East Central European Historical Studies 3, no. 1 (2025): 93–113

Mary Wollstonecraft's Enlightened Historical Narrative: Her Rational (Re)view on the French Revolution

Éva Antal

Abstract

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790), Mary Wollstonecraft ardently justified the French Revolution, reacting to Edmund Burke's criticism of the event in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). However, having visited France in the 1790s, she rationalised her previous zeal about her radicalism in *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has produced in Europe* (1794). In the *View*, history is presented as a coherent narrative of progress, and the event of the revolution, despite its inevitable causes, is criticised in the moral-philosophical framework. Being an Enlightened thinker, Wollstonecraft re-evaluated her previous ideas, examining them on a large scale in the process of (hu)man development towards virtue. In my paper, I will trace the recurrent characteristics of the narrative, focussing on theatricality, immaturity, and the clash of conflicting forces, while presenting the utopian (female) voice of a philosophical historian.

Keywords: Mary Wollstonecraft, French Revolution, Enlightenment history, Philosophical historiography, Historical narrative, Collective progress, Utopian political vision

"*Ah!* ça *ira,* ça *ira,* ça *ira,*
L'égalité partout régnera."
(French Revolutionary street song)

https://doi.org/10.46438/ECEHS.2025.1.93

Wollstonecraft's radicalism

In her essay collection, Virginia Woolf introduces the radicalism of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), who embodies the revolutionary *par excellence*:

> "The Revolution thus was not merely an event that had happened outside her; it was an active agent in her own blood. She had been in revolt all her life—against tyranny, against law, against convention. The reformer's love of humanity, which has so much of hatred in it as well as love, fermented within her. The outbreak of revolution in France expressed some of her deepest theories and convictions, […]."[1]

Woolf refers to the two *Vindications* that were inspired by the French Revolution. In the first one titled *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790), Wollstonecraft hastily reacted to Edmund Burke's criticism of the event in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in which she passionately defended the Parisian poor and their just revolt.[2] In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), though she mostly debated Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notions on women's education, she was still under the influence of the revolutionary ideal of "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité".

In 1792, Wollstonecraft travelled to France after the September Massacres when fourteen hundred prisoners were killed by the Parisians; however, she was still optimistic.[3] She stayed in France till 1795 to experience the reign of Terror; and she even had to hide in Le Havre with her American lover, Gilbert Imlay who saved her claiming that she was his wife. She witnessed the death of the King then the Queen and the imprisonment or execution of her Girondist friends—Helen Maria Williams and Thomas Paine escaped, Mme Roland and Olympe de Gouges were guillotined, while Condorcet died in prison.[4] In those circumstances (also being pregnant), Wollstonecraft was working on her lengthy historical book, and as an Enlightened thinker, rationalised her previous zeal about the revolution in *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has produced in Europe* (1794). Her being an ardent believer of reason and justice led her to re-evaluate her previous ideas, placing them in a rationalised historical framework at large: focussing on the movement of (hu)man towards virtue in the process of development of manners and education. In the writing of her chronicle, she relied on the French events documented in the contemporaries' reports and letters:

[1] Woolf 1935: 91.
[2] See my recently published article about the philosophical and aestheticised debate, Antal 2024.
[3] Furniss 2002: 64.
[4] Tomalin 2012: 207–209.

Wollstonecraft used the records of the *New Annual Register*, the French journals, *Le Courrier* and *Le Moniteur*, and she also cited J. P. Rabaut Saint-Étienne's history of the French Revolution (*Précis historique de la Révolution Française*, 1792) and Mirabeau's letters (*Lettres du Comte de Mirabeau,* 1789) among others.[5] In addition to the authentic records, she was inspired by Catharine Macaulay (1731–1791), the great historian of her time, as they had a short-lived correspondence in 1790 that ended due to Macaulay's death. They exchanged writings and also expressed their understanding and mutual respect for each others' work.[6] The two women writers shared radical values on strict morality, republicanism, and equal education; they both attacked Edmund Burke's anti-revolutionary letter in 1790. In her historical writings, Wollstonecraft provided utopian ideas about human virtue and virtuous life as a future programme, while Macaulay claimed for the need to live virtuously in the present—she took virtue as "an ethical imperative", and she wrote her scholarly historical survey, *The History of England* (1763–83) from that position.[7]

Wollstonecraft was planning to write several volumes on the French Revolution, and the final version was to consist of five books with a short "Advertisement" and "Preface" attached.[8] In the introduction, she underlines the difficulties of her research, and she claims that she intends to present "theoretical investigations, whilst marking the political effects that naturally flow from the progress of knowledge".[9] Moreover, she promises that she will subdue her emotions while writing about the great events of the French revolution and allow reason to guide and beam "on the grand theatre of political changes".[10] As she observes, the revolution was a rational consequence of the historical events in France, and it was:

> "[...] the natural consequence of intellectual improvement, gradually proceeding to perfection / in the advancement of communities, from a state of barbarism to that of polished society, till now arrived at the point when sincerity of principles seems to be hastening the overthrow of the tremendous empire of

[5] See Bour 2010: 2.

[6] Green 2020: 294–295; Hill 1995. Ironically, their scandalous life episodes also connected them: Wollstonecraft had her first daughter out-of-wedlock and Macaulay, the aged widow (47) infamously got married to William Graham, a surgeon's mate, 26 years younger than her age and also a brother to James Graham, the quack doctor (Macaulay was said to have an affair with him as well), who revolutionised sexuality with his Celestial Bed (Looser 2003: 204; Hill 1995: 188.).

[7] Mandell 2004: 128; Macaulay 2023.

