

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE MATERNAL BODY IN *THE WRONGS OF
WOMAN, OR MARIA*

Thesis

Submitted to

The College of Arts and Sciences of the
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of

Master of Arts in English

By

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Dayton, Ohio

May 2017

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ABSTRACT

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In my thesis I argue that Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* is a fictionalized sequel to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which she presents the maternal body as an abled and functional body. I use Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's Feminist Disability Studies as a framework to examine the ways that Wollstonecraft fought against popular historical perceptions of women, such as Galen's one-sex model, by using her characters, Maria and Jemima, and their relationships with the maternal body.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Rebecca Potter for being my thesis advisor and all her help throughout the process, as well as Dr. Elizabeth Mackay for her time and her feedback. I would also like to thank Dr. Cynthia Richards whose class initially gained my interest in the subject. She is an amazing teacher and helped make me a better writer.

A special thanks to Dr. Bryan Bardine for his time and commitment as TA advisor in which he always provided an open door, listening ears, and helpful conversation. Without him, and my TA partner-in-crime Lynn Roesch, I am not sure how I would have made it through the past two years.

I would also like to thank my mom for ensuring I always have everything I need and my fiancé for his endless support.

Finally, I thank coffee for keeping me going, CrossFit for keeping me sane, and the Chinese food delivery guys for keeping me fed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Mary Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel, *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798), showcases some of the wrongs done to women in the late eighteenth century, especially the wrongs done to maternal bodies. The novel opens with a focus on a traumatized and distraught maternal body, that of Maria, who has been sent to a madhouse by her husband. Maria is confined to a prison in which she cannot leave, and she appears to have no control over her body or any power over herself or others. Maria is also clearly a maternal body in a vulnerable state. Her breasts are full of milk, and she yearns to feed the baby that has been taken from her prior to her arrival at the madhouse. The narrator explains,

Her infant's image was continually floating on Maria's sight, and the first smile of intelligence remembered, as none but a mother, an unhappy mother, can conceive. She heard her half speaking half cooing, and felt the little twinkling fingers on her burning bosom – a bosom bursting with the nutriment for which this cherished child might now be pining in vain. From a stranger she could indeed receive the maternal aliment, Maria was grieved at the thought – but who would watch her with a mother's tenderness, a mother's self-denial? (Wollstonecraft 249)

At first, readers may notice the vulnerability presented by Maria as her breasts hurt and she cannot feed her child. However, that same image also reminds readers that her body is actually in a state of power and has a purpose. It is “bursting” to care for its child, and “bursting with the nutriment” that the child needs to survive and to grow. Maria knows that she is the one who can provide for her daughter, whose maternal body remains defined by its purpose of caring even when it is forced away from that responsibility. In this opening image, Wollstonecraft presents her readers with an image of a female body that is functional and has a clear purpose to care for another; one that is abled rather than its traditional representation as disabled.

Throughout her life, Mary Wollstonecraft fought for women as abled and active contributors to society. Her activism on the part of women is seen most prominently in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Then, after becoming a mother, she reframes the female body, and more specifically the maternal body while writing *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* which can be paired with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as a fictionalized representation of the argument for women’s rights. Wollstonecraft’s words make her an interesting subject of study as an activist of her time, even before *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*. She published multiple controversial documents, opened schools, and traveled the world¹. The amazing thing about Wollstonecraft is that her ideas and contributions are still relevant in 2017, more than two hundred years later. In discussions on feminist disability studies, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson says that the

¹ *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), *The Female Reader*, published under the name Mr. Cresswick in 1789, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published in 1790 as a criticism of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections of the Revolution in France*. Wollstonecraft opened a school for girls in Newington Green with her friend Fanny and her sister Eliza in 1784. The school did suffer while she was gone to Lisbon with Fanny Blood, but it was because she was most fit to run it.

“goal of activism” is to contribute “controversial ways to change the social landscape and to promote equality” (23). Wollstonecraft was doing just that; she was a strong and outspoken woman, writing about and doing what she believed to be right. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in 1792, and four years later, she began writing *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*. Within the four years between her ardent arguments and her fictionalized interpretation, she had a daughter and had survived two suicide attempts. She was a different person than she had been before; her infatuations had moved from a man, Gilbert Imlay, to her daughter, Fanny². She was now a maternal figure, in both a body that had changed and a new role that was centered on providing for her child. She also became pregnant again shortly after beginning *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, this time by William Godwin, whom she marries. In a text that Godwin published after her death, he explains, “[a]ll her other works were produced with a rapidity, that did not give her powers time fully to expand. But this [*The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*] was written slowly and with mature consideration” (111). She exhausted time and effort for this piece of writing. Likely due to her experiencing growth as a maternal body yet again, she took her time with the novel, taking care to highlight the importance of motherhood, adding more emphasis to that role than she did in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Her maternal position, and her effort in writing the novel, makes studying the characters within it that much more fascinating.

While Wollstonecraft’s activism for education is well known and discussed, analysis of her work as an argument for the abled maternal body is less so. In her works, she presents the maternal body as abled instead of disabled, showing that a woman’s

² Conceived out of wedlock with Imlay and named after her dear friend, Fanny Blood, who died in 1785.

ability to fully accept her maternal role does not limit, but instead empowers her. In *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, Wollstonecraft presents multiple representations of the maternal body, showing awareness of societal impressions, but fighting against them with illustrations of power through her characters, Maria and Jemima. Wollstonecraft uses her characters' relationships with the maternal body to show that it is a form of the female body that is powerful and purposeful, counteracting previous perceptions of women as weak and incapable.

