

REBELLIOUS MARYS AT THE CROSSROADS: SELF-DEVELOPMENT IN MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S NOVELS, *MARY* AND *MARIA*

ÉVA ANTAL

antal.eva@uni-eszterhazy.hu

The context of the present article is my research on philosophies of female education and the questions of female *Bildung* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England. Female writings seem to rely on the theoretical background provided by the well-known male authors in order to present a critical and ironical reading. In my study, I highlight the ways of development expressed in the open and closed spaces in Mary Wollstonecraft's novels. In the quite autobiographical *Mary* (1788), in accordance with the characteristic aversion to the *household*, the heroine feels at home in nature, or on the road (cf. homelessness). Meanwhile, having left the suffocating *milieu* of her home and her marriage, she finds her peace and partner in her own way. In the unfinished novel, *Maria* (1798), the prisonlike environment of the wife with her actual imprisonment in the Gothic asylum, physically represents the patriarchal restraints in women's lives. Maria is a rebel, she leaves her husband, and later her readings free her mind. In both novels the heroines struggle with the expectations of the age and their paths of life display the possibilities for development offered to a young woman in the second half of the eighteenth century—in the framework of Wollstonecraft's early *Bildungsromane*.

Keywords: reading, self-development, Bildungsroman, Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, *Maria*.

“Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?”
(Mary Wollstonecraft)

1 Introduction: the Rebellious Marys

The last two decades of the eighteenth century were dominated by rebellious Marys in English fiction, the embodiments of courageous and “outcast” female characters in novels written by Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, and Mary Hays, among others. In an article published in the *Anti-Jacobean Review and Magazine* in 1799, the anonymous pugnacious critic sighs that the “old fashioned moralists [...] are sick

of Mary” (“*A Victim*” 1799, 57).¹ In the novels, the female protagonists struggle to find their own ways in life with the aim of fulfilling their self-realisation within the bonds of possibilities offered to women at the time. The writers and their fictional characters dared to question, criticise and/or transgress the boundaries of their social roles, emphasising the importance of (self-)education, self-knowledge and self-reliance. These “female *Bildungsromane*” introduce, as Anne K. Mellor claims, “the rational woman” who “can become as sensible and virtuous as men” (1993, 40). In the present article, I will analyse Wollstonecraft’s novels *Mary* and *Maria*, focussing on the heroines’ paths and the ways they leave behind their traditional contexts, their *homes*—where they are locked up—and then, moving beyond, how they map their possibilities in “the wild zone.” In my approach, I am emphatically influenced by feminist criticism and I rely on such concepts as “fathers,” “muted story,” and “the wild zone,” borrowed from and quoted in Elaine Showalter’s seminal work, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” (1981). Having provided a short introduction on Wollstonecraft’s ideas of self-education, I show that her philosophical tale, “The Cave of Fancy” marks a turning point in her early writings, in which she questions the closing and opening up of life-paths; thus, the story underlines the theme of development discussed in the two novels afterwards.

2 Mary Wollstonecraft, the (Self-)Educationalist

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), the eighteenth-century novelist, essayist, and educationalist was an enlightened thinker. She was highly influenced by the notions of her radical contemporaries and was an ardent believer in reason, common sense and self-education. In her early works, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), she published educational stories and tales to instruct the female reader. In her edited collection, *The Female Reader*, she also propagated reading, while in the novels—*Mary: A Fiction* (1788) and *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798)—she discussed the possible ways of women’s self-development. In her most well-known political debates, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she demonstrated that critical thinking was essential to personal education, while in her reviews, translations and her travelogue, she also completed the process of her self-training.

¹ The critic refers to Mary Hays’s *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799) but we can also think of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Mary* (1788) and *Maria* (1798), along with the writers—all Marys. For more on this topic, see Janczer Csikós 2022 and 2023.