[8] In the paper all the references are to Mary Wollstonecraft's *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* in the critical edition of 2016 (Wollstonecraft 2016).

[9] Wollstonecraft 2016: 5.

[10] Wollstonecraft 2016: 6.

> superstition and hypocrisy, erected upon the ruins of gothic brutality and ignorance./"[11]

In the historical narrative, she outlines how the European monarchies developed through the centuries, reaching their prime in the time of Enlightenment. This essay will explore Wollstonecraft's contribution to enlightened philosophical history, thus situating the French Revolution in a progression from the infancy of society to the age of (r)evolution.

The enlightened framework of history

As Gary Kelly says, Wollstonecraft's *View* is an "Enlightenment 'philosophical history', describing change in sociological and cultural rather than merely political terms", and it is not without novelistic and sentimental passages.[12] Sapiro, O'Neill, and Furniss (among others) lay special emphasis on the moral view and on the notion of "progress" detailed in the work.[13] In the opening chapter, Wollstonecraft speaks of the slow development of mankind and the understanding of man's motives as a socio-political being, "contemplate[ing on] the infancy of man, his gradual advance towards maturity".[14] She sees a development in history, moving away from the age of barbarism to the flourishing Greek democracy, then to the rise and the fall of the Roman Empire. She highlights the medieval and early modern scientific and geographical discoveries to present man's—"our"—superiority. Her voice is self-confident, and she boldly presents the shared values of the French and American Enlightened thinkers of the age—including her own generation and women writers. Strikingly, her reference to "the infancy of man" and his "maturity" recalls Immanuel Kant's famous opening of his "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" (1784):

> *"Enlightenment is the human being's [man's] emergence from his self-incurred minority* [*Unmündigkeit*; cf. *immaturity*]. *Minority* is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This minority is *self-incurred* when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude*!

[11] Wollstonecraft 2016: 7.
[12] Kelly 1992: 153.
[13] Sapiro 1992: 252; O'Neill 2007: 242; Furniss 2002: 68.
[14] Wollstonecraft 2016: 15.

> Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment." (emphasis in original)[15]

Wollstonecraft uses the word, "infancy", while Kant's *Unmündigkeit* has recently been translated as "minority" (together with *des Menschen* as human being's, that was originally "man's"); however, he uses the word "immaturity" in other versions. Like Kant, Wollstonecraft also believes in the Enlightenment tenet that every (hu)man dares to ask questions in order to exercise their reasoning in the understanding of others and the social world. In the passage just quoted, Bour even finds allusions to "phylogeny and ontogeny" formulated by Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment.[16] It cannot be traced back whether Kant or Smith is cited here, since Wollstonecraft names John Locke and refers to his writings on civil liberty and toleration after the introductory paragraphs.[17] Locke widely discusses the state of the English government and analyses the constitution of the country during the time of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 though his ideas gained popularity later in the English political discourse.[18] Wollstonecraft uses the term revolution for the first time in the text, and she proudly celebrates the English (Lockean) achievements in political science and philosophy. She also asserts that the English legislators should be praised for their ability to introduce a system "to hold the balance", "the equilibrium of the whole": "Nature having made men unequal, by giving stronger bodily and mental powers to one than to another, the end of government ought to be, to destroy this inequality by protecting the weak".[19]

Wollstonecraft seeks to provide the context for the French Revolution. Thus, she contrasts the peaceful period that resulted in England from the "bloodless revolution" with the tyranny and oppression in France. As she describes, there "the bitterness of oppression" and "the serious folly of superstition [...] stared every man of sense in the face".[20] In the name of enlightened reason, Wollstonecraft cites the satirical writings of Voltaire and the social criticism of Rousseau as they highlighted the hypocrisy of the clergy and the harsh social inequality of the exploited and the rich in the French system. She also claims that the two writers "educated" their readers, opening their eyes to the social abuses; similarly, as playwrights did on the stage in French theatres. According to Wollstonecraft, the French economists of the *Encyclopaedia*, Quesnay and Turgot encouraged reforms in the 1760s-70s, but their ideas were dismissed.

[15] Kant 1999: 17.
[16] Bour 2010: 3.
[17] Wollstonecraft 2016: 16.
[18] O'Gorman 2016: 41.
[19] Wollstonecraft 2016: 17.
[20] Wollstonecraft 2016: 18.

Meanwhile, the American success in political science was watched closely by the Enlightened thinkers, and they agreed upon the unique state of the country, being a newly born nation of brave and industrious people who 'dared to rely on their reason' (in the Kantian way). The American example is presented by Wollstonecraft as a positive example for European nations:

> "[...] she [cf. America] had it in her power to lay the first stones of her government, when reason was venturing to canvass prejudice. Availing herself of the degree of civilization of the world, she has not retained those customs, which were only the expedients of barbarism; or thought that constitutions formed by chance, and continually patched up, were superiour [sic] to the plans of reason, at liberty to profit by experience."[21]

In the period, America often appeared as the land of freedom, and its rebellion against the mother country was accelerated by the English radicals: among others, Thomas Paine whose writing titled *Common Sense* (1776) was said to have an impact on the phrasing of the Declaration of Independence.[22] However, instead of referring to her contemporaries, Wollstonecraft highlights the genuine and natural beginnings of the new society foundation in which all citizens using their common sense work for the benefit of the community. She stresses the Christian law of reciprocity taken from the Bible; namely, "men will *do unto others, what they wish they should do unto them*" (emphasis in original).[23] In her text, the quotation expresses a proto-communist or utopian wish. Moreover, the statement does not only recall the Kantian categorical imperative but it also propagates *virtue* as "the main purpose of every civilization," which connects Wollstonecraft's historical work with Catharine Macaulay's notions.[24]