CHAPTER II

THE DEFECTIVE FEMALE BODY

To understand the significance of Wollstonecraft's achievement in *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, readers must first understand that during Wollstonecraft's time, the female body, and even more so the *maternal* body, was seen as a limiting and passive form. A pregnant body, one susceptible to weakness, sickness, and vulnerability (especially in the eighteenth century) has been commonly seen as disabled or diseased. In a chapter concerning the maternal body, Clare Hanson says "the maternal body is a troubling, disruptive body. Its most striking characteristic is its mutability, as it expands, dilates, contracts and expels. It is also leaky and permeable, losing mucous, blood and milk" (87). As seen in the opening image of *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, this "leaky" characteristic is what makes Maria seem "troubling" and vulnerable. Hanson points out that maternal bodies have typically been presented in an awkward in-between of health and disease, often pulling more towards the latter. Wollstonecraft's efforts to present the maternal body in her final text, as well as actively speak out about the maternal body, was her way of bringing understanding to society about the wrongs done to women. Her overall goal was to strengthen the character and identity of women, and change the way people saw pregnant and maternal bodies.

Feminist Disability Studies

Before, during, and even after Wollstonecraft's time, the female body, maternal or not, has been seen as a disabled body by scholars and society in general. It was not until fairly recently that there has been an applicable avenue for studying it, referred to as feminist disability studies. In analyzing *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, it is useful to turn to feminist disability studies because it helps to outline the ways in which Wollstonecraft was working against cultural perceptions of her time. In 2002, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argued for the integration of disability studies to strengthen the field of feminist studies. Garland-Thomson explains that femaleness and disability have both been viewed as defective throughout history, and the representations of women and their various bodies has always been lesser than the normal. She continues to say, "[w]omen and the disabled are portrayed as helpless, dependent, weak, vulnerable, and incapable bodies" (Garland-Thomson 8). She believes we perceive a great deal about a culture by looking at its representations of disability. Understanding a culturally disabled body allows others to better understand how it fits into society. In her article, Garland-Thomson states, "understanding how disability operates as an identity category and cultural concept will enhance how we understand what it is to be human, our relationships with one another, and the experience of embodiment" (5). Views of women and their bodies in the eighteenth century and before saw them as deformed representations of men. Wollstonecraft touches on the subject often in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. At one point, she simply states, "[t]hat woman is naturally weak, or degraded by a concurrence of circumstances, is, I think, clear" (Wollstonecraft 73). She acknowledges the perceptions of females as weak, and argues against them by turning to

mental equality. Female repression is seen right away in *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* with the opening image of Maria locked up and separated from her newborn. The narrator explains that “after being two days the prey of impetuous, varying emotions, Maria began to reflect more calmly on her present situation, for she had actually been rendered incapable of sober reflection, by the discovery of the act of atrocity of which she was the victim” (Wollstonecraft 250). Through Maria’s reflections and actions, Wollstonecraft fights against such representations of women as disabled and incapable and argues that women are not limited and passive like society believed they were at her time.

The Female Body as Deformed

Wollstonecraft’s activism was in response to the female body in general, as well as the maternal body. Leading up to Wollstonecraft’s time, there was conversation of the female body as deformed. In Thomas Laqueur’s book, *Making Sex* (1990), he provides background on Galen’s and Aristotle’s views concerning the “one-sex model.” Laqueur begins his book by explaining the beliefs that “women were essentially men in whom a lack of vital heat - of perfection - had resulted in the retention, inside, of structures that in the male are visible without” (4). In other words, women’s bodies were the same as men’s, their sex organs had just remained inside their body instead of being pushed out because they were colder, thus creating a deformity. He claims that it was not until the late eighteenth century, after 1759 when he believes that the first detailed female skeleton was drawn, that ideas of sexual nature began to change³ (Laqueur 5-10). He says that “up to this time there had been one basic structure for the human body, and that structure was

³ 1759 also happens to be the year that Mary Wollstonecraft was born.

male” (Laqueur 10). Therefore, Laqueur deduces that the female body has always been seen in relation to the male as abnormal.

Another scholar, Londa Schiebinger, supports Laqueur’s sense that in the late eighteenth century, there was movement towards viewing bodies differently than they had been viewed previously, explaining that such movements “regarded women and non-European men as deviations from the European male norm” (“Theories of Gender and Race” 22). There was, as she refers to it, a hierarchy in which the white, European male was at the top⁴. While woman’s place was not always certain in relation to men of other races, it was clear that “since Aristotle natural historians had given preference to the study of male bodies, or more precisely, the bodies of male citizens. Woman, considered a monstrous error of nature, was studied for her deviation from this male norm” (“Theories of Gender and Race” 24). However, Schiebinger claims in her article that around the time of Wollstonecraft is when people were finally beginning to look at female bodies differently. The growth in the study of female bodies most certainly would have been something that Wollstonecraft was aware of.

