society by the time Wollstonecraft set about building a new world. Each thinker contributed to the future.

I am also arguing that each of these early modern thinkers saw any sort of advocacy for women as something beneficial to the whole society, not just the individual woman. Modern feminism, gender studies, and gender history often separate themselves from the male world. Yet, this separation is a false one. All three female thinkers influenced, and were influenced by,
male thinkers. Modern ideas about social equality can benefit from early modern philosophers in
that women and men are not separate, nor was early modern feminism separate from theology,
philosophy, political theory, or any other category of thinking. Whereas it has been true
throughout history that men have tried to delineate duties and roles between the sexes, it is not
ture that this has ever been entirely successful. The fact that modern feminists are just beginning
to look at how male children and adults should be taught that no duty or rule should be allocated
based on sex belies an ignorance of our philosophical past: as I have argued here, Wollstonecraft
believed over two hundred years ago that all men and women should be educated to be good
human beings, free thinking individuals, and productive members of society, regardless of sex.
For her, good human beings were not separated into a male type or female type. Furthermore,
modern criticisms of individualism also remain ignorant of the schools of thought from the past
which advocated a responsible individualism, one where the individual must cultivate herself or
himself and use that freedom to make society better and more equitable. Because much
scholarship has sought to make the Enlightenment a one trick pony, a long historical period that
supposedly advocated selfish individualism, the nuances and lessons from the people of the
period have been forgotten or essentialized. I contend that there is still a great value in
examining older philosophies in order to reappropriate them, since many of our modern
problems remain very similar: gender inequality, income inequality, and insufficient education
are still problems in our modern world.

In addition, examining schools of thought among female thinkers can help begin the
process of assimilating women’s history into the larger picture of historical intellectual
development. As we map ideas that women shared, we can start to map the influence of male
thinkers on female thinkers as well as the reverse. Even if the voices appear to have received
less attention, that does not denote that they had less influence. When women and men corresponded frequently, discussing philosophy and science, it makes logical sense that the men were influenced by those conversations. Also, Masham and Wollstonecraft published anonymous texts, making it plausible that many men read them. Regardless of socially constructed norms or ideals, women have always found ways to enter the discussion. Therefore, continuing to separate them from the larger story is not only inaccurate and demeaning, but we lose something by not seeing how male and female intellectual interactions might change our understanding of male thinkers as well.

Finally, we must remember our past. The “liberal” strain of feminism that historians have argued Chidley may or may not fit into does indeed begin with an expansion of individual freedoms. To modern people in the Western world, who enjoy the privilege of attending a church, mosque, synagogue, or temple, the idea of limited religious tolerance for Protestant churches seems arcane. Yet, such a protest against state religion was necessary on a small scale before it could grow into a call for religious toleration for all faiths. Before Masham and Wollstonecraft could call for women’s equal education it was first necessary to dispel the belief that women had no souls or lesser souls. Masham’s concern for those at the bottom in terms of their souls being equally as important as those at the top became important for Wollstonecraft’s critique of income inequality. Before modern feminists could fight for the right to vote, to attend college, to own property, it was necessary for Chidley, Masham, and Wollstonecraft to argue that women were people too.
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