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Wollstonecraft's Philosophical Impact on Nineteenth-Century American Women's Rights Advocates

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*This article challenges the thesis that the publication of William Godwin's scandalous *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1798 minimized the philosophical impact of Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 work *The Rights of Woman* in nineteenth-century American political thought. Instead, we demonstrate that leading nineteenth-century American women's rights advocates—Hannah Mather Crocker, Lucretia Mott, Sarah Grimké, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony—understood themselves to be in a critical, philosophical dialogue with the text of *The Rights of Woman*, and in some cases, the *Memoirs*, and defined their own, distinctive philosophies of sex equality partly within this context.*

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) never visited America during her lifetime, but her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had a considerable impact on the political thought of American women's rights advocates in the nineteenth century. The publication of the *Rights of Woman* in London in 1792 made Wollstonecraft the most famous—and infamous—proto-feminist of the European Enlightenment (Gunther-Canada 2001, 98; Sapiro 1992, 28–30).¹ It established Wollstonecraft as the preeminent defender of the controversial yet visionary view that women could realize the same levels of moral, intellectual, and political excellence

as men if the sexes were given the same education and the same civil and political rights—a view that paved the way for public discourse on women's rights, including the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention.² The *Rights of Woman* was reprinted many times in America between 1792 and 1891, and Wollstonecraft had a wide readership among men and women (Windle 2000).³ Why, then, do scholars often fail to acknowledge Wollstonecraft's influence in nineteenth-century American political thought?

The answer to this puzzle partly lies in the publication of the first biography of Wollstonecraft after her untimely death in 1797. Her husband William Godwin

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¹We use the term "proto-feminist" to describe Mary Wollstonecraft and her philosophical followers in nineteenth-century America because they anticipate certain modern feminist political arguments, yet lived in a time when the term "feminist" was unknown. While the term "feminisme" was first used in France in the 1870s, the terms "feminist" and "feminism" were not regularly used in America until the 1910s (Offen 2000, 19; Cott 1987, 3, 14).

²Although Wollstonecraft devoted the bulk of the *Rights of Woman* to arguments for the familial, social, and educational reforms necessary for the realization of sex equality, she clearly stated that equal "civil and political rights" are also necessary for this cause. She argued that women should be "active" and "free" citizens, who should have and could be elected "representatives," but recognized the revolutionary nature of her political argument and anticipated critical "laughter" at it (Wollstonecraft 1995, 69, 236, 237, 240, 275).

³The *Rights of Woman* was published in two separate editions in Boston and Philadelphia in 1792 and two separate editions in Philadelphia in 1794. Five more editions of the *Rights of Woman* were published in New York in the nineteenth century in 1833, 1845, 1856, 1890, and 1891 (Windle 2000, 16–19).

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composed *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as a tribute to her memory and philosophical legacy. Unfortunately, the *Memoirs* damaged Wollstonecraft's posthumous reputation because it revealed many shocking details about her romantic life, including her affair and child with Gilbert Imlay and her pre-marital sexual relationship with Godwin.

Intellectual historians have argued that after the mixed early reception of the *Rights of Woman* in Europe and America, the publication of the scandalous *Memoirs* in London in 1798 and Philadelphia in 1799 plunged Wollstonecraft and her proto-feminist philosophy into disrepute (Brown 1995; Janes 1978; Thiébaux 1978).⁴ Consequently, a commonly reiterated scholarly view has been that Wollstonecraft's political theory failed to have a philosophical impact in transatlantic nineteenth-century political thought and only began to enjoy a serious following once the leading feminists of the early twentieth century (such as Emma Goldman and Virginia Woolf) revived her memory and celebrated her life and works as part of their own philosophies (Barker-Benfield 1992, 368–95; Browne 1987, 172; Caine 1997, 40; Kaplan 2002, 249; Rendall 1984, 33; Sapiro 1992, 275–77; Stansell 2001, 51–52; Wardle 1951, 339). For example, Caine argues that the “initially favorable reception” of Wollstonecraft's writings “came to an abrupt end” when “Godwin's intended tribute managed at one stroke to destroy Wollstonecraft's reputation and to ensure her infamy for nearly a century” (1997, 40). Although Sapiro acknowledges that several nineteenth-century American women's rights advocates, including Lucretia Mott, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, were familiar with Wollstonecraft, and that Wollstonecraft's persona remained a powerful icon in the nineteenth century, she concludes that “There is little indication that anyone who played a key role in women's history or feminism, other than Lucretia Mott, read Wollstonecraft's work seriously after her death until the twentieth century” (1992, 275–77). While Gunther-Canada (1996, 214) tempers this view by suggesting that Mott, Fuller, Stanton, and Anthony revived interest in Wollstonecraft's ideas among women's rights advocates in the middle of the nineteenth century, she does not provide extensive textual or historical evidence to support this thesis. Although Craciun (2002, 35–36) briefly mentions that Mott, Fuller,