In a more recent article, Michael Stolberg argues that Schiebinger and Laqueur, while widely cited, may have been wrong in some of their claims. He reminds readers that Schiebinger claimed in 1986⁵ that the first drawings of a female skeleton were in the mid to late eighteenth century, and then Laqueur followed with the claim that “until the eighteenth century medical notions of the female body were based on a ‘one-sex model’” (Stolberg 275). However, Stolberg’s article claims that female skeletons and their

⁴ In Schiebinger’s chapter, she argues that there were rises in scientific racism and scientific sexism, but that the former has been studied much more than the latter.

⁵ In a chapter titled “Skeletons in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton in Eighteenth-Century Anatomy.”

differences from male skeletons were actually discussed by anatomists such as Benedetti and Giacomo Berengario da Carpi in the late fifteenth century (276). Because of the skeletal differences noted earlier in time, Stolberg argues that scholars and medical professionals would not have been able to blame a lack of heat in females as the reasons for the differing bone structures, therefore denying Galen's one-sex model. Similarly, Laura Gowing says that "a set of ideas that constructs women's bodies as absolutely different from men's is already there in seventeenth-century gender relations" (821). Hippocratic writings also deviated from the one-sex model ideas and instead argued for the "material otherness of the female body" (Stolberg 285). While Hippocratic comparisons did not align completely with female bodies being the disabled versions of male bodies, they "implicitly identified the male body as the standard and the female body as a deviation. But in this respect the eighteenth century brought no substantial change. Indeed, the same still holds true today" (Stolberg 285). Wollstonecraft acknowledges the deviation of women from the male norm in *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, saying she has "granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue," (44) and that "[n]ature has given woman a weaker frame than man" (47). Therefore, we can deduce that even if there is disagreement among scholars on the exact notions of bodies at specific times, there has still been a widely agreed upon consensus that females and their bodies are perceived as disabled versions of the male norm, and that Wollstonecraft was aware of that.

The Female Body as Empty

Another argument for the female body as disabled in relation to the male body, is that the female body is empty and lacking. In a recent article titled “Remaking the Maternal Body in England, 1680-1730,” Mary Fissell explains a common metaphor throughout the seventeenth century of pregnant women as passive containers such as cargo ships (120-1). Society saw women as beings whose purpose it is to reproduce. She continues to explain that as well as being seen as passive containers, “discussions of breast feeding in popular medical books constructed a female body whose sole purpose it was to nurse her children” which then removed her from any other activity or role limiting her even further (Fissell 124). Though it is no secret that both men and women are needed in reproduction, the weight of it all was left to women; “at the most reductive level, women have been seen as little more than baby machines; and even when the derogatory valuation of that is put aside, it does seem to express a self-evident truth that the reproductive role is more properly that of the woman than the man” (Shildrick 22). As mentioned before, these beliefs were present throughout the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, which means that the people of Wollstonecraft’s time would have been privy to them. While the exact beliefs and their respective time periods can at times become unclear, “the idea that a ‘one-sex model’ dominated Western culture until the eighteenth century continues to serve as a major and largely uncontested principle” (Stolberg 276). What can be concluded from the wide range of texts concerning the female body throughout history, is that in the late 1700s, Mary Wollstonecraft would have been exposed to the notions and beliefs of women as less than men. Whether she was prominently exposed to the idea of the “one-sex model,” or was surrounded by those

who did recognize women as separate, one conclusion can be drawn: that women were still seen as inferior to men.

In relation to the beliefs of female bodies as empty or lacking, it is also important to consider Plato's beliefs on the relation between the mind and the body. Elizabeth Spelman writes about Plato and his importance on the mind and soul over the body. According to Spelman, "the only difference between men and women, Plato says at this point, is that women have weaker bodies than men, but this is no sign that something is amiss with their souls" (39). While Plato's bigger concern was with a person's soul, he still recognized the belief that women were not as strong as men, and were held to a lesser standard than men. Plato placed importance on the mind and soul over that of the body and related the body with women and the soul with men, claiming that women were associated with and more concerned with the body which was not as important as the soul. Applying the less significant of the two to women was yet another area where women fell short and were related to empty vessels. Margrit Shildrick brings up the "notion of the unity of the mind and body" and proposes that "it is the body itself, in whatever physical form it is experienced, which positions women as both morally deficient and existentially disabled. Even the 'whole' body of phenomenology is intrinsically masculine, and women, by that token, are never in full existential health" (14). Shildrick's claim can be applied both to the mind/body positioning of women and to the belief of where women fall in the one-sex model. Wollstonecraft also argued the importance of the mind in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, connecting it most to reason: "Consequently the perfection of our nature and capability of happiness, must be estimated by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge, that distinguish the individual

... [and] from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow” (28).

Wollstonecraft argued that both men and women should be concerned with achieving reason to better themselves and their society, and in *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, she highlights the importance of a mother’s mind to benefit her child.

CHAPTER III

WOLLSTONECRAFT'S EFFECTIVE FEMALE BODY

Wollstonecraft's own changes with her female body in the time between *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* likely had an impact on the representation of the maternal body as abled in *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*. She argues that women can, in fact, successfully fulfill the many roles, not just maternal, that society denies them. Wollstonecraft challenges long-held beliefs towards women leading up to her time; she shows society and her readers that change becomes a sign of growth and of life instead of a sign of aging and disablement, and that the changing body is a positive construct rather than a negative one. The maternal body increases power instead of the long-held belief that it takes power away from women. Wollstonecraft's representation of the female body in *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* shows that the maternal role is a female role that has enough power, due to its purpose, to counteract the inclination to be pleasing, and that pregnancy and nursing are ways that women become more reasonable and analytical.