Before giving her assessment of the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft asserts what should be "the political perfection of the world": in the age of reason, man—and the body-politic—should reach maturity, growing out of the infant state and "the youth approaching manhood should be led by principles".[25] In accordance with the enlightened notion, she accepts that man was born naturally good, and also that to be a grown adult means to take responsibility for one's action. Man's maturity, claims Wollstonecraft, is accompanied with the sense of rationality and self-respect In her enthusiastic passage about the rational development, she has proven to be an Enlightened historian: "Reason has, at last, shown her captivating face, beaming with

[21] Wollstonecraft 2016: 20.
[22] O'Neill 2007: 155.
[23] Wollstonecraft 2016: 21.
[24] Mandell 2004: 127–128.
[25] Wollstonecraft 2016: 21.

benevolence; and it will be impossible for the dark hand of despotism again to obscure it's [sic] radiance, or the lurking dagger of subordinate tyrants to reach her bosom".[26] For Wollstonecraft, the French Revolution should be considered as the revolution of reason, displaying the reasoning faculty of everyman who was capable of grasping the purpose of humanity, summed up in the slogan of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". Nevertheless, in the course of history, Wollstonecraft cannot see the call of reason, thinking of wars and massacres; only the softening of manners can be taken as a sign of man's Enlightenment instead of the chivalric sentiments for the gentlemanly conduct described by Burke in his *Reflections*,[27] the benevolent and rational acting for the sake of a community's welfare is emphasised here.

In her historical survey, Wollstonecraft regards the historical antecedents leading to the revolution in France; moreover, she presents the changes of the (patriarchal) rulers' characters in the country. She claims that moving away from the ferocity of the Gauls and the Franks, the gentlemanly "bastard morality" was being formed at the time of Christian crusades against the Turks in the first half of the 16th century during the reign of Francis I; then, in the second half, the first Bourbon king, Henry IV exemplified "manly dignity" and "tenderness of heart" in his fatherly command. With the ministry of Richelieu and Mazarin, the reign of Louis XIV was characterised by favouritism, dissimulation, and the royal taste for frivolity. Wollstonecraft connects the stage of history to the world of theatre, and she analyses how Corneille and Racine as faithful courtiers served and flattered their king in their neoclassical plays.[28] Moreover, she highlights the importance of drama in the forming of the national character of the French, and she regards it as a means of education, as "the schools of vanity".[29] In their analysis, Bour and Furniss also underline that Wollstonecraft, even in her rhetoric, reflected on the "theatricality" and "the artificiality" of French society.[30] Probably, Wollstonecraft borrows Edmund Burke's observation in this passage, as in his *Reflections,* he claims that "theatre is a better school of moral sentiments than churches, where the feelings of humanity are thus outraged", and he presents the spectacular features of Louis XVI's reign.[31] Wollstonecraft presents the theatrical exhibitions of Louis the Great or the Sun King, whose excessive lifestyle was worshipped by his subjects though his immense amount

[26] Wollstonecraft 2016: 22.
[27] Burke 2003: 60.
[28] Wollstonecraft compares Corneille to the English Dryden, the great playwright of Restoration, who was a Poet Laureate commemorating events of the Royal Family, and when Charles II was followed by the Catholic James II, he even converted to Catholicism. The only exception of not being a sycophant to the French court was Molière (Wollstonecraft 2016: 24–25).
[29] Wollstonecraft 2016: 25.
[30] Bour 2010: 6; Furniss 2002: 69-70.
[31] Burke 2003: 69.

of spending brought the country to the verge of ruination. His great-grandson, Louis XVI, inherited some of this legacy mainly in his favoured debauchery and eccentric behaviour, but Louis XVI lacked the popularity of the *grand monarque*. Nevertheless, he loved the English and introduced some "masculine writers", which helped the French "to rouse [their] sleeping manhood".[32] Wollstonecraft herself cannot avoid mentioning to some well-known stereotypes about the differences of the feminine French and the masculine English, probably also borrowed from Burke. As a recurrent motif in the narrative, she frequently points out the stereotypical characteristics of the French, mainly influenced by the eighteenth-century English notions about their frivolity, theatricality, and femininity.[33]

Then, in French history and in chapter II of Wollstonecraft's historical survey, Marie Antoinette enters the stage: "the young and beautiful *dauphine*" from Austria, whose ambition was to become the only mistress and the future queen of Louis XVI, overpowering Mme du Barry, the mistress of the previous King, in fame and influence.[34] Marie Antoinette's extravagance was infamous, and her expensive feasts at the estate of Trianon resulted in heavy taxation; the latter went against the suggestion of the minister of finance, Jacques Necker, who (with his reforms) was dismissed. Wollstonecraft says that the King himself was a man of reason with "a desire to promote useful reformation", but his advisors made the deficit of the country even worse due to their lack of credibility and immorality. Although Necker's follower, the unpopular Calonne suggested "the equalization of taxes" to the assembly of notables, and some found that a new constitution would be the solution, the nobility rejected the efforts. It is rather simple to state that they were not enlightened enough "to listen to the dictates of justice or prudence",[35] and as a result, in 1787, the country reached the state of financial crisis. When Calonne was accused by La Fayette at the assembly of notables, he excused himself, claiming that he had followed the King's orders (actually, the King's pleasures). Calonne, though realised the economic maladies could not break "the circle of corruption" (deeply involved in it); having been disgraced, he fled to England and lived in exile.[36] Brienne succeeded Calonne as controller-general of finance, and he summoned an aristocratic assembly (*cour pléniere*) to register taxes, bypassing the parliament. The French government stumbled out of one blunder into the other; "imbecility now characterised every measure," sums up Wollstonecraft.[37] The ones who criticised the management, for instance, the duke of Orleans, named Philippe Egalité, had to flee while two corrupt ministers were imprisoned,