In addition to being a member of the Radicals, Wollstonecraft frequently attended the dissenters' meetings and lectures organised by the publisher Joseph Johnson (Tomalin 2012, Richardson 2002). She read the fashionable "conduct books" of her own time, for instance, Rev. James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), and John Bennett's *Strictures on Female Education* (1787) and she highly criticised their rigid notions concerning women's roles and possibilities. These works demonstrated the proper behaviour expected from women, such as following the rules of etiquette and manners, which was regarded as appropriate for women's social status. Even well-educated girls were not encouraged to read or know anything other than the Bible, and John Gregory, mentioned above, voices his utter despair when he writes about the theatre. In the chapter "Entertainment," he can scarcely offer his daughters a literary work in his own age "without a shock to delicacy"—one that does not evoke unnecessary, disturbing, or even inappropriate emotions (1808, 62, 68). The reading of novels was also discussed in conduct books and educational writings due to its effects on women's development. Wollstonecraft—who waged a battle against conduct books, based on "a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men"—was willing to confirm that novel-reading was dangerous for young women (Wollstonecraft 2004b, 11). The reading of fashionable romances would prevent girls' intellectual growth, increase their sensibility and their weakness, thus perpetrating their subjection to men.

In order to understand Wollstonecraft's life-work, I cannot avoid referring to the influential 'intellectual fathers'—John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Edmund Burke, among others—whose writings provided her with a framework of thinking in the textual debates she published. John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education* (1762; English translation 1763) had a great effect on her philosophy of education. While Locke mainly focussed on young gentlemen's training and Rousseau wrote about boys' natural education, Wollstonecraft tried to apply their notions to women's development. Her early *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and *Original Stories* clearly show the impact of Lockean and Rousseauvian ideas, while she reacted to some infamous statements of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. In her masterpiece, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she overtly attacks Rousseau and his ideas. In Book 5 of *Emile*, entitled "Sophy, or Woman," addressing female education, Rousseau states that men's and women's education cannot be the same and the modest Sophy is to be brought up mainly to accompany the naturally educated man, to be a "companion [...] given to him" (1979, 357). Moreover, according to Rousseau, girls "ought to be constrained very early," since it is "inseparable from their sex [...]. All their lives

they will be enslaved to the most continual and most severe of constraints—that of the proprieties” (1979, 369). In *A Vindication*, Mary Wollstonecraft critically reads Rousseau, and she does not only quote the ‘mainstream’ educational work, but, as she claims, “warp[ing] the author’s reasoning” (2004b, 100), she also moves beyond the conventional ideas towards her own, new understanding of the ‘fatherly’ concepts.

3 “The Cave of Fancy” at the End of Her World

In addition to the early educational writings, Wollstonecraft left behind the fragment “The Cave of Fancy: A Tale” (1787, posthumously published in 1798). In the tale, an imagined sublime realm is presented, where the hermit, the old wise Sagestus (cf. sage) lives in sublime surroundings at the end of the world. In his cogitation, Sagestus’s isolation and confinement are emphasised not only by his eyes, which turn inwards, but by the far away and ancient cavern through which he can enter the depth of the earth, where “the various spirits, which inhabit the different regions of nature, were here obedient to his potent word” (Wollstonecraft 1989, 191). The grave-like cave, being like a *limbo* between life and death, welcomes the ghosts of the dead; some of them are evil creatures waiting for their long purification, and some are good ones, like “the guardian angels,” who are allowed to leave their prison.

In the depiction of the cavern, Wollstonecraft relies on the Platonic image of the cave and the idea that man should come out of “his” cave to light in order to re-discover the truth of human existence. The cave itself is associated with the body and the skull, and the narrative reflects on the workings of the human mind. In Wollstonecraft’s understanding, “the cave” and “fancy” also stand for the secrets of the female heart, mind, and sexuality.² On the one hand, in her educational writings, her philosophically minded female characters (similarly to herself) strive to find their home, their partner and their role in the world, while at the same time they have to learn to tame their desire. On the other hand, as Sylvana Tomaselli says, Wollstonecraft—in a Platonic mode—presents “human love as an ephemeral delusion in an uneasy relation to virtue and esteem, which must not be allowed to usurp the rightful place of divine love in the soul” (2016, 30).