The added perception that a woman gains from her maternal body helps her in all areas of her life. Wollstonecraft argued that a woman's mind and her education were important in furthering her societal importance, and that being a mother, physically and socially, allowed her to think more clearly. She understood the powers of the maternal

body before she became one; in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she says, “[a]s the care of children in their infancy is one of the grand duties annexed to the female character by nature, this duty would afford many forcible arguments for strengthening the female understanding, if it were properly considered” (Wollstonecraft 184). She argued that maternal bodies, and their capability of more reasonable thinking, were much more than the diseased bodies that they were often represented as and thought to be. The maternal body was an important part of being a woman which is evident in Wollstonecraft’s works; women should be just as well-rounded as men, strengthening the many parts of them so that they can contribute to being a better person and better citizen. The betterment of society is why she fought so hard for the education of women; because strengthening the female mind strengthens the female body which is an important aspect of the continuation of society, and of her arguments that women can fulfill multiple roles at once, just as men can.

At the time that Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she was single and had no children. She wrote it in a passionate retaliation to argue the importance of educating girls as well as boys, providing equal opportunities to women and for the educating of women to make them better citizens and in turn better mothers. She also shows the public through her life and her works, that a woman can fulfill multiple roles, instead of being subjected to one at a time, and that in fact, in doing so, women will become better for it. In the text, she claims that “[m]en have various employments and pursuits which engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind; but women, confined to one, and having their thoughts constantly directed

to the most insignificant part of themselves, seldom extend their views beyond the triumph of the hour” (Wollstonecraft 64). The one employment or pursuit of women that she is referring to is to please men; focusing their efforts on their looks and the ways in which they can fulfill their duty as objects for men. Wollstonecraft believed women should be educated in the same way as men because equalization of men and women would mean women would become less worried about their looks and male attention, and would in turn become better mothers and better women in general (Wollstonecraft 19). It is motherhood that is arguably the most prominent of female roles during Wollstonecraft’s time. Motherhood was a role that most women were expected to fill and is important in ensuring a child fit for society. Shawn Lisa Maurer explains that “[a]s a culturally sanctioned biological function, motherhood could thus provide for the fullest, because the only available, development of women’s capacities, both emotional and intellectual. And conversely, the maternal role could itself furnish the most powerful grounds for women’s education” (Maurer 39-40). Wollstonecraft was certainly not saying that motherhood was the only important goal for every woman; however, she is showing that motherhood can empower a woman in her other roles, instead of diminishing them like many believed.

CHAPTER IV
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MATERNAL BODY IN *THE WRONGS OF*
WOMAN, OR MARIA

Wollstonecraft is writing *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* while she is pregnant with her second daughter, Mary Godwin⁶. The women within the novel are dealt unfortunate fates and overcome them in different ways. As mentioned, the novel opens with Maria locked in a madhouse after being ripped away from her newborn. Readers are also introduced to Jemima, a woman who provides a narrative of the repercussions of a mother who does not take seriously her maternal, societal, and intellectual duties. Jemima's narrative is used to show the unfairness experienced by women and the poor, a message Wollstonecraft also delivers in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It is through the sharing of the characters' narratives that they band together as women and come to fully realize the capabilities of their femaleness. Maria is overcome with emotion after hearing Jemima's story, and she is then concerned with her daughter's fate. The two are connected by their maternal bodies, which then helps to bridge the gap between the argument for education and the purpose of a maternal body to function for another. Wollstonecraft shows that both roles can exist, and in fact, Maria's maternal role then provides her with more will to seek higher fulfillment.

⁶ Mary Godwin later becomes Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*.

Overcoming the Inclination to be Pleasing

Within Wollstonecraft's representations of the maternal body, she is also arguing for the power that is presented to women when they are able to fulfill their many roles, which is one of the many reasons that Wollstonecraft is considered to have produced some of the first feminist texts, because "[f]eminism increasingly recognizes that no woman is ever only a woman, that she occupies multiple subject positions and is claimed by several cultural identity categories" (Garland-Thomson 17). Mary Wollstonecraft was making this argument by showing that women could satisfy many roles instead of being the "play-thing[s]" of men (42). They could be intelligent and be friends and companions to their husbands, not just act as their husbands' servants. However, such a belief was not common during her time. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she says, "[s]trengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavor to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing" (Wollstonecraft 42). Wollstonecraft presents an example of the expectations of women in *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*. In Maria's recollection of her relationship with her husband, George Venables, Maria writes in a letter to her daughter,

I vainly endeavoured to establish, at our fire-side, that social converse, which often renders people of different characters dear to each other.

Returning from the theatre, or any amusing party, I frequently began to relate what I had seen and highly relished; but with sullen taciturnity he soon silenced me. I seemed therefore gradually 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. (Wollstonecraft 309)

The scene presented shows the ways in which Mr. Venables wishes to keep Maria in the dark and does not see her as an intellectual equal. Maria tries to form a relationship with her new husband beyond the physical attraction that started it all, but Mr. Venables has no desire for more than that.