[32] Wollstonecraft 2016: 28.
[33] Wellington 2001: 41–42.
[34] Wollstonecraft 2016: 29–30.
[35] Wollstonecraft 2016: 32.
[36] Wollstonecraft 2016: 34–35.
[37] Wollstonecraft 2016: 38.

and their effigies were enthusiastically burnt in Paris. The country was drifting into anarchy, and the soldiers sympathised with the struggling poor; the people experienced injustice, and they could not trust state legislature. However, "justice had never been known in France," remarks Wollstonecraft, "retaliation and vengeance had been it's [sic] fatal substitutes".[38]

In August 1788, there was the dawn before the Revolution, and Necker, the once popular financial expert was recalled.[39] Necker could not convince the parliament and the notables that the burdens of the poor should be lightened, relieving their famine; the nobles and the clergy wrapped themselves up in their sacred rights that proved their "winding-sheet" as Wollstonecraft points out prophetically in her Gothic rhetoric.[40] However, smart pamphleteers attacked Necker and urged serious reforms promoted by Sieyes, Condorcet, and Mirabeau, who would be the future members of the National Assembly in 1789. Truly, it could have been the last chance to accomplish a turning point in French history, but the Revolution seemed to be morally and humanely inevitable. In this respect, Bergès and Coffee even call Wollstonecraft's understanding as "a conceptual Revolution"; "a rational and moral" one.[41] Here Wollstonecraft turns out to be a political philosopher, considering the ifs and the what-could-have-been happenings in a rather utopian and uchronian style. Quoting her Enlightened credo:

> "Several acts of ferocious folly have justly brought much obloquy on the grand revolution, which has taken place in France; yet, I feel confident of being able to prove, that the people are essentially good, and that knowledge is rapidly advancing to that degree of perfectibility, when the proud distinctions of sophisticating fools will be eclipsed by the mild rays of philosophy, and man be considered as man—acting with the dignity of an intelligent being."[42]

In this passage, Wollstonecraft emphasises her belief in the fundamental goodness of man and reasserts her belief that the violence of the revolution will subside.

---

[38] Wollstonecraft 2016: 40.

[39] Unfortunately, instead of initiating radical reforms, Necker lapsed into moralising and metaphysical speculations, publishing several treatises, and issued only "timid half-way measures" (Wollstonecraft 2016: 42). Mary Wollstonecraft herself translated Necker's moralising book written to children titled *De l'importance des opinions religieuses* (1788) and it came out at Joseph Johnson's in London (*Of the Importance of Religious Opinions, 1788*). There is another link between the two thinkers; namely that Necker was the French feminist, Mme de Staël's father.

[40] Wollstonecraft 2016: 43.

[41] Bergès and Coffee 2022: 138–139.

[42] Wollstonecraft 2016: 46.

The revolution of reason and its reality

Wollstonecraft strongly believed in man's progress and development in the course of European civilization. The term, "civilization," was first introduced in eighteenth-century enlightened histories describing the stages of growth, as Jane Rendall claims.[43] As the French Revolution was a sudden break in the historical continuity, Wollstonecraft decided to provide a lengthy introduction; the siege of the Bastille is first discussed only on page 85 (Book II, Chapter III), that is, the first third of the book, which covers the detailed descriptions of the antecedents.[44] On 17 June 1789, after several futile weeks of waiting for the commons to gather and discuss the state affairs, "the deputies declared themselves as a National Assembly", which happened, according to Wollstonecraft, in accordance with the Rousseauvian radical movement of dismissing the rulers he had described—or prophesied—in his *Social Contract*.[45] The nobles and the clergy still thought that they were untouchable; meanwhile the hostility of the French towards the parasites was inflamed by the revolutionary act of founding the Assembly with elected representatives. They made the first step to reformulate their constitution, as Wollstonecraft recaps: "the French in reality were arrived, through the vices of their government, at that degree of false refinement, which makes every man, in his own eyes, the centre of the world".[46]

In the forthcoming chapters, Wollstonecraft summarises the first phase of the revolution. In their enthusiasm and with the support of the people, the third-estate immediately addressed the urgent necessities: they claimed that all extra taxes (not enacted by the consent of the people's representatives) were illegal, then they examined the deficit and the national debt. The nobles still urged the King to dissolve the state-general while the majority of the clergy joined the Assembly. The latter event was to happen on 20 June, but the building was guarded by soldiers as the King was about to appear (*séance royale*); thus, the newly enlarged Assembly finally gathered at the tennis-court, and later they were joined by the soldiers. It is the episode that Wollstonecraft cannot avoid painting without pathos: "The benedictions that dropped from every tongue, and sparkled in tears of joy from every eye, giving fresh vigour to / the heroism which excited them, produced an overflow of sensibility that kindled into a blaze of patriotism every social feeling".[47] The forthcoming day, the King's speech

[43] Rendall 1997: 156–157.

[44] In my paper, obviously, I have to omit discussing all the events though Wollstonecraft's thorough survey of the minor details—even of debates, speeches, and occurrences—is worth further historico-political analysis (see, for instance, Chapter 1 in Book II, or Chapters 1–3 in Books III and IV).

[45] Wollstonecraft 2016: 61.