In Wollstonecraft’s allegorical “Cave,” the wise man, Sagestus is able to sense (imagine or fancy) the life-stories of the dead, studying their bodily features. Thus, when he finds a baby-girl who survives a shipwreck, he adopts the child and later

² Meena Alexander even says that “the cave itself, in a kind of imaginative extremity is both the womb of Mother Nature and the tomb of all mothers” (1989, 185).

educates the young girl named Sagesta (after himself) by allowing her to listen to the narratives of (dead) women. In the (promised) realistic narrative(s), the emotional, financial and bodily troubles of eighteenth-century women are revealed and this way Sagesta—through her fancy—is trained to become a wise and sensitive human being. One can wonder whether she will eventually assist or replace the aged Sagestus in coordinating the spirits in the cavern, but the conclusion can only be guessed, since the tale is unfinished.³

In the philosophical and spiritual setting of the tale, the reader is also invited to sense the movement from noticing the characters' outer features to the grasping of their inner thoughts. The study of physical features can also be ascribed to J. C. Lavater's theory of physiognomy, since when Wollstonecraft was working on the puzzling story, she was influenced by her debate with the Swiss thinker's stereotypical approach—especially, in the understanding of female character. Yet, the *inspired* ghosts are individuals, not types, and highlighting female voices reveals a new direction in the writer's work. In Wollstonecraft's own lifework, "The Cave of Fancy" presents a new way (out) and her new readings of the 'fathers' works.' Through her liberating fantasy, or fancy, she moves towards her rebellious writings, where she starts to re-define the female body, sensibility, and consciousness. As she writes about her first novel, *Mary: A Fiction*: growing out of spiritual (in)fancy, "a new genius will educate itself" (2004a, 211).

4 *Mary*: "neither a Clarissa, not a Lady G-, nor a Sophie"

In the short "Advertisement" attached to *Mary: A Fiction*, the author highlights that in her "artless tale [...] the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers is displayed" (2004a, 3). The rather provoking opening also names three female characters—Samuel Richardson's two sentimental heroines in *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, and Rousseau's Sophie in *Emile*—who represent the conventionally accepted portrayal of women in the age: the docile and intimidated female. Thus, the first *Mary* novel is not only a critique of contemporary romances written for women, but it also presents the female mind and its thinking, although Wollstonecraft knows that many people consider this organ too feeble for intellectual work. As the already quoted statement goes, here she shows how "a genius will educate itself," where the term, genius, also means a "[h]uman endowed with superiour faculties,"

³ In his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, William Godwin emphasises the fragmentary quality of the tale (2018, 21).

“mental power or faculties,” or even “nature, disposition,” as we can read in Samuel Johnson’s first academic dictionary of the English language (1755). Dr. Johnson’s representative examples and literary quotations which accompany the meanings of the words identify men as *genii*; the protagonist, Mary, has indeed a long way to go to become one.

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft’s earlier novels display women characters’ emotions and, in a romanticised way, have an autobiographical inspiration: not only the author’s own life story is filtered through, but also her own defining reading experiences, such as Rousseau’s *Emile* and Johnson’s *Rasselas*, in addition to the works already mentioned before. The portrayal of Mary’s childhood and her parents is a fairly accurate picture of the conditions of her time: her mother Eliza was brought up to be a spoiled, stupid ‘automaton’ (cf. “a mere machine,” Wollstonecraft 2004a, 5), and her husband was assigned to her by her parents. In the figure of the mother, the author offers a caricature of the eighteenth-century ladies for whom sentimental romances provided a reading experience, in their anti-*Bildung*. At that point Wollstonecraft tells the reader that she also could write such tear-jerking stories of sensibility, but she has no intention of doing so (2004a, 6). The mother does not care for her two children—the sickly, weak son and the heroine—and she does not love her husband either; she prefers to coddle her pet lapdog, and dies very early.

After her brother is sent to a boarding school—and since girls of her age have no chance of an institutional education—little Mary is left unattended, and she runs around the house mostly in a wild rampage. In her early childhood, she is described as a *romp* (cf. “ramp,” Wollstonecraft 2004b, 57), experiencing freedom in nature, which brings to mind the Rousseauvian natural and physical education of man in *Emile* while, practically, the young girl’s independence is due to her being neglected by the parents. Then the housekeeper teaches her to read, the governess teaches her French and the world *opens up* to her. During her walks and wanderings in the countryside, by the river and in the abandoned castles, Mary reflects on her reading: her mind is shaped by Thomson’s and Young’s melancholy poems and the works of Milton. As Barbara Taylor points out, Mary has a “naturally philosophic mind” and, in a rather manly way, she is preoccupied with metaphysical and theological ideas, which she records from an early age (2003, 35). She learns to appreciate the sublime quality of nature and, while her soul is filled with infinite beauty, she is able to feel the presence of the Creator in her outdoor experiences. Wollstonecraft details the process of young Mary combining the experience of her surroundings with her insight into the divine:

[..] she would steal to this retirement, where human foot seldom trod—gaze on the sea, observe the grey clouds, or listen to the wind which struggled to free itself from the only thing that impeded its course. Many nights she sat up, [...] *conversing* with the Author of

Nature, making verses, and singing hymns of her own composing. [...] Often did she taste unmixed delight; her joys, her ecstasies arose from genius. (2004a, 11–12, emphasis in the original.)