In *A Vindication to the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft observes that because of societal pressures and expectations, a woman's need and aim is to be beautiful:

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 of 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. (Wollstonecraft 36)

She is pointing out that the only expectation of women is to be beautiful, and that their acceptance of such a fate is their mother's fault for not fighting against expectations. It should be the duty of the mother to teach her daughters to strive for more; that they can fulfill more than the requirements to become a slave of man. The role of motherhood involves educating her children. The need for a strong maternal figure willing to educate her daughter and teach her to be more than looks is important since there is no one else in society to do so. The only hope for daughters, for children, is their mother. A mother's education was important since within society at the time woman "was created to be the

toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (Wollstonecraft 52). Women were not expected to have a mind and life of their own. Their purpose was to please the men in their life and they were considered a man’s property. Wollstonecraft argued that man and wife should be friends and companions, instead of the woman being her husband’s property. She was unhappy with the expectations of women at the time noting that as it was, “females should always be degraded by being made subservient to love or lust” (Wollstonecraft 45). The subservience and lack of self-respect were due to a lack of education and not having access to the same resources that men had access to. Wollstonecraft suggested that a way of fixing the problem was to start with the maternal body, using the power of that body to impart new ideals on its children.

Wollstonecraft’s interpretation of the maternal body is that it is a body of protection. The maternal body is powerful and abled and ensures the care and protection of its child. One of the important functions of the maternal body is the ability to feed and nurture its child. She breastfed her child in a time where it was normal to have a wet nurse do it instead. Evidence of her nursing her daughter, Fanny, appears in multiple letters that she wrote to Gilbert Imlay, Fanny’s father. Wollstonecraft nursed her own daughter and also commented on the benefits of other women nursing their own children as well. In another letter that she wrote to Imlay while she was in Sweden, she says that “[t]he women of fortune here, as well as everywhere else, have nurses to suckle their children; and the total want of chastity in the lower class of women frequently renders them very unfit for the trust” (*Letters* 22). What Wollstonecraft is highlighting, is that women are expected to fit into one role or the other. They must be the maternal body, or

they must be the sexual or sensual body. What readers can see from her letter is that in society a woman could not be both a maternal, breastfeeding body at the same time as being a sexual body whose purpose it is to please men. As Fissell explains, “the chief reason why men might have been interested in their wives wet nursing instead of breast feeding was so that they could resume sexual relations with their wives (breast-feeding women were supposed to abstain from sexual relations), but most advice and medical books did not acknowledge this desire openly” (130). Many women hired wet nurses to feed their children so that their body was no longer a maternal body, and they could return to the sexualized body to please their husbands. Wollstonecraft believed, however, that a woman could do both, and in fact the maternal body strengthened the other roles that a woman was to fulfill.

A woman’s tendency to fall into the expectation to be compliant and pleasing to their husbands was something that Wollstonecraft sees as weak and in need of change. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she says,

Nature has given woman a weaker frame than man; but, to ensure her husband’s affections, must a wife, who by the exercise of her mind and body whilst she was discharging the duties of a daughter, wife, and mother, has allowed her constitution to retain its natural strength, and her nerves a healthy tone, is she, I say, to condescend to use art and feign a sickly delicacy in order to secure her husband’s affection? (47)

Here Wollstonecraft questions the expectation of a woman to dispel her other duties in order to attain a man’s affection. She believes that a man and a woman can attain such an affection through shared interests of their minds, not just through a woman’s passive

nature and pretty looks, and that when women remain in the purposeful and protective mindset of motherhood, is when they can see the importance of such a distinction.

Wollstonecraft illustrates the importance of a maternal body, by showing the conflict in Maria that arises when trying to maintain a maternal body along with other roles that a woman may have. In the novel, Maria's main concern is for her daughter, but she is also caught up in her sexualized body and the way it relates to a man. Maria forms a relationship with Mr. Darnford, another inmate, and as their relationship grows, she at times feels conflicted with her interest in Mr. Darnford while still seeking to help her child. After finding out that her daughter is dead, "she indulged the superstitious notion that she was justly punished by the death of her child, for having for an instant ceased to regret her loss" (Wollstonecraft 292). Maria feels guilty for not spending every instant in the mind of her maternal role. It is a moment of shame in which Maria was caught up in the interest of a man, instead of in her power as a woman and as a maternal body whose focus is on her child. Wollstonecraft is using the self-doubt in that instant to illustrate how powerful the expectations of women were, that they could cause hesitation in Maria. Women were expected to only be able to fill one role at a time, sexual or maternal, and in turned believed that themselves. However, Wollstonecraft is arguing that when women succumb to such perceptions, they are harming themselves and their children. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft says,

When a woman is admired for her beauty, and suffers herself to be so far intoxicated by the admiration she receives, as to neglect to discharge the indispensable duty of a mother, she sins against herself by neglecting to cultivate an affection that would equally tend to make her useful and

happy. True happiness ... must arise from well regulated affections; and affection includes a duty" (173).

She is saying that the duty and responsibility of motherhood provides women with the power to overcome their inclination to be pleasing. She provides the moment of weakness and doubt in Maria for a moment, to let readers see the constructions she is arguing against. It is as Maria quickly overcomes such doubt, that she presents the purposeful maternal body.