Stanton, and Anthony had an interest in Wollstonecraft, her literary sourcebook of responses to Wollstonecraft fails to include a single text from nineteenth-century America. While Taylor (2003, 9, 250) mentions that Stanton viewed Wollstonecraft as an icon of both female sexual freedom and its oppression, she does not explore how Wollstonecraft's philosophy was used in American proto-feminist discourse on women's rights; moreover, she concludes that it took more than a century before the “fog of censure” lifted from Wollstonecraft's posthumous reputation, and that she only became “western feminism's leading heroine” in the late twentieth century. Although Anderson underscores how Mott and Stanton, as part of the international women's movement in the mid-nineteenth century, upheld Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* as a “talismán” of their cause, she concludes that, in the broader culture of Europe and America, “Wollstonecraft remained a pariah throughout the nineteenth century” (2000, 55, 69). Likewise, histories of the nineteenth-century American women's rights movement, and biographies of its leaders, tend to either briefly mention, or ignore, Wollstonecraft's impact (Banner 1980, 40, 71; Barry 1988, 127, 222; Bartlett 1994, 5, 31, 94, 101, 107; Berg 1978, 19; DuBois 1998, 284–85; Flexner 1970, 24, 55, 231; Kraditor 1981, 113; Lerner 1967; Marilley 1996, 6; McFadden 1999, 174).

While the *Memoirs* certainly tarnished Wollstonecraft's reputation for a general audience during the nineteenth century, we contend that her philosophical significance was far from lost in the century after her death for an elite, and influential, group of women's rights advocates in America. Even as her persona persisted as a controversial cultural icon of both the dangers and the promise of female sexual liberation, her philosophy of women's rights navigated an influential course through nineteenth-century American political thought. Rather than focusing on Wollstonecraft's largely negative reception in the popular print and political culture of the time, our project is to recover her previously uncharted philosophical impact on the political theories of the major American women's rights advocates of the nineteenth century.

In this spirit, some scholars have established that Wollstonecraft, despite the *Memoirs*, had influence on the development of utopian socialist, proto-feminist, Unitarian, Romantic, and radical thought in Britain during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Hirsch 1996; Mellor 2002; Poovey 1984, 112–13; Taylor 1983, 1–9; Taylor 2003, 246–51). Some historians have also discussed Wollstonecraft's mixed yet vibrant reception in the United States between 1792 and 1802. Vice-President John Adams penned extensive marginalia in his copy of Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View of the Origin*

⁴The *Memoirs* were later reprinted in America in 1802 and 1804 and discussed extensively in American magazines between 1799 and 1818 (Thiébaux 1978, 206–27). The *Rights of Woman* was reprinted in New York in 1833 with a “biographical sketch of the author” (presumably based on the *Memoirs*) and Charles Kegan Paul published *Mary Wollstonecraft-Letters to Imlay, with Prefatory Memoir* in 1879 (Windle 2000, 26–28).

and *Progress of the French Revolution* (1794) and playfully referred to his wife Abigail, who perused the *Rights of Woman*, as a "Disciple of Wollstonecraft" (McCullough 2001, 619; Withey 2002, 233). Bostonian Judith Sargent Murray favorably received Wollstonecraft's philosophy in her own proto-feminist essays in the 1790s (Norton 1980, 251–53). A pair of 1794 commencement addresses at Philadelphia's prestigious Young Ladies Academy quoted and praised Wollstonecraft, and Philadelphians warmly discussed the ideas of the *Rights of Woman* during the 1790s (Branson 2001, 38–46). Charles Brockden Brown philosophically engaged the ideas of the *Rights of Woman* in his 1798 dialogue *Alcuin* (Branson 2001, 47–49). In an 1801 letter, the New England schoolgirl Eliza Southgate grappled with the problem of reconciling her appreciation for the ideas of the *Rights of Woman* with her distaste for the scandalous contents of the *Memoirs* (Cott 1977, 203). Benjamin Silliman—the future President of Yale—joined the legion of critics who lambasted Wollstonecraft as a fallen woman and a Jacobin sympathizer in his 1802 work, *Letters of Shahcoolen* (Brown 1995). Little scholarly attention has been paid to Wollstonecraft's philosophical legacy in America beyond the Federalist era, however.

We close a gap in the existing literature by systematically tracing the influence of the *Rights of Woman* on the political theories of leading nineteenth-century American women's rights advocates through a close, comparative study of their writings with the arguments of Wollstonecraft's landmark work. What follows is the first extended study of the reception, interpretation, and use of the *Rights of Woman* in the writings of Hannah Mather Crocker, Lucretia Mott, Sarah Grimké, Margaret Fuller, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. These political theorists treated Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* as a (and in some cases, *the*) canonical philosophical text on the question of whether and, if so, how, women might achieve equality with men. They critically engaged the *Rights of Woman*, entering into a philosophical dialogue with its author on the questions which she so controversially brought to the forefront of the Enlightenment: Is the soul sexed or unsexed? Do men and women share the same moral laws, and practice the same moral virtues? Should boys and girls be educated in the same way? Should men and women have the same civil and political rights? Can women balance the duties of motherhood with civic and political duties? In asking these questions in critical dialogue with Wollstonecraft, these American women's rights advocates located themselves within a transatlantic tradition of proto-feminist political thought that began to flourish during the later decades of the eighteenth century. They also identified themselves as philosophers in their own right, who used the arguments of the *Rights of Woman*

to expound, but not wholly define, their own theories of sex equality. Many of them took issue with different aspects of her political theory, including her conception of the sexless soul, her view that the sexes had identical moral virtues, and her demand for equal civil and political rights for men and women.

While Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* should not be understood as the sole inspiration for the political theories which animated the burgeoning American women's rights movement, her philosophy of sex equality should be studied alongside radical Protestant theology, republicanism, abolitionism, Lockean philosophy and other Enlightenment schools of thought, Rousseauian philosophy and Romanticism, as a distinct system of ideas which shaped the development of several strands of American proto-feminism. Other European proto-feminist theorists (such as Germaine de Staël, Frances Wright, Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, George Sand, Harriet Taylor, and John Stuart Mill) shaped the thinking of nineteenth-century American women's rights advocates, but none enjoyed the same iconic stature as Wollstonecraft, and most were readers of the *Rights of Woman* themselves.

Method

Our method of interpretation seeks four forms of evidence that, when combined according to the following system, indicate the likelihood of Wollstonecraft's influence on Crocker, Mott, Grimké, Fuller, Stanton, and Anthony: philosophical/textual evidence (direct references to Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* in the writings of a particular thinker or striking parallels in philosophical terms and arguments between the two thinkers), autobiographical evidence (the thinker's own assertion of Wollstonecraft's influence on her ideas), biographical evidence (another person's reliable assertion of Wollstonecraft's influence on a particular thinker), and contextual evidence (e.g., the record of a copy of the *Rights of Woman* in the thinker's personal or familial library or the record of the thinker's exposure to Wollstonecraft's works or her prominent students). We only include those thinkers for whom we have philosophical/textual evidence, buttressed by some form of autobiographical evidence, or, if none, then reliable biographical evidence, for the substantive influence of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* on their arguments regarding women's rights. We provide contextual evidence as a supplement to these three primary forms of evidence.

We acknowledge that parallel terms and arguments do not independently provide evidence of Wollstonecraft's direct influence on a particular thinker,

yet they can indicate a shared set of philosophical concerns between the two theorists. When combined with evidence of direct references to the text of the *Rights of Woman*, and/or autobiographical or biographical evidence of her engagement with Wollstonecraft's work, parallel terms and arguments contribute to the philosophical/textual evidence that Wollstonecraft was a likely influence on the thinker. We recognize that these thinkers may have arrived at certain parallel terms and arguments independently from their readings of Wollstonecraft. Moreover, the broader Christian, Enlightenment, and Romantic traditions surely influenced them on some points they shared with the *Rights of Woman*. Consequently, we focus on those thinkers for whom the evidence of their exposure to, and concern with, Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* is so strong that it is likely that the coincidence of similar terms and arguments partly reflects a careful and critical reading, absorption, and application of some of her defining views.

Hannah Mather Crocker: Early Critical Reader of the *Rights of Woman*

Hannah Mather Crocker (1752–1829) paid critical homage to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* with the title of her own treatise on women's rights, *Observations on the Real Rights of Women with their Appropriate Duties, Agreeable to Scripture, Reason, and Common Sense* (1818). The *Observations*, though generally overlooked by the scholarly literature, is the first American work on women's rights written as a book-length philosophical treatise, rather than in another literary genre (Riegel 1963, 7). There are many arguments in Crocker's *Observations* which parallel the arguments of the *Rights of Woman* in both substance and terminology, on topics such as the theological and scriptural basis of the equal intellectual capacities of the sexes, friendship as the foundation of marriage, women's natural duty to care for their children, the constraints placed upon the realization of women's moral and intellectual potential by their trivial and superficial education, and the consequent need for the reform of female education (Crocker 1818, 5, 54, 58, 51, 56; Wollstonecraft 1995, 114, 99, 243, 92). The two direct references to Wollstonecraft and three lengthy direct quotations from the *Rights of Woman* in Crocker's *Observations*, however, provide a persuasive combination of autobiographical and philosophical/textual evidence of Crocker's critical engagement of Wollstonecraft's view of women's rights, duties, and abilities.