When she is absorbed in her thoughts, being empowered and guided by her intellectual passions, she forgets her bodily needs; the display of genius is emphasised by the powerful emotional expression (passions, ecstasies, delight).

“Neglected in every respect, and left to the operations of her own mind, she considered everything”—Mary reads, thinks, that is, educates herself (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 7). She inherits her passionate disposition from her father, which may explain that “her understanding were [sic] strong and clear, when not clouded by her feelings; but she was too much the creature of impulse, and the slave of compassion” (2004a, 9). In addition to the *ingenious* and *genuine* experience of the divine-sublime, at quite a young age, she encounters death while visiting a dying farmer’s house, and from childhood, she is attentive to the fallen, the suffering, and the poor; she is almost pathologically caring and empathetic in her helpfulness to others. She has a lifelong “intimate” friendship with Ann, the eldest daughter of a neighbouring widow, who, like her, is prone to melancholy. Mary learns how to write from her older friend and Ann has a beneficial influence on her irrepressible nature: Mary’s “manners were softened” owing to her friend (2004a, 10). Mary adores her, but Ann is very indifferent to her adoration. Truly, Mary sees, they are not “congenial minds,” but she feels that it is more than friendship, “a passion” that “occupie[s] her heart” (2004a, 16–18). It would be difficult to determine, in an age of wives regarded as lapdogs, the precise nature of Mary and Ann’s relationship. Mary is the masculine, energetic active partner, while her friend is the passive, feeble-minded, feminine partner in the relationship, though homoeroticism is not thematised, only implied in the novel. Mary’s husband also accepts his wife’s “romantic friendship” with the other woman (2004a, 18).

Upon her brother’s death, Mary becomes the heiress to the estate and at the age of seventeen she is forced to marry her neighbour’s son, whom she does not know. Mary prefers intelligent men, with whom, however, she has had little luck. In fact, she is marrying to use her wealth to do good, to help and to continue supporting her ailing friend’s family. The young heroine has to face several losses: the illness of her lover, the untimely death of her brother and mother, her unhappy marriage to a despicable man, followed by the death of her father. Ann’s condition takes a turn for the worse, so the two women travel to a pleasant climate after Mary receives permission to do so from her husband, who is travelling in Europe. Escaping from her marriage and her home, on the ship to Lisbon, she is again fascinated by the stormy sea. Moreover, she meets a witty though weak man, Henry, and during their conversation “all the faculties of her soul unfolded themselves; genius animated her

expressive countenance” (2004a, 24). She meets Henry frequently and develops an emotional attachment to him, while Ann’s health does not improve and she dies in Portugal. In Mary’s life, there is no mentor, guide or advisor: the heroine is shaping her own personality, or rather her innate abilities are shaping her understanding and passion. The experiences she has gained give her a broader vision of the world, and her suffering teaches her empathy, taming her childish unruliness. Henry can be Mary’s worthy companion with a promise of eternal friendship, and she is enraptured to think there is one man in the world who understands and loves her: she is lonely, but she is not alone. After her girlfriend’s death, her place in Mary’s life is taken by the equally ailing, effeminate Henry, and so the earlier “tale of forbidden and unnarratable passionate friendship becomes a tale of forbidden but narratable adulterous love,” as Claudia L. Johnson remarks (2002, 195).