After Maria becomes interested in Mr. Darnford's mind through his marginal notes in the books, she looks out the window to try to catch a glimpse of him. At this point in the story Wollstonecraft writes, "[s]till I [Maria] should like to see him.' She went to bed, dreamed of her child, yet woke exactly at half after five o'clock, and starting up, only wrapped a gown around her, and ran to the window" (260). In this moment Maria is concerned with seeing the man that she is growing fond of, yet her maternal body, specifically her maternal mind, is still present. She dreams of her child, not of the man. The same hint of the maternal influence is present later when the narration says, "[s]he found however that she could think of nothing else; or, if she thought of her daughter, it was to wish that she had a father whom her mother could respect and love" (Wollstonecraft 263). Maria is wrapped up in the thoughts of a man but her maternal mind still breaks through and if anything, make sure the man is good enough. It is the maternal mind that is judging the man and if he could be a good father or not.

Maria continues to evaluate the times she fell victim to societal thoughts and expectations before she became a maternal body. She mentions in her narrative that it is not the first time she has been caught up in the attentions of a man. When she was young

and exposed to the possibility of courtship, she interacts with a young man and states, “I did not then suspect, that my eloquence was in my complexion, the blush of seventeen, or that, in a world where humanity to women is the characteristic of advancing civilization, the beauty of a young girl was so much more interesting than the distress of an old one” (Wollstonecraft 301). In her retelling of the situation, Maria realizes that she was playing into the conceived notions of a woman and her duty to please men. She was letting herself be seen and perceived as the beautiful, blushing girl. The same story follows her introduction to Mr. Venables and she again succumbs to the expectations of women as men’s playthings. However, she includes the story in her letters to her daughter, because it is not until she has become a mother that she is able to fully realize how foolish she was to think in such a way. She writes, “I have perhaps dwelt too long on a circumstance, which is only of importance as it marks the progress of a deception that has been so fatal to my peace; and introduces to your notice a poor girl, whom, intending to serve, I led to ruin” (Wollstonecraft 302). She now realizes that by obtaining the attention and affection of men, by playing into her looks and status as a woman, she was actually undermining her intellectual potential. Motherhood has allowed her to focus on more important things such as education and knowledge.

In Maria’s narrative, she continues to analyze what brought her to her current situation. She now realizes that she was seen as inferior and was not doing anything to help break through the barriers placed on her. She says at one point, “[b]y allowing women but one way of rising in the world, the fostering the libertinism of men, society makes monsters of them, and then their ignoble vices are brought forward as a proof of inferiority of intellect” (Wollstonecraft 304). At this point in the novel, Maria’s

observations mirror those of Wollstonecraft's own beliefs. In *A Vindication to the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft states, "[t]he obedience required of women in the marriage state comes under this description; the mind, naturally weakened by depending on authority, never exerts its own powers, and the obedient wife is thus rendered a weak indolent mother" (Wollstonecraft 96). When women allow themselves to be the play-things of men they hurt their own mind and body by neglecting them. They succumb to the role men's play-things, instead of using their capabilities to become more.

Bonding Through the Maternal Body

Not only were maternal bodies seen as disabled, but they were also misunderstood and there was not much known about the processes that the maternal and birthing body underwent, besides among women themselves. In an article concerning childbirth, Linda Pollock explains that reproduction and the birthing process made others uncomfortable and was something to be ashamed of. The only support that women had throughout their pregnancy and giving birth, was from other women. "The birth itself is saluted as the tribute to female support networks . . . Draughts and bright light were excluded, men and the world were shut out until the child was born" (Pollock 288). Mary Wollstonecraft mirrors those findings in *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*. The two main female characters, Maria and Jemima, were brought together by their shared motherhood. They formed a bond after telling stories of the wrongs done to them and their children at the hands of men. Bonding through similar situations is common, especially for those who are repressed. "For social historians, motherhood has been described as a time of unity among women: neighbors gathering to help" (Gowing 818). Wollstonecraft shows some of the maternal bonding of women in *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* and how such

support for each other is beneficial. For instance, the relationship that Maria and Jemima form helps Maria find the passion to seek more for her daughter. Jemima's story also speaks to Maria and is what causes her to become more serious in aiding her daughter. Maria hears Jemima's story and realizes that the same misfortunes could happen to her daughter as well. Maria works to write her narrative while in captivity so that she can help her daughter have a better life. Jemima's story fuels Maria's intentions to read, to write, to escape. She is writing to warn her daughter of the ills that can come from being a woman. Jemima's troubled relationship with the maternal body is what connects the two women even further, providing a common ground for them to work from and allowing them to depend on each other.

Jemima, in contrast to Maria, is the not surprising (at the time) story of a woman who is forced into the maternal body role and then forced out of it. She is wanted for her sexual body, but then her maternal body that is a result of male desire threatens a man's opportunity to obtain Jemima's sexual body. She tells Maria, "[m]y master...contrived to be alone in the house with me, and by blows-yes; blows and menaces, compelled me to submit to his ferocious desire; and, to avoid my mistress's fury, I was obliged in future to comply, and skulk to my loft at his command, in spite of increased loathing" (Wollstonecraft 278). Jemima's master saw her as a sexual body there to please him, and he took what he thought was his. However, once she became pregnant and told her master, he "gave [her] a medicine in a phial, which he desired [her] to take, telling [her], without any circumlocution, for what purpose it was designed" (Wollstonecraft 278). Her pregnancy complicates her master's life and his access to her sexual body, and she is therefore forced into an abortion. After terminating the pregnancy, she wanders the

streets to find a role for herself once again. She comes across many women who are prostitutes and realizes that such a role is what is most available to her and expected of her. However, she says, “[t]o escape from this persecution, I once more entered into servitude” (Wollstonecraft 281). Jemima would rather be a servant than be expected to fulfill the pleasures of men with no regard for herself. She then ends up in the house where she finds a yearning for literature and knowledge. It is not until she is working in the madhouse as Maria’s caretaker that she begins to take a form of the maternal role that she had been suppressing. By her caring for Maria, and their sharing of their stories, she becomes more concerned with reason; thinking analytically with Maria about what needs to be done to ensure the future of Maria’s daughter.