[46] Wollstonecraft 2016: 62.

[47] Wollstonecraft 2016: 65.

was not well accepted and when his majesty used the expressions of "I command" and "I will", the Assembly refused to receive orders from any person since they were to represent the whole nation. As Wollstonecraft points out, Mirabeau's brave opposition with his well-known statement that "only the bayonet can oblige us to quit our places" offered the last stroke to the outbreak of the Revolution.[48]

Wollstonecraft focuses on the turbulence in Paris, when the minority of the nobles also listened to their common sense and joined the commons; nevertheless, the royalists still kept their meetings, being unable to react sensibly and accept the changes. As it is remarkably outlined in the *View*:

> "The inveterate pride of the nobles, the rapacity of the clergy, and the prodigality of the court, were, in short, the secret springs of the plot, now almost ripe, aimed at the embryo of freedom through the heart of the national assembly. But Paris, that city which contains so many different characters that vortex, which draws every vice into it's [sic] centre—that repository of all the materials of voluptuous degeneracy—that den of spies and assassins contained likewise a number of enlightened men, and was able to raise a very formidable force, to defend it's [sic] opinions."[49]

While the French soldiers refused to attack the crowd and arrest the deputies, foreign troops were brought to the city to control posts from Paris to Versailles. There was serious scarcity of bread, yet the people enthusiastically gathered at meetings to discuss the happenings, Mirabeau composed great speeches, and even the victorious news from America enkindled the revolutionary spirit. The events leading to the 14 July are mostly described through Mirabeau's eyes, as Wollstonecraft gives lengthy quotations from his letters and speeches.[50]

Wollstonecraft details how on 13 July, the Parisians were arming themselves, also carrying the busts of the newly-dismissed Necker and the Duke of Orleans in the city, and all the theatres were closed down. At the Tuileries, the first shooting occurred; the crowd gathered all kinds of weaponry (shovels, pikes, axes, knives, or stones) —"To arms!" was echoed in Paris, while the courtiers were still partying at Versailles. In this section, Wollstonecraft introduces a sentimental digression, and meditates upon the present silence of the palace in 1792: Versailles has become the emblem of debauchery and profligacy; thus, crying for its loss, she is mourning over the glory of France. In her narrative, wandering in the empty and neglected rooms, Wollstonecraft even imagines

[48] Wollstonecraft 2016: 67.
[49] Wollstonecraft 2016: 76.
[50] Wollstonecraft 2016: 79–82; Kirkley 2022: 152–154.

that she sees her reflections in the mirrors as a thinker, as a historian, and as a female writer.[51] Reaching the actual day of the Revolution in her chronicles, Wollstonecraft also displays the sentimental voice of the moral philosopher (cf. "I weep", "I tremble"), and in her outburst, the unfortunate consequences of the situation of the 1790s can be traced. The falling of despotism and the destruction of the Bastille truly meant the end of an epoch for Wollstonecraft, but the starting of a better onecould only be achieved by a morally founded government and virtuous citizens.[52]

In her account, Wollstonecraft describes how the Parisians, because of their indignant sense of injustice, were becoming more and more furious; carriages were stopped and attacked, and leaders were badly needed. La Salle had become a general, La Fayette, who volunteered as a freedom-fighter in America, "laid before the assembly a proposal for a DECLARATION OF RIGHTS" in the American spirit; however, he used the version that the Marquis de Condorcet had previously presented to the deputies.[53] At Versailles, the King was warned to withdraw the troops, but he rejected it, taking the suggestion as an offence. The court decided to cut off the supplies of flour so that Paris should be without bread for days. Wollstonecraft remarks that the measure occasionally was used to control the crowd and, certainly, the idea of the revolution was horrible to imagine; thus, starving, the people were supposed to blame the new order of things and give up their rebellion. Then rumour spread that the cannons of the Bastille targeted the people and, in spite of the negotiation, some citizens were wounded, and the Parisian attacked the prison. The emblematic start of the French Revolution is detailed by Wollstonecraft based on eye-witnesses' reports, and in her fervour, she starts using the pronoun *we* instead of 'they'.[54] The siege of the Bastille, "the fortress of tyranny"[55] is not only the focal point of the historical work, but it is also the peak moment in French and European history—regardless of the fact that it occurred due to some miscommunication in the tumult, as it is documented:

> "This was certainly a splendid example, to prove, that nothing can resist a people determined to live free; and then it appeared clear, that the freedom of France did not depend on a few men, whatever might be their virtues or abilities, but alone on the will of the nation."[56]

[51] Kirkley 2022: 124.
[52] Wollstonecraft 2016: 84–85.
[53] Wollstonecraft 2016: 90.
[54] Wollstonecraft 2016: 95–97.
[55] Wollstonecraft 2016: 104.
[56] Wollstonecraft 2016: 100.

The hated prison having been taken, the officers were massacred, and the wounded cannoneers were hung on lamp-posts—and Wollstonecraft drops the unifying patriotic "we" from then on.

Educational lessons on equality and fraternity

In the Lockean spirit, Wollstonecraft states that freedom is the natural right of man in a civil society; thus, the French acted justly when they rebelled against "the most ignominious servitude," quoting the dissenter priest, Richard Price's phrase.[57] Although the National Assembly presided by Liancourt acted upon common sense and dignity, the mob, "the hardened children of oppression in all countries is the same; whether in the amphitheatre at Rome, or around the lantern-post in Paris," remarks Wollstonecraft.[58] Instead of "*vive le roi*", "*vive la nation*" was shouted in the streets and though the King also echoed it, accepting the cockade, the suppressed anger and the thirst for vengeance broke out; as a result, cruelties, atrocities, and executions paved the road of 'liberty' to 'equality' hand in hand with the notion of 'fraternity'.