Returning to England, Mary visits her dead friend’s mother and continues to support the family. Again, she finds solace looking at “the smiling face of nature,” in the exuberant happiness of animals, while she sees that humanity in general is degraded (2004a, 39). She continues to help those in need, yet she receives neither respect nor thanks in return and she falls into apathy, being surrounded by unfriendly, ungrateful people. The reader can also follow her spiritual ups and downs as she begins to praise sensibility, for it is “the foundation of all our happiness” (2004a, 43). Henry turns up, sending a formal letter asking Mary to meet him, while her husband is still wandering on the continent. In fact, Henry is dying, so Mary can nurse him: “I cannot live without loving—and love leads to madness” (2004a, 49), she writes in her diary, and the man dies in her arms.

The ending of the short novel is far from conventional. Mary as a self-made woman lives alone in her own home and lives *on* her own household. However, the final melancholy passages do not celebrate her independence; instead, they shockingly question the institution of marriage:

Mary visited the continent, and sought health in different climates; but her nerves were not to be restored to their former state. She then retired to her house in the country, established manufactories, threw the estate into small farms; [...]. She visited the sick, supported the old, and educated the young. [...] In moments of solitary sadness, a gleam of joy would dart across her mind—She thought she was hastening to that world *where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage.* (2004a, 53, emphasis in the original.)

We might ask whether this woman has found her happiness in her short life. Hers is not a domestic fulfilment: she has enjoyed intellectual pleasures, being lost in her own thoughts and engaged in meaningful conversations while she is taking care of her dying loved ones. Her health, shaken by adversity, does not give her a long life, but she does not regret it in her joyless marriage. Before the heroine’s idea about

the abolition of marriage is considered revolutionary, we must notice the Biblical reference to eternity where man and woman will live as angels and therefore they will not have to marry: “For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven” (Matthew 22:30). To be more precise, angels are genderless beings, and in this way in the afterlife, the pious and good-hearted heroine may even be reunited with her beloved friend. Claudia L. Johnson, however, points out that formally, the questioning of marriage as a compulsory happy ending in the conclusion is a radical act, as Wollstonecraft’s eighteenth-century women readers may have come to see that self-realisation was only possible by transcending boundaries (2002, 198). They could contemplate whether they wanted to live on as trapped ‘lapdogs,’ or as independent flesh-and-blood women, or, in the heat of mystical rapture, as angels.

5 “Abodes of horror”: *Maria*

The heroine of the early novel, *Mary*, is both masculine and feminine: a married woman who wanders in the world as if she were single, recording profound thoughts about the meaning of life, while also motherly in her caring for others, in a hypersensitive way. There is no model for Mary to follow, she only tries to place and define herself, her genius in the wild zone presented by the outer and inner spaces of the novel. In the “Preface” to *Maria*, the author claims that her novel is about “the oppressed part of mankind” and Maria’s life is a story of passion, rather than a novel of manners; the heroine is first “a woman of sensibility,” then an individual (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 59–60). The subtitle ironically proclaims *The Wrongs of Woman*, and although the author portrays female upbringing in different social classes, the suffering of women is in fact universal. The second novel, *Maria*, was written after *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and in both works, Wollstonecraft attempts to demonstrate “the experience of *being female*” and how social frameworks oppress women emotionally and intellectually (Taylor 2003, 55–56, emphasis in the original). In this way, the non-existent rights of women—and the consequent wrongs—such as the freedom to love, to make one’s own decisions, to live separately and to divorce, can be juxtaposed.⁴

⁴ The novel, *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* is imbued by the author’s own experiences: Wollstonecraft’s love affair with the American Gilbert Imlay and her abandonment with a newborn child are commemorated in the representation of the disillusioned female characters. However, she was still working on her last work when she got pregnant and married William Godwin. The introduction to the novel was written by the author’s husband, who also edited and published the unfinished work after Wollstonecraft’s death in childbirth. See Tomalin 2012, 232–44 and 257–70.

The opening of the novel is revolutionary: Maria is seen in chains in an asylum, where she laments being torn away from her four-month-old daughter. The first words of the novel refer to the women's prison as "abodes of horrors", where the heroine regrets that her child is female and thus doomed to suffer (2004a, 61). The twenty-six-year-old Maria has been sent there by her husband and she writes her memoirs in the madhouse: her life story is intended for her daughter so that the girl should learn from her mother's "wrongs," because it is not easy to live a full life and be happy as a woman. "Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?" asks the heroine, her apt words providing the motto of the present paper (2004a, 64). The question is an excellent illustration of the rigidity of social expectations, and it is particularly ironic that it is asked in a madhouse where women who cannot fit in are locked up. Maria is not allowed to go out of her cell into the garden, but from her window she can see the ruins outside. Similarly, inside, the female wretches (cf. wrecks) are imprisoned and their narratives reflect the evils of the world outside. In addition to Maria, who has fled from her immoral husband, there are the adulteresses, the constantly singing "sweet maniac," who went mad when forced to marry a rich old man, or Maria's guard[ian], Jemima—all these characters offer Wollstonecraft's critique of her own times.