The Maternal Mind

Wollstonecraft’s fight for education contributes to the maternal body being strong and abled. The female body as a whole needs to be strong, intelligent, and abled; and one of the most influential forms of the female body is the maternal body. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she says, “[c]ontending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice” (16-17). Here, Wollstonecraft argues that women are as intellectually capable as men. She believed that education and knowledge were important virtues for everyone to have; male and female, rich and poor. She believed that by educating women they would become better companions, better members of society, and better mothers. Not only does knowledge provide a woman more to offer, but it is the maternal body, the one that is

changing, nurturing, and providing for its child, that is able to contribute that knowledge in the most reasonable and beneficial ways by passing it on to the next generation. A maternal body fights for the interests of many, not for the interests of one.

Wollstonecraft believed in the power of motherhood, and did not take it lightly. She believed that the maternal body was strong and that its job was to take charge of its children. When she was in Denmark and wrote a letter to Gilbert Imlay, she commented on some of the mothers there saying, “the children are spoiled, as they usually are when left to the care of weak, indulgent mothers, who having no principle of action to regulate their feelings, become the slaves of infants, enfeebling both body and mind by false tenderness” (*Letters* 101). She knew that the maternal body and mind was strong, yet was frustrated by those women who were not also aware of their powers and possibilities as a mother. She was not shy to blame women for the wrongs that they inflicted on themselves. Shawn Lisa Maurer provides some similar insights:

Yet Wollstonecraft ascribes their failings to a lack of sufficient nurturance and education, most frequently on the part of their own mothers. By placing at least some of the responsibility for moral development on women themselves, Wollstonecraft endows women with a subjectivity, a subjectivity, moreover, that is constituted in direct relation to a woman’s role as mother. (36)

The women in *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* suffer because of their lack of nurturance and education, which is mostly their mothers’ fault. What Maurer’s article does not do however, and what I am adding, is to see that the attributes of women and their maternal bodies that she sees as disabling, are actually empowering.

Maria's maternal role within *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* empowers her to seek more for herself and for her daughter. While Maria is a maternal body, she is also a mind that seeks intelligence and literature, and a body that seeks the companionship of a man whose mind first attracted her. She was able to be on the same field intellectually with Mr. Darnford, as opposed to a lesser being that is there to please him. The difference in her relationship with Mr. Darnford, as opposed to her husband Mr. Venables, is that she first forms a relationship with Mr. Darnford through their intellects. It is not about her beauty and her ability to please him. They gain interest in each other before ever meeting. It is through shared books and notes written in the margins that they begin to fall in love. In a note that Mr. Darnford leaves in a book for Maria, he says, "[w]hoever you are, who partake of my fate, accept my sincere commiseration – I would have said protection; but the privilege of man is denied me" (Wollstonecraft 263). Mr. Darnford sees the ability present in Maria, because he was able to see her intelligence through writing before forming preconceived notions of her as a passive and incapable woman. Their relationship is a refreshing alternative to the others mentioned in the novel and it is made possible by Maria's maternal body and the new priorities that come with it.

Wollstonecraft speaks to the importance of a woman's impact on her children. Also in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she says, "If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman, at present, shuts her out from such investigations" (17). A mother has the most influence over her children, and it is her duty to make sure that the influences are good

for the children and for society. Wollstonecraft is arguing that at the present time (the eighteenth century) women did not have the knowledge available to properly fulfill the roles of mother, patriot, societal member, sexual partner, and others, but not because there were not able. Women were not aware of the moral and civil interest of mankind, because they were not included in those conversations. Therefore, they could not ensure that their children were learning all that they needed to. Wollstonecraft shows readers instances of the women yearning for knowledge throughout *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*. While Jemima tells her story she mentions that she “had acquired a taste for literature, during the five years I had lived with a literary man, occasionally conversing with men of the first abilities of the age; and now to descend to the lowest vulgarity, was a degree of wretchedness not to be imagined unfelt” (Wollstonecraft 284). Jemima’s character shows readers that once a woman has had a taste of knowledge, it can be disastrous to revert back to the typical status of women at the time. It is once Jemima is put in the maternal role of caring for Maria, she begins to gain some of her knowledge and abilities back, and listening to Jemima’s story is what leads Maria to decide that she needs to be sure to write her narrative for her daughter. Because “[t]hinking of Jemima’s peculiar fate and her own, she was led to consider the oppressed state of women, and to lament that she had given birth to a daughter [. . .] it seemed probable that her own babe might even now be in the very state she so forcibly described” (Wollstonecraft 290). The message that Wollstonecraft is sending with the determination of Maria is that a mother should care for her child, and that caring means to ensure that the child is educated and prepared for the societal ills towards women. It is through her maternal body, and then

the formed relationship with Jemima, that she is able to reasonably see the importance of such knowledge.