However, as Bergès and Coffee point out quoting Wollstonecraft's statement, if a man in position, "an officer" gains some power and he exercises it, in his pride, he immediately takes himself a little "tyrant"—"a cock on a dunghill".[59] In the practice of the National Assembly, she clearly sees that the deputies act upon "the vile foundation of selfishness":

> "[...] virtue has been the watch-word, patriotism the trumpet, and glory the banner of enterprize; but pay and plunder have been the real motives. [...] By real patriots, I mean men who have studied politics, and whose ideas and opinions on the subject are reduced to principles; men who make that science so much their principal object, as to be willing to give up time, personal safety, and whatever society comprehends in the phrase, *personal interest,* to secure the adoption of their plans of reform, and the diffusion of knowledge."[60]

Although Lally-Tollendal spoke about the union of all deputies in the name of fraternity, the forming of clubs and cliques with individual haughtiness drove the representatives astray in their *consensual* working for the nation. According to Wollstonecraft, in the question of the *royal veto*, the French could have learnt from the English model

[57] Wollstonecraft 2016: 118.
[58] Wollstonecraft 2016: 125.
[59] Bergès and Coffee 2022:136.
[60] Wollstonecraft 2016: 141.

of constitutional monarchy and could have kept Louis XVI (and his dignity) "as a theatrical king".[61] That way, the King could have been saved with "the shadow of monarchy", and the later occurrence of the dismission and execution of a king would not have stirred the other monarchies in Europe with the news. In the analysis of this episode, on the one hand, the female historian underlines her former character typology; namely, the emphasis on French theatricality and the sober rationality of the English. On the other hand, she displays that most incidents were generated by the conflicts of the participants, and however hard she tries to tell a philosophical narrative, it is "above all one of the clash of opposed interests and passions".[62]

Wollstonecraft strictly follows the events recorded in the authentic reports she cites, but occasionally, she returns to her original and recurrent theme: the progress in history and the (possible) improvement of man. In the different periods of human civilization, the refinement of taste and arts can be seen, but the same development cannot always be stated about manners. Moreover, if a new era starts but human weakness with selfishness and liability to corruption prevails, the starting of the new age will be illusionary—optimally, "a civilization [should be] founded on reason and morality," she claims.[63] She refers not only to the horrors of slavery and the cruel treatment of women but she also highlights the improvement of the century in the Enlightened reign of Catherine II in Russia and in Germany where the philosophy of education and critical thinking are taught.[64] In the *View*, in addition to the thread of development in history, Wollstonecraft's other theme is the study of manners and education. As it is pointed out earlier, Wollstonecraft highlights the theatricality of the French character, but she also praises the erudition of the brains of the Revolution (cf. Necker, Mirabeau, La Fayette, Liancourt). The royal couple is described as an average rich man and woman: Wollstonecraft provides rather hideous pictures of the animal-torturing and lavish Louis and of the coquettish and ignorant Marie Antoinette; she claims that their behaviour was due to the lack of proper education.[65] Later Marie Antoinette is presented as a young and beautiful mother at the feast at Versailles when the cockades were trampled upon by the drunken soldiers, and the mob broke into the palace. On the whole, the Queen is associated with the court of feminised Versailles, with all of her vicious, careless and costly practices; thus, "for abolishing her sway, Europe ought to be thankful," Wollstonecraft states.[66]

[61] Wollstonecraft 2016: 160.
[62] Rendall 1997: 166.
[63] Wollstonecraft 2016: 111.
[64] Wollstonecraft 2016: 114–16.
[65] Wollstonecraft 2016: 73–74.
[66] Wollstonecraft 2016: 222.

In Wollstonecraft's history, not only Versailles but also Paris is gendered: *she* has become "the author of the revolution",[67] while the pleasure-seeking and childlike French are referred to as "feminine", and even their capriciousness explains the sudden turns in the events:

> "[...] because there a variety of causes have so *effeminated reason*, that the french [sic] may be considered as *a nation of women*; and made feeble, probably, by the same combination of circumstances, as has rendered these insignificant. More ingenious than profound in their researches; more tender than impassioned in their affections; prompt to act, yet soon weary; they seem to work only to escape from work, and to reflect merely how they shall avoid reflection." (emphases are mine)[68]

Irony cannot be traced here; Wollstonecraft regards the French feminine due to their "self-negating weakness, shallowness, and lack of fortitude with which conservative polemicists of the day characterised women".[69] Earlier, their love of entertainment and the theatre is also explained by the "effeminated" character, and it says more about the treatment of women, being stated by a rationally thinking English—woman.[70] Comparing the French city life to their countryside milieu, the latter is more idyllic and cheerful—similar to the English—with "more simplicity of manners prevailing," and women's modesty seems to be praised by Wollstonecraft:

> "Besides, in France, the women have not those factitious, supercilious manners, common to the english [sic]; and acting more freely, they have more decision of character, and even more generosity. Rousseau has taught them also a scrupulous attention to personal cleanliness, not generally to be seen elsewhere: their coquetry is not only more agreeable, but more natural: and not left a prey to unsatisfied sensations, they were less romantic indeed than the english [sic]; yet many of them possessed delicacy of sentiment."[71]

In this passage, she clearly goes against her previous criticism of Rousseau's treatment of women discussed in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) where female