The readers are first introduced to the prison guard Jemima's muted story. At the beginning, she treats Maria coldly, but when she learns that she has left behind a baby, she takes pity on her. She brings books for Maria and allows her to write: these activities keep the prisoner alive, and a sincere friendship develops between the two women. Jemima's life is also full of humiliation: her parents were servants, her father seduced and impregnated her mother; she, in turn, married him out of necessity. Her mother died immediately after Jemima's birth, the father remarried, and the new wife treated the little girl abusively. No one loved or respected the little "bastard," but "in spite of neglect, [she] continued to exist, to learn to curse existence, [...] and the treatment that rendered [her] miserable, seemed to sharpen [her] wits" (2004a, 80–82). In her teens, Jemima was seduced by her employer, who had a family, and when she got pregnant, she was forced to abort the foetus by means of the medicine the man gave her. The affair was revealed, as a result she ended up on the streets: begging, stealing, and selling her body. "I was still a slave, a bastard, a common property," she sums up her situation (2004a, 85). Fortunately, she met an educated gentleman, who took her in, and in her new home Jemima learnt manners and learnt how to read; she was blossoming in the educated men's (cf. 'the intellectual fathers') company mainly due to the discussion of her ample readings. After her master's death, she was thought by all the relatives to be the man's mistress, she became an object of scorn, and she was thrown out on the streets again. Jemima is also critical towards the reform-minded writers of her time, for when

they claim that if a talented person wants to work, he can find a job, they always think only of men—women must take the meanest jobs to support themselves, but they can lose the occupation easily if they are discredited and stigmatised by society (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 88). Jemima survives by manual work and the tiresome toil makes her listless and desperate: “I hated mankind [and] I despised myself,” she says (2004a, 90). Then she is hospitalised with an injury and she finds herself in a workhouse, whose manager also runs the private shelter; he sees an opportunity in Jemima, thus, she starts to work in the asylum, looking after the mentally handicapped and outcasts.

Taylor (along with several other feminist authors) sees the lower-class Jemima as the real rebel of the novel, and a sharp critic of her time: in her “feminist rage,” she lashes out against the status of men, the behaviour of rich women, and even against the “hypocritical social reformers” (Taylor 2003, 238–41). A valuable thread in the novel is the unfolding friendship between the two women, the prisoner and the prison guard. Jemima (with her Biblical name, meaning dove) lists all the suffering of women in that age, and Maria, with her own life experiences, regrets having a daughter. In one of the most passionate episodes, she asks Jemima to be the adoptive mother of her child:

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; [...] and I will procure it for you, as a testimony of my esteem, as well as of my gratitude. (2004a, 92)

The misanthropic, tough Jemima finally feels that she matters, that she is important to someone, which gives her a sense of belonging—this is a fine example of sisterhood and “feminist solidarity” (Johnson 2002, 206). In fact, Jemima saves Maria in her bedlam, shakes off her apathy, and together they run away and hide.

In the novel, Maria’s own retrospective life story is written with an educational purpose. In prison, Maria, “a mother schooled in misery,” writes her memoir for her daughter (2004a, 94). Laurie Langbauer also highlights the significance of this maternal memoir, but not due to its educational purpose; she claims that “apostrophizing her [daughter], [...] Maria may only be a mother *while* she is writing” (1988, 212, emphasis in the original).⁵ Throughout her memoirs, she gives advice

⁵ Certainly, this remark clearly alludes to Hélène Cixous’s idea of “white ink”; namely that a female writer uses *her* natural ink, alluding to mother’s milk, and pouring it on white pages, she composes an invisible narrative (qtd. Showalter 1981, 201). But my focus is still on tracing visible female development in the novels.