Jemima's narrative is mostly concerned with her desire for education and a way out of poverty. Her story most closely aligns with the problems presented in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. At one point in the novel, Maria exclaims to Jemima,

With your heart, and such dreadful experience, can you lend your aid to deprive my babe of a mother's tenderness, a mother's care? In the name of God, assist me to snatch her from destruction! Let me but give her an education – let me but prepare her body and mind to encounter the ills which await her sex, and I will teach her to consider you as her second mother, and herself as the prop of your age. Yes, Jemima, look at me-- observe me closely, and read my very soul; you merit a better fate.

(Wollstonecraft 290)

Wollstonecraft's views are shining through Maria in this instant where she knows that in order for her daughter to have a better chance and life, she needs to have an education. She asks for Jemima's help because through their shared maternity stories, she knows that Jemima understands the importance of protecting her child.

Maria is writing to her daughter to protect her. She is a maternal body that longs for her lost daughter and while strengthening her mind with books, reading, and knowledge, she is working to convey her thoughts on paper in order to better her daughter's life. "Maria, the protagonist [...], uses her desperate situation to instruct and discipline herself in the process of educating her daughter" (Maurer 37). Then, in the

instance of Jemima, is a character that did not have a maternal figure. She mentions at one point that “Now I [Jemima] look back, I cannot help attributing the greater part of my misery, to the misfortune of having been thrown into the world without the grand support of life – a mother’s affection” (Wollstonecraft 277). Readers see that the maternal body is important to the life of a child. The maternal body is powerful in its abilities and its duties that it should fulfill and Jemima feels the physical effects of the separation.

Maria and Mr. Darnford knew each other first through their minds, and grew to respect each other’s intelligence, which is what makes him a better match for her than Mr. Venables. Once they began their relationship, Mr. Darnford’s “[d]esire was lost in more ineffable emotions, and to protect her from insult and sorrow – to make her happy, seemed not only the first wish of his heart, but the most noble duty of his life” (Wollstonecraft 272). Maria’s relationship with Mr. Darnford was based on intellect as opposed to good looks and fortune. Once Maria realized the kind of relationship she could have with a man like Mr. Darnford, she was committed to him and “[a]s her husband she now received him, and he solemnly pledged himself as her protector – and eternal friend” (Wollstonecraft 345). The relationship that Wollstonecraft presents with Maria and Darnford is one that she argues for throughout her other writings, especially *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. They are that of mutual respect, intelligence, and friendship. It is through the relationship that Maria has with Mr. Darnford, that she is able to better fulfill her other duties, especially those concerned with the maternal body, and it is no coincidence, that both Wollstonecraft and her character, Maria, were able to achieve a relationship based on intelligence and friendship once they had become

mothers⁷. It was through their maternal bodies, and the functional purpose for another that such bodies gave them, that they could achieve the reasonable thinking necessary to break through the preconceived notions of how a woman should act.

⁷ For more on the relationship between Wollstonecraft and Godwin, refer to Godwin's text, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

It is important to acknowledge the fact that Wollstonecraft's novel is unfinished, and that it is unfinished because she died from complications after giving birth to her second daughter, Mary⁸. While it could be said to be ironic that Wollstonecraft died in such a situation after spending much of her life and effort on a representation of a strong maternal body, I would like to propose that her death highlights the strength and power that a maternal body possesses. At the time of her life, a maternal body was seen as diseased and disabled, and some could say that her dying due to her body not dispelling the placenta is an effect of such a diseased body. However, Wollstonecraft was a victim of time, not of her maternal body. Her complications were simply due to the time in which she lived and the lack of education on the subject; and that same maternal body brought two women into the world and provided hope for many more.

Wollstonecraft spent the time and effort in ensuring that the wrongs of woman were documented and that the importance of education was explained. Wollstonecraft illustrates the importance of what she was doing within the novel. Her main character, Maria, also documents her narrative with her daughter in mind. Maria's letters to her daughter begin by questioning whether the tenderness of a father "could equal that of a

⁸ Who later becomes Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*.

mother ...laboring under a portion of the misery, which the constitution of society seems to have entailed on all her kind?" (Wollstonecraft 293). The beginning of Maria's writings to her daughter also reflect what Wollstonecraft herself was doing. Wollstonecraft could not have known that she would not survive childbirth, however, Maria's words mirror her situation perfectly when she writes to her daughter:

It is, my child, my dearest daughter, only such a mother, who will dare to break through all restraint to provide for your happiness – who will voluntarily brave censure herself, to ward off sorrow from your bosom. From my narrative, my dear girl, you may gather the instruction, the counsel, which is meant rather to exercise than influence your mind. – Death may snatch me from you, before you can weigh my advice, or enter into my reasoning. (Wollstonecraft 293)

Wollstonecraft was fighting for her daughters from the moment she began to actively speak out for women, years before her first daughter, Fanny, was even born.

Wollstonecraft was then able to focus her words more profoundly towards their benefit after becoming a maternal body. Certainly, it was an unfortunate turn of events that she did not survive Mary's birth. Her maternal care was left unfinished, much like her novel; thus, both the legacy of her mind and her body were left in an equal state after her passing. But it was her experience as a maternal body that allowed her to become who she was and, as William Godwin writes in a chapter concerning the end of her life, allowed her to fight for as long as she could, not once blaming her body in all its forms, but instead embracing it and using it to strengthen who she was and what she fought for. Godwin said it well when he said: "The loss of the world in this admirable woman, I

leave to other men to collect; my own I well know, nor can it be improper to describe it”

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