The third chapter of the *Observations* contains an extensive list of examples of "illustrious females" and their "strength of mind" from ancient to modern times (Crocker 1818, 28). Crocker's inclusion of Wollstonecraft in this list sets it apart from the standard model for women's history at the time, Mary Hays's 1803 *Female Biography* (Scott 1996, 112). Although Hays was a friend of Wollstonecraft, she refrained from including her in the *Female Biography* after the *Memoirs* rendered her a scandalous figure (Wardle 1951, 322). Although Crocker composed the *Observations* after the publication of Godwin's *Memoirs* in America in 1799, she refrains from any kind of *ad hominem* attack on Wollstonecraft. While it is possible she was unaware of the *Memoirs*, it is more likely that she chose to ignore it. The popular impact of the *Memoirs* was palpable when Crocker published her *Observations*; a satirical poem about Wollstonecraft appeared in the New England journal, *The Ladies' Monitor*, in 1818 (Thiébaux 1978, 232n). Instead of dwelling on the details of Wollstonecraft's life, Crocker engages Wollstonecraft as a fellow philosopher of women's rights and duties.

Crocker's first direct quotation of Wollstonecraft is from the positive review of the writings of Hester Chapone and Catharine Macaulay in chapter five of the *Rights of Woman*. Crocker introduces her own quotations and paraphrases of Wollstonecraft's views on these late eighteenth-century English advocates of reform in female education by identifying Wollstonecraft as a fellow historian of exemplary women: "Miss Wolstonecraft [sic] mentions some ladies with energy" (Crocker 1818, 40). Crocker then quotes Wollstonecraft's praise of Chapone's "good sense" and "unaffected humility," yet refrains from quoting Wollstonecraft's critical appraisal of Chapone's ideas, "I cannot, it is true, always coincide in opinion with her; but I always respect her" (Crocker 1818, 40–41; Wollstonecraft 1995, 187–88). This ellipse seems to signal Crocker's intent to mine the *Rights of Woman* for examples of "illustrious females," unmarred by Wollstonecraft's slight criticisms. Yet Crocker ironically juxtaposes this ellipse with her own laudatory yet critical review of Wollstonecraft's ideas: "Mary Wollstonecraft was a woman of great energy and a very independent mind; her Rights of Women are replete with fine sentiments, though we do not coincide with her opinion respecting the total independence of the female sex. We must be allowed to say, her theory is unfit for practice, though some of her sentiments and distinctions would do honour to the pen, even of a man" (Crocker 1818, 41). Chapone is to Wollstonecraft what Wollstonecraft is to Crocker: a respected philosophical mentor who is not uncritically received. By portraying Wollstonecraft's argument for the "total independence" of women as impractical,

Crocker rhetorically distances her own philosophy of female freedom from the contents of the *Rights of Woman*.

Crocker similarly abridges her quotation of Wollstonecraft's review of Macaulay. Crocker cites Wollstonecraft's praise for Macaulay's writing in which "no sex appears," yet stops short of citing Wollstonecraft's claim that Macaulay was "proof that a woman can acquire judgment, in the full extent of the word" (Wollstonecraft 1995, 188). By juxtaposing this ellipse with her praise for "some" of Wollstonecraft's philosophy, Crocker suggests a subtle parallel between Wollstonecraft's reception of Macaulay and her own reception of Wollstonecraft (Crocker 1818, 41). Just as Wollstonecraft revered Macaulay as "proof" of the sexless character of the human mind, Crocker provocatively indicates the universal, sexless, human value of "some" of Wollstonecraft's ideas on sex equality by arguing that they would honor any writer, regardless of gender. Crocker later uses similar terms and a defining argument of the *Rights of Woman* when she states "Mind has no sex" but she does not accept Wollstonecraft's use of this premise—the equal intellectual and rational capacities of the sexes—to argue that men and women have the same moral virtues (Crocker 1818, 51; Wollstonecraft 1995, 114).

Crocker proceeds to cite the "distinction between modesty and humility," found in chapter seven of the *Rights of Woman*, as one of Wollstonecraft's "ingenious" ideas (Crocker 1818, 41). Wollstonecraft rejected the conventional view of modesty as a sexual virtue related to female chastity and defined true modesty as a human virtue that exhibits a "sobriety of mind which teaches a man not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think" (Wollstonecraft 1995, 207). Wollstonecraft's redefinition of modesty embodies her belief that there is no sex to virtue and that women and men share identical moral standards as human beings governed by the universal moral law of God (Wollstonecraft 1995, 95, 110).

Crocker, however, resists complete identification with Wollstonecraft's doctrine that there is no sex to virtue through an elliptical citation of her definition of modesty. She quotes and paraphrases three of the first four paragraphs of chapter seven of the *Rights of Woman*, but excludes the second paragraph of the chapter in which Wollstonecraft defines true modesty against *both* chastity and humility (Crocker 1818, 41–42; Wollstonecraft 1995, 207–208). Through this omission, Crocker suggests her dissatisfaction with Wollstonecraft's critique of the conventional understanding of chastity as a feminine sexual virtue. For Crocker, women should be modest according to Wollstonecraft's definition of the term as well as chaste in the traditional feminine sense of the term. Unlike Wollstonecraft, Crocker defends the view that

women belong in a different "sphere of life" than men, in which they operate according to some specifically feminine moral virtues, and some universally human moral virtues (Crocker 1818, 20).