[67] Wollstonecraft 2016: 227.
[68] Wollstonecraft 2016: 121.
[69] Wellington 2001: 40.
[70] However, the stereotypical presentation does not underline Wollstonecraft's rationality; she even refers to the effects of the pleasant French climate that makes the people cheerful, negligent and feeble (Wollstonecraft 2016: 122). Bour reads the *View* along this thread, stating that "the French turned sensibility into sensuality" (Bour 2010: 5).
[71] Wollstonecraft 2016: 148.

subjugation and feebleness are endorsed by the French thinker. In the *View*, women are presented as acting upon impulses, either naturally or theatrically. When the deficit of the country is discussed in the Assembly, "the wives and daughters of artisans" (in Roman style) offered their jewellery and "ornaments" to help the country; they made the gesture out of pride or vanity and rather theatrically, and "the lively applauses of the assembly were reiterated with great gallantry".[72]

On the whole, being intimidated by the happenings in 1792-94 she personally witnessed in Paris, Wollstonecraft herself questions the rationality of the French crowd (referred to as "a pack of dogs", the *canaille*[73]). The behaviour of the French women is not too often discussed, and when accounting the siege of the Bastille, the historian is rather silent about the victorious female hordes—"all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women," as Burke refers to them in his *Reflections* earlier[74]. Nevertheless, she gives a detailed description of the day when the King and the Queen were attacked at Versailles, and here she clearly cites Burkean references to the marching of the famished 4000 market and street women "with the appearance of furies", being joined by some 500 men, who armed themselves and attacked soldiers in Paris.[75] Singing the street song (see my motto), the female populace—even with men disguised as women—was heading towards Versailles; meanwhile, at the Assembly, La Fayette tried to get the King's consent upon accepting the Declaration of Rights. The starving women simply wanted grain and flour, and the King graciously guaranteed their request, so "the most decent of the women" returned to Paris, while the rest, as Wollstonecraft calls them "the gang of ruffians" (also "vagabonds" and "banditti") broke into the palace, caught and beheaded two guards, and attempted to kill the royal couple.[76]

The Duke of Orleans (Égalité) was said to be behind the turmoil, and his "low intrigue was added also a decided preference of the grossest libertinism, seasoned with vulgarity, highly congenial with the manners of the heroines, who composed the singular army of the females".[77] With the sarcastically used word, "heroines," and with the label, "the vilest of women"[78]—repeating again the well-known Burkean phrase she ardently criticised in her first *Vindication* in 1792—, she recalls Burke's criticism of the French Revolution:

[72] Wollstonecraft 2016: 169.
[73] Wollstonecraft 2016: 196.
[74] Burke 2003: 61.
[75] Wollstonecraft 2016: 197.
[76] Wollstonecraft 2016: 204–205.
[77] Wollstonecraft 2016: 207.
[78] Wollstonecraft 2016: 207.

> "The laws had been trampled on by a gang of banditti the most desperate—The altar of humanity had been profaned—The dignity of freedom had been tarnished—The sanctuary of repose, the asylum of care and fatigue, the chaste temple of a woman, I consider the queen only as one, the apartment where she consigns her senses to the bosom of sleep, folded in it's [sic] arms forgetful of the world, was violated with murderous fury—The life of the king was assailed, when he had acceded to all their demands—And, when their plunder was snatched from them, they massacred the guards, who were doing their duty.—Yet these brutes were permitted triumphantly to escape –."[79]

As a result of the vandalism at Versailles, the King and his family were brought to Paris being accompanied by women riding on cannons that were covered with national cockades and followed by carriages filled in wheat and flour. With the assistance of Mirabeau, the Assembly introduced the riot act, preventing the unlawful gatherings of dozen people, that was said to be "an imitation, though not a copy, of the English riot act," remarks Wollstonecraft.[80] Moreover, in a prophetic, concluding description, she presents Paris as a beautiful "prison" with its great boulevards, pleasant parks, lovely palaces, and the neat squares that will be the future blood-stained places of the guillotine.[81]

Conclusion on the politics of freedom

Regarding the similarities between Wollstonecraft's and Macaulay's approach in the writing of their histories, they both agreed upon that the "the duty of the historian" was "to record the truth".[82] As for the differences, Wollstonecraft was more concerned about humanity's moral progress, being exemplified by the French happenings. Quoting her words:

> "And, perhaps, it will appear just to separate the character of the philosopher, who dedicates his exertions to promote the welfare, and perfection of mankind, carrying his views beyond any time he chooses to mark; from that of the politician, whose duty it is to attend to the improvement and interest of the time in which he lives, and not sacrifice any present comfort to a prospect of future

[79] Wollstonecraft 2016: 209.
[80] Wollstonecraft 2016: 218.
[81] Wollstonecraft 2016: 216.
[82] Wollstonecraft 2016: 213.

> perfection or happiness. If this definition be just, the philosopher naturally becomes a passive, the politician an active character."[83]

The detailed discussion of Wollstonecraft's *View* is frequently neglected in monographs on her feminist writings. Truly, it is regarded as her least popular writing although it has its merits as an authentic historical narrative, as a moral philosophical piece, or as "an allegorical history" of Freedom.[84] Furniss also emphasises Wollstonecraft's struggles; the way how, being a radical and a revolutionary, she tries to learn from the lessons of the historical outcomes.[85] She rather concentrates on the character of the French, and she does not thematise the failures of the Revolution: she leaves out that it did not grant civil rights to women and the equal education envisioned by Talleyrand.[86] In her conclusion, she claims that the French were not "properly qualified for the revolution"; it was inevitable due to the long-time feudal subordination of the people, and all the anarchic consequences could be explained by the outbreak of a nation with "infant freedom".[87]