to her daughter, though she knows that there is no real room for manoeuvre for women in her own age. Similarly to Mary's, her childhood was only happy thanks to her love of nature, while her strict, retired army officer father and weak-willed mother indulged her brother and neglected her and her sisters. Only her uncle cared for her intellectual development and brought her books. After her mother's death, her father brings a new woman into the house and her stepmother scourges her for her laziness, blames her reading and confiscates her books. Maria escapes into a "romantic" marriage to a gentleman of the neighbourhood, which she later discovers having been made possible by her uncle's money. The husband, George Venables appears to be a good man at first, but later turns out to be a swindler, spending money on gambling and courtesans. "Why was I not born a man, or why was I born at all?" (2004a: 105), the young heroine asks the philosophical question, reflecting on her own past. During their years in London, the relationship between the spouses becomes strained, as the differences between their characters become apparent. The husband, after squandering the family fortune, spends her uncle's money while Maria tries to keep the household under control and look after her own siblings. She feels to be "the man's property," also a "housekeeper," her feelings are extinguished, and she does not love or respect her husband (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 117–18). She knows that so many of her fellow women live in the world disenfranchised, since in marriage all her properties belong to the husband; the wife has no rights at all. Upon discovering that she is pregnant, she becomes desperate; meanwhile, altruistically, she already cares for an illegitimate child delivered by a servant girl whom her husband seduced in the household. A friend of her husband approaches Maria and Venables turns out to have borrowed money from this man in exchange for the sexual services of his pregnant wife. When Maria reads her husband's letter, she reaches a turning point: she takes off her wedding ring and leaves their home after six years of hardship. She experiences a sublime vision of relief:

Yes; free I termed myself, [...]—liberty, that I would have purchased at any price, but that of my own esteem! I rose, and shook myself; opened the window, and methought the air never smelled so sweet. The face of heaven grew fairer as I viewed it, and the clouds seemed to flit away obedient to my wishes, to give my soul room to expand. *I was all soul*, and (wild as it may appear) felt as if I could have dissolved in the soft balmy gale that kissed my cheek, or have glided below the horizon on the glowing, descending beams. A seraphic satisfaction animated, without agitating my spirits [...]. (2004a, 121, emphasis added)

Only when writing to her daughter, without thinking of social expectations, could she finally be herself, experiencing "true sensibility" and "the soul of genius" (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 130). Unfortunately, her freedom does not last long, since she has to flee, planning to go to a relative to Lisbon, but she gets sick and is forced to go into hiding

as a “villain,” while her husband is searching for her. Eventually, the uncle dies, leaving his fortune to Maria’s siblings and to her new-born baby, for whom Maria is the trustee until she comes of age. While trying to escape to France, she is drugged, her child is kidnapped by her husband and she is taken to the madhouse.

In addition to the friendship between the two women, Maria and Jemima, a romance is also woven in the madhouse. From an imprisoned man, Jemima brings Maria books written by Dryden, Milton, and Rousseau, and it is through the reading of the marginal notes that she gets to know her fellow prisoner. Her interest is aroused by his interpretation of *Julie, or The New Heloise*, and his affirmation of the legitimacy of passion (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 71). They begin to correspond, then meet with Jemima’s help, and the man becomes the first reader of Maria’s memoir. He is Henry Darnford, an ex-student from Eton, a member of a distinguished family, who had made his fortune as a young man, then was sent to America as a soldier. Once back in London, he lived a life of debauchery, and later he was kidnapped by his family. The acquaintance between Maria and Henry turns into an affair, as they fall passionately in love and Maria calls the man “husband” (2004a, 139). She is happy as a woman in this relationship and gives in to her desires for the first time, experiencing her sexuality (cf. “the best sex,” Elfenbein 2002, 242).⁶ But the couple is about to face new troubles. The second part of the novel, which remains in fragmentary notes, reveals that Darnford is sentenced for adultery, while Maria, telling her life story to the jury, saves herself but loses her alimony. At the trial, Maria describes her mistreatment by her husband and she declares that she cannot live with a man who has broken all his moral obligations. On this legally unjustified ground for women (only exceptionally cruel treatment being acceptable grounds for divorce, along with bigamy, impotence, and incest), she asks for divorce, while sharply criticising the laws that

throw the whole weight of the yoke on the weaker shoulders, and force women, when they claim protectorship as mothers, to sign a contract, which renders them dependent on the caprice of the tyrant, whom choice or necessity has appointed to reign over them. (2004a, 143)