Throughout the *Observations*, Crocker contends that there is "some moral and physical distinction of the sexes," even though "the powers of mind are equal in the sexes" (Crocker 1818, 5–6). Crocker and Wollstonecraft agree that the main physical differences between the sexes that have social relevance are reproductive functions. They both argue that the female capacities for childbirth and lactation translate into the natural duty of women to care for their children. Without direct reference to Wollstonecraft, Crocker uses terms and arguments in chapter six of the *Observations* that closely parallel the words of chapter ten of the *Rights of Woman*. Just as Wollstonecraft asserts, "the care of children in their infancy is one of the grand duties annexed to the female character by nature," Crocker similarly writes, "the care of children naturally devolves on the women, and is one of the important duties annexed to the female character" (Wollstonecraft 1995, 243; Crocker 1818, 58). And yet, while Wollstonecraft uses the phrase "children in their infancy," Crocker uses the broader term "children," implying that she understands the duties of motherhood to be the main focus of a woman's life for a longer period than Wollstonecraft.

Finally, Crocker directly quotes a lengthy passage from chapter thirteen of the *Rights of Woman* in which Wollstonecraft condemns women's use of fortune-tellers to learn about the future as an offense to reason, morality, and theology (Crocker 1818, 42–43; Wollstonecraft 1995, 276–77). In her commentary on this quotation, Crocker reveals that she shares Wollstonecraft's view of the limits of human knowledge of the future and the consequent need for faith in divine providence: "Be not deceived by (the fortune-tellers') juggling tricks but put your trust in the All-wise Disposer of the affairs of human life . . . trust in Providence, that what we know not in this state, shall be revealed to us in another" (Crocker 1818, 43). Both thinkers espouse what Crocker terms a "rational christian philosophy;" they agree that human beings, while governed by reason, are limited in their knowledge of the world, and must consequently accept on faith the benevolence of God's providential plan for them (Crocker 1818, 59). Yet while Wollstonecraft uses her rationalist Christian theology to argue for a universal moral standard for human conduct, Crocker uses her rationalist Christian theology to defend only the sexless character of the human mind, not the sexless character of human virtues.

Like Wollstonecraft, Crocker places motherhood at the center of female duties; but unlike Wollstonecraft,

she does not defend a woman's right to employment in professions outside the home, nor to full political citizenship (Crocker 1818, 19–20). The question of women's possession of the same political rights as men was so controversial in 1792 that even Wollstonecraft steers clear of making it her central focus. Instead, Wollstonecraft focuses on the question of how reform in female education can create women who are "rational creatures" capable of being both "free citizens" and "good wives and mothers" (Wollstonecraft 1995, 275). By critiquing the patriarchal bias in most eighteenth-century educational philosophies, including Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), she established herself as the leading Enlightenment advocate of the inextricable link between reform of female education and the realization of sex equality in every sphere of life, including politics. Although Wollstonecraft argued that women should be citizens, she maintained that a more rational education would better prepare the vast majority of women for their main career in life, the governance of family and the home. Wollstonecraft briefly outlines some of the other possible careers—in medicine, shop keeping, or politics—that women might practice when they are single or when their children are no longer infants. Contrary to Wollstonecraft's visionary philosophy, yet consistent with European and American public discourse on women's rights between the late 1790s and the late 1840s, Crocker does not defend equal civil and political rights for the sexes. Instead, she only defends women's "equal right" to "form societies for promoting religious, charitable and benevolent purposes" which serve civil society without directly engaging in the masculine sphere of politics (Crocker 1818, 19). Despite the fact that she does not embrace Wollstonecraft's argument for female citizenship and female employment outside the home, Crocker shares Wollstonecraft's view that female education should be reformed so that it enables women to fulfill their primary moral duties: the development of their individual strength of mind, body, and character, the care and education of their children, and service to the good of the greater society.

Lucretia Mott and Sarah Grimké: Spreading the Words of Wollstonecraft

Although Sapiro (1992, 277) suggests that Lucretia Mott (1793–1880) was the only nineteenth-century American women's rights advocate to carefully read Wollstonecraft, it is more accurate to say that she was the most pivotal and influential reader of the *Rights of Woman* in the emergent

American women's rights movement. Crocker, for example, certainly read the *Rights of Woman* carefully and critically engaged its arguments, but her *Observations* did not command the same kind of audience as Mott's lifetime of work for abolition and women's rights. Mott's letters provide autobiographical evidence that she first read the *Rights of Woman* in the 1820s, more than 20 years before she started seriously advocating for women's rights in the 1840s (Greene 1980, 12, 19). In a letter to Caroline Healey Dall in 1867, she writes: "Mary Woolstonecraft [sic], whose Rights of Woman I read 40 years ago. . . ." In the same letter, Mott marveled at the negative reception of the *Rights of Woman* and described her efforts to counteract it: ". . . [I] was greatly astonished that such a Work should be thus condemned, and out of print. From that time it has been a centre table book, and I have circulated it, wherever I could find readers" (Mott 2002, 392). In an 1855 letter to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mott argues that Sarah Grimké's *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* (1838) was "the best Work after Mary Woolstonecraft's [sic] Rights of Woman—it would be well in thy Book to give 'honor where honor is due—credit where credit,' by according to M. Woolstonec[t]. [sic] great moral courage, in coming out in that day 60 or 70 years ago with her radical claim of the Rig. Of Wom." (Mott 2002, 234). In these letters, Mott identified Wollstonecraft as one of the great pioneers of a "radical" theory of women's rights and dismissed the negative reputation Wollstonecraft had garnered after her death.