As for the function of the National Assembly, she claims that the people's representatives should be "their voice, in enlightened countries, [and] is always the voice of reason".[88] They should "put the public good over their private interest", and they should exercise their power for the sake of the community (and even over themselves), also standing up for their rational principles in their strict morality—in their virtue.[89] Due to the lack of morally based political culture in France, the working process of the National Assembly was not organised in accordance with rational planning and was not guided by strict conduct. Moreover, the deputies' vanity and the frivolous debates accompanied "by a burlesque affectation of magnanimity" proved rather counter-productive, sums up Wollstonecraft.[90] For the improvement "in the science of government," the French assembly could not follow, for instance, Hume's model of the commonwealth or the English-American examples: they wanted to teach the world of liberty in their revolutionary zeal, being "the vainest men living".[91] However, in the science of politics and finance, the present generation's achievements (and even their mistakes) will be beneficial for the forthcoming one. "The improvements in the science of politics have been still more slow in their advancement than those of

[83] Wollstonecraft 2016: 154.
[84] Favret 2022.
[85] Furniss 2002: 68.
[86] Furniss 2002: 70.
[87] Wollstonecraft 2016: 210.
[88] Wollstonecraft 2016: 210.
[89] Bergès and Coffee 2022: 140.
[90] Wollstonecraft 2016: 210.
[91] Wollstonecraft 2016: 166–167, 172.

philosophy and morals;" says Wollstonecraft and she adds "but the revolution in France has been progressive, [being] a revolution in the minds of men; and only demanded a new system of government to be adapted to that change".[92]

In "her democratic dream",[93] she predicts that the reforming "of the system of education and domestic manners [that] will be a natural consequence of the revolution", and the French "will insensibly rise to a dignity of character far above that of the present race".[94] As Furniss concludes: "The example of the French Revolution has not dampened Wollstonecraft's optimism about the inevitability of gradual human improvement, but it has convinced her that revolution is not the best means of encouraging such improvement"[95]. By the utopian conclusion of her (re)*View*, only the hope of "liberty" remains—*ruling over* the principles of "equality" and "fraternity".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Antal, Éva 2024: "Sublime Reason and Beautiful Rhetoric: Wollstonecraft and Burke on the Natural Rights of Man." *Filozofia*, 79. no. 7: 722–36. https://doi.org/10.31577/filozofia.2024.79.7.2

Bergès, Sandrine and Coffee, Alan 2022: "Cocks on Dunghills—Wollstonecraft and Gouges on the Women's Revolution." *SATS* 23. no. 2: 135–52. https://doi.org/10.1515/sats-2022-0015

Bour, Isabelle 2010: "Mary Wollstonecraft as Historian in *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has produced in Europe* (1794)." *Études Épistémè* no. 17: 1–10. https://doi.org/10.4000/episteme.668

Burke, Edmund 2003: *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. 1790. New Haven and London: Yale UP.

Favret, Mary A. 2022: "Writing the French Revolution." Ed. Nancy E. Johnson and Paul Keen. *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 77–86. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108261067.009

Furniss, Tom 2002: "Mary Wollstonecraft's French Revolution." Ed. Claudia L. Johnson. *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 59–81. https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521783437.005

Green, Karen (ed) 2020: *The Correspondence of Catharine Macaulay*. Oxford: Oxford UP. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190934453.001.0001

[92] Wollstonecraft 2016: 183.
[93] O'Neill 2007: 256.
[94] Wollstonecraft 2016: 231.
[95] Furniss 2002: 79.

Hill, Bridget 1995: "The Links between Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay: New Evidence." *Women's History Review* 4. no. 2: 177–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029500200078

Kant, Immanuel 1999: "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" Ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. *Practical Philosophy. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 17–22.

Kelly, Gary Donald 1992: *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kirkley, Laura 2022: *Mary Wollstonecraft: Cosmopolitan*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP. https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781399503099.001.0001

Looser, Devoney 2003: 'Those Historical Laurels Which Once Graced My Brow Are Now in Their Wane': Catharine Macaulay's Last Years and Legacy." *Studies in Romanticism* 42. no. 2: 203–25. https://doi.org/10.2307/25601616

Macaulay, Catharine 2023: *Political Writings*. Ed. Max Skjönsberg. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009307451

Mandell, Laura 2004: "Virtue and Evidence: Catharine Macaulay's Historical Realism." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 4. no. 1: 127–57. https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2004.0012

O'Gorman, Frank 2016: *The Long Eighteenth Century. British Political and Social History 1688–1832*. London – New York: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350000247

O'Neill, Daniel I. 2007: *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy*. Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State UP. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271034867

Rendall, Jane 1997: "'The grand causes which combine to carry mankind forward': Wollstonecraft, history and revolution." *Women's Writing* 4. no. 2: 155–72.

Sapiro, Virginia 1992: *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft.* Chicago: Chicago UP.

Tomalin, Claire 2012: *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*. London: Penguin Books.

Wellington, Jan 2001: "Blurring the Borders of Nation and Gender: Mary Wollstonecraft's Character (R)evolution." Ed. Adriana Craciun and Kari E. Lokke. *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution*. New York: State University of New York Press: 33–61. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780791490648-004

Wollstonecraft, Mary 2016: *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*. 1794. Ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler. *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft.* Vol. 6. London and New York: Routledge. 1–236.

Wollstonecraft, Mary 1999: *A Vindication of the Rights of Men.* 1792. Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Oxford: Oxford UP. 3–62.

Woolf, Virginia 1935: *The Common Reader, Second Series.* E-book. Retrieved September 17, 2024, from https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0301251h.html.