⁶ Andrew Elfenbein sees Wollstonecraft’s genius in the presentation of sexuality and he emphasises the protagonists’ independence, “female masculinity” and their rejection of marriage in the Mary novels (2002, 237–38). I would not go that far but I do not agree with Cora Kaplan, either. In her view, due to the strong influence of Rousseau’s *Emile*, Wollstonecraft does not thematise female sexuality, since the age focuses on men’s desires, evoked by the ‘sinful’ beauty of women. Thus, Wollstonecraft does not liberate female pleasure; women’s independence is presented in social, economic, moral and legal ways in both novels (1986, 43–46). The textual allusions show that Wollstonecraft took a more philosophical approach to the question of womanhood, using *genius* in terms of character and spirit, and the self-identical genius was meant to be superior to the distinction between social gender and biological gender— which did not exist in the eighteenth century anyway.

Maria manages to divorce her husband and she is pregnant again but Darnford cheats on her and she has a miscarriage. In fact, both men whom she had a relationship with were “libertines” and both men were idealised by her: she thought of her husband as kind-hearted and she first had seen Darnford as a hero, a freedom-fighter (Johnson 2002: 204). Her readings, having been sent by the man, misled her judgment and her sensibility, while her fancy overcame her common sense. In her frustration, Maria contemplates suicide when Jemima brings to her the daughter that she believed to have died. Two possible conclusions were drafted by Wollstonecraft in her notes: in one, Maria devotes her life to her child; in the other, she commits suicide (2004a, 147–48).

6 Conclusion: The Way Out

As has been pointed out, in Wollstonecraft’s novels the women characters’ life stories are written into a social pattern, and by adopting the conventional narrative form, she presents that their life paths meander within the constraints of the given framework. The heroines tend to question the legitimacy of those constraints and attempt to transgress them, but ultimately, they only end up in situations that force them to highlight the boundaries. Wollstonecraft’s fancy about women’s development is experimental, her characters rebel and try to break out, venturing into the wild zone. In the typical novels of upbringing, the male protagonists set out on a journey, with a series of adventures along the way, while supporting characters, mentors and lovers help them and shape their worldview. For the female travellers, *Bildung* is more of an internal and mental adventure, since the conditions for women’s quests in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were quite different from men’s: women could not aspire to the same education and they could not achieve the same social success. Moreover, the Mary novels, as precursors of the nineteenth-century female *Bildungsromane*, are marked by a transformative character and by the impassioned revolutionary rhetoric of a “spontaneous process of self-creation almost *ex nihilo*,” instead of displaying the earlier “narrative of long-term evolutionary change” (Felski 1995, 165, emphasis in the original).

However, such an interpretation of the female development narrative goes against the process of male *Bildung*. While the male *Bildungsroman* complies with the generic constraints, the female version works against the framework almost from the start—it can only be an anti-*Bildungsroman* by definition. Eve Bannet also argues that by the end of the eighteenth century, “the ideals of women’s conduct and of women’s lives [...] bec[a]me ‘ritual objects,’” and that women’s narratives

revolutionised the way in which “a clearly defined strategy for bringing about social change, [...] social reeducation” was articulated (1991, 197–99). As she remarks,

[w]riting in a genre that transgressed the fixed boundary between the ideal and the real in a way the conduct book did not, eighteenth-century lady-novelists nevertheless proceeded in a similar way, contrasting the real and the ideal, refashioning the latter, and presenting even their radical innovations in the language of conventional morality and *Bildung*. (1991, 200)

This may sound as if the heroines of these novels knew exactly the reasons for their actions and what they were doing. On the contrary, what is truly innovative in Wollstonecraft’s early, ‘fanciful’ anti-*Bildungsromane* is that the female protagonist, seeking new paths, dares to act differently and in this way she subverts the genre, recasting its paradigms. In contrast to the expected conclusion of social integration, found in men’s narratives, the principle of transformation comes to the fore, into the open: *transformation* of one’s own self instead of it being formed with all the possibilities that can be fictionalised. The female novelist, coming from the periphery, from the outside, is able to shape her environment by questioning the *status quo* as a critical reader, while she performatively reinterprets the framework and (re)writes the narrative of self-development.

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