Mott's speeches spread her interpretation of Wollstonecraft and the ideas of the *Rights of Woman* to a broader audience. The conclusion of an 1866 speech at the National Woman's Rights Convention takes on the tone and diction of a sermon by lauding Wollstonecraft with Biblical language and allusions: "Young women of America, I want you to make yourselves acquainted with the history of the Woman's Rights movement from the days of Mary Wollstonecraft. All honor to Mary Wollstonecraft. Her name was cast out as evil, even as that of Jesus was cast out as evil, and those of the apostles were cast out as evil; but her name shall yet go forth and stand as the pioneer of this movement" (Mott 1980, 270). Mott, a Quaker minister, provocatively transforms Wollstonecraft from an Eve-like fallen woman who was "cast out as evil" to a Christ-like leader who rises from her death to become the founder of a new American faith based on the ideas of the *Rights of Woman*.

Mott's speeches contain philosophical/textual evidence, including parallel terms and arguments, of the views she shares with the *Rights of Woman*—especially the corrupt state of feminine culture and female education and the need for their reform. On numerous

occasions, Mott expresses distaste for the culture of luxury and dependency that produces vain, weak, and superficial women who are incapable of supporting themselves apart from male patronage. Wollstonecraft was the most famous, and ferocious, proto-feminist critic of this phenomenon in the late eighteenth, early nineteenth centuries, and a likely inspiration for some of Mott's arguments on the issue. Wollstonecraft uses the terms "plaything," "toy of man," and "mere dolls" to describe the way women are viewed and used as decorative, sexual objects (Wollstonecraft 1995, 93, 104, 235). Using similar language, Mott likewise implores women not to be satisfied with their roles as "the mere toys and playthings of society" (Mott 1980, 148, 220). In the introduction to the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argues that the "sickly delicacy" of romantic novels contributes to the moral and intellectual decline of their typically female audience (Wollstonecraft 1995, 77). Echoing Wollstonecraft's terms and arguments, Mott likewise contends that women's taste for romantic novels obstructs their intellectual and moral development: "When we consider the character of the romance, the sickly sentimental yellow covered literature that she reads, we cannot expect that she will be much" (Mott 1980, 220).

Mott also joins Wollstonecraft in attacking the fashions that bind women, expressing her disgust at seeing women "laced so tight that [they can] scarcely breathe" (Mott 1980, 220; Wollstonecraft 1995, 113). Although she does see it fit for a woman to "cultivate all the graces and proper accomplishments of her sex," such as music, dance, and needlepoint, Mott agrees with Wollstonecraft that women should not let these accomplishments "degenerate into a kind of effeminacy, in which she is satisfied to be the mere plaything or toy of society, content with her outward adorning, and with the tone of flattery and fulsome adulation too often addressed to her" (Mott 1980, 148; Wollstonecraft 1995, 77). Mott advocates equal education for women and men, to remove "all the hindrances to her elevation in the scale of being—let her receive encouragement for the proper cultivation of all her powers, so that she may enter profitable into the active business of life" (Mott 1980, 161; Wollstonecraft 1995, 92). Mott's ideal form of coeducation includes "physical, intellectual and moral" education—the three basic tenets, in the same order of importance, of the model proposed in the *Rights of Woman* (Mott 1980, 155; Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 113, 165). In this way, Mott and Wollstonecraft built on the tripartite educational schema made famous in the eighteenth century by Locke and Rousseau, but transformed it into an egalitarian system in which girls and boys received the same educations for their bodies, minds, and characters.

Mott shares Wollstonecraft's view of the moral and social goals of reform of female education. Like Wollstonecraft, Mott believes that a more rational education will help women better fulfill their fundamental moral duties and vital social roles as wives and mothers. According to Mott, an educated woman will not "fulfill less her domestic relations, as the faithful companion of her chosen husband, and the fitting mother of her children" (Mott 1980, 151; Wollstonecraft 1995, 74). Moreover, education should increase a woman's sense of self-respect and personal autonomy: "preserving the dignity of her being, she will not suffer herself to be degraded into a mere dependent" (Mott 1980, 151). Mott shares Wollstonecraft's appreciation of the moral dimension of women's intellectual development; women educated according to Wollstonecraftian principles will realize their inherent dignity and equality with men and achieve full standing as human beings.

Although Mott stresses how educational reform will benefit women in their primary roles as wives and mothers, she also follows Wollstonecraft's arguments in her advocacy of a range of pursuits for women that they could balance with their familial duties. In an 1849 speech, Mott states, "there are many kinds of businesses which women, equally with men, may follow with respectability and success. Their talents and energies should be called forth, and their powers brought into the highest exercise" (Mott 1980, 159). According to Mott, the education of women should not be mere ceremony; it should train women to work equally alongside men in certain jobs, to have a voice as citizens in the ruling of the nation, and to retain their dignity and independence in marriage. Although she assisted Elizabeth Cady Stanton with composing the 1848 *Declaration of Sentiments*, the first political document in the American tradition to call for women's possession of the same civil and political rights as the male citizens of the United States, Mott remained more committed to women's rights to the same education and civil roles as men than the more controversial cause of women's suffrage (Greene 1980, 16).

Mott played a pivotal role in the proliferation of Wollstonecraft's ideas among prominent American women's rights advocates. Perhaps her most famous "convert" to Wollstonecraftian philosophy was Sarah Grimké (1792–1873). In a letter to Elizabeth Neall Gay dated 7 May 1858, Mott described how "some twenty years ago" Sarah Grimké had noticed her "pet book"—*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—on her "Centre table" and declared, "Lucretia, I admire thy independence" (Mott 2002, 272). In a letter to Caroline Healy Dall dated 9 August 1867, Mott contends, "Sarah Grimké in her *Work on Woman* noticed Mary W. I think in 1835 or 6—She was

impressed much as I was, on first reading her book” (Mott 2002, 392). What is significant about Mott’s letters is that they provide biographical evidence that Sarah Grimké favorably perused Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* before writing her major “Work on Woman,” *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* (1838).

Scholars of Grimké’s political thought have argued she may have been influenced by the general reception of Enlightenment theories of natural rights in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American political thought, but they do not explicitly identify Wollstonecraft or the *Rights of Woman* as a likely source (Bartlett 1988, 6–7; Lerner 1998, 26). In contrast, we perceive in the *Letters* philosophical/textual evidence that supports Mott’s claim that Grimké’s *Letters* and Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* are linked not only as the two most important early treatises on women’s rights, but also in their shared set of philosophical concerns. Grimké omits direct references to Wollstonecraft, yet employs terms and arguments parallel to the *Rights of Woman*.

Reflecting their common background in the dissenting Christian tradition, Grimké and Wollstonecraft present the same scriptural and theological argument for human moral and intellectual equality through the creation of both man and woman in the “image of God” (Grimké 1988, 32; Wollstonecraft 1995, 139). By asserting the “intellect is not sexed,” Grimké offers an argument that parallels the fundamental premise of the *Rights of Woman* (Grimké 1988, 48, 64; Wollstonecraft 1995, 114). Both thinkers advance a strikingly similar critique of the Biblical and Miltonic “help-meet” ideal of marriage; they argue that the traditional Christian defense of the subjugation of the wife to the husband is unjustified, and even anti-Christian, given the equal subjection of human beings to the moral law of God (Grimké 1988, 42, 81; Wollstonecraft 1995, 87–91, 240). Grimké describes how men have degraded women by treating them as “slaves,” “toys,” and “dolls,” instead of as “rational creature(s),” “moral being(s),” and “companions,” terms often similarly employed in Wollstonecraft’s arguments (Grimké 1988, 44, 53, 56; Wollstonecraft 1995, 104, 155, 175, 235, 262). Grimké laments the historical oppression of women by men as “the wrongs of woman,” calling to mind the title of Wollstonecraft’s final novel, initially published in the same volume as Godwin’s *Memoirs* and reprinted separately in America in 1799 (Grimké 1988, 47; Windle 2000, 26–7).

Grimké “utterly” rejects the idea of modesty as the feminine virtue of sexual self-restraint and instead defends the Wollstonecraftian idea of the sexless, universal, divinely ordained nature of human virtue, rights, and du-

ties: “she is clothed by her Maker with the same rights, and, of course, that upon her devolve the same duties” as men (Grimké 1988, 43, 100; Wollstonecraft 1995, 95, 110). In a passage evocative of Wollstonecraft’s argument that the promotion of sex equality would lead to “more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens,” Grimké insists that her philosophical defense of the moral and intellectual equality of the sexes seeks to enable women to better fulfill their moral duties and their attendant social roles, not reject these duties or roles outright: “I would entreat her to double her diligence in the performance of all her obligations as a wife, a mother, a sister and a daughter” (Wollstonecraft 1995, 240; Grimké 1988, 52).

Like Wollstonecraft, Grimké acknowledges that moral duties such as good parenting, while identical for men and women as moral universals dictated by God, are put into practice in different ways by mothers and fathers according to particular social circumstances and roles. Wollstonecraft allows that “Women . . . may have different duties to fulfill; but they are human duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them . . . must be the same;” in what could be a commentary on the previous passage, Grimké writes, “men and women have the same sphere of action, and the same duties devolve upon both; but no one can doubt that the duties of each vary according to circumstances; that a father and a mother, a husband and a wife, have sacred obligations resting on them, which . . . do not attach to them as men and as women, but as parents, husbands, and wives” (Wollstonecraft 1995, 124; Grimké 1988, 64). In her *Letters*, Grimké shares Wollstonecraft’s support for women’s movement into a full range of roles in civil society, including law, ministry, and social reform movements for abolition and women’s rights, but diverges from her predecessor by refraining from supporting women’s direct participation in politics as citizens or legislators on the grounds that politics is an immoral profession. Later in her career, however, Grimké became a full-fledged advocate of women’s suffrage and citizenship (Lerner 1998, 40).

One possible explanation for why Grimké echoed some of Wollstonecraft’s ideas without direct acknowledgment of her life or works is a fear of public outcry against her work’s allegiance with the scandalous image of the fallen woman memorialized in the *Memoirs*. Mott’s remembrance of Grimké’s first encounter with the book on her center table suggests that Grimké considered the *Rights of Woman* or its author quite controversial. Through the employment of parallel terms and arguments, Grimké treats the *Rights of Woman* as a source of

philosophical ideas divested of its author's personal identity. In this way, Grimké quietly infuses the burgeoning American women's rights movement in the 1840s with a neo-Wollstonecraftian philosophy of the equality of the sexes that serves as a foil to the Tocquevillean ideology of sex difference found in her rival Catherine Beecher's popular *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841).

Margaret Fuller: Revisionary Reader of the *Memoirs and the Rights of Woman*

Margaret Fuller (1810–1850) was the daughter of a Unitarian minister who read Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* during his tenure as a preceptor at Leicester Academy, a prominent girls' school in Massachusetts, in the first decade of the nineteenth century (James 1990, 18). Fuller first discussed Wollstonecraft in an essay entitled "The Great Lawsuit—Man versus Men; Woman versus Women" (1843) which she expanded and revised into her landmark work on sex equality, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* contains a compelling combination of autobiographical and philosophical/textual evidence that Fuller used arguments common to the *Rights of Woman* to reinterpret the legacy, significance, and coherence of its author's life and ideas. Unlike her contemporary Sarah Grimké, Fuller directly engages the question that the publication of Godwin's *Memoirs* raised: is the life of Mary Wollstonecraft as portrayed by her husband reconcilable with the ideas of the *Rights of Woman*? Fuller reads the text of Godwin's *Memoirs* and his novel *St. Leon* (1799) alongside the text of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* and upholds Wollstonecraft and Godwin's unorthodox relationship as a new form of marriage based on "intellectual companionship," which they helped usher into existence with both their philosophies and the example of their marital union (Fuller 1941, 148).

Fuller argues that "civilized Europe is still in a transition state about marriage; not only in practice but in thought" (Fuller 1941, 147). She contends that marriage has been mistakenly, and harmfully, understood as a "contract of convenience and utility," but it is a contract that has historically benefited the husband more than the wife (Fuller 1941, 147). Echoing the theological argument that serves as the basis of Wollstonecraft's critique of the unequal status of women within marriage, she claims, "Were Woman established in the rights of an immortal being, this could not be" (Fuller 1941, 147; Wollstonecraft 1995, 139). Fuller agrees with Wollstonecraft that the im-

mortal human soul or mind constitutes the basis of the metaphysical equality of men and women, and, as such, is the precondition for the practice of the universal human right and duty to develop the mind to its fullest potential. In contrast to the historical understanding and practice of marriage as a contract that is most convenient for men, Fuller suggests that the fundamental, God-ordained, moral and intellectual "equality" of the sexes may only be fully realized in an "intellectual" or "religious" conception of marriage. Fuller sets forth a theory of the four "grades" of marriage which men and women have, and may, aspire to practice with one another: "household partnership," "mutual idolatry," "intellectual companionship," and "religious" marriage (Fuller 1941, 148–53). She establishes the "religious" marriage as the fourth and highest form of marriage that contains certain aspects of the other three forms. The possibility of practicing the "religious" marriage has been presaged by the "intellectual companionship" of two remarkable couples, the French Girondist revolutionaries, Madame and Monsieur de Roland, and the English Jacobins, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, of late eighteenth-century Europe.

Immediately following her celebration of the Rolands, Fuller cleverly wields a revisionary and Romantic interpretation of the text of Godwin's *Memoirs* to counteract its negative legacy on Wollstonecraft's posthumous reputation and cast new light on the philosophical and political relevance of the ideal of marriage as a friendship of moral and intellectual equals found in the *Rights of Woman* (Wollstonecraft 1995, 99). Fuller portrays Godwin as a heroic husband who paid the ultimate honor to his wife by writing a tribute to her life which celebrated her as a noble soul, not a fallen woman: "This man had courage to love and honor this woman in the face of the world's sentence and of all that was repulsive in her own past history. He believed he saw of what soul she was, and that the impulses she had struggled to act out were noble, though the opinions to which they had led might not be thoroughly weighed. He loved her, and he defended her for the meaning and tendency of her inner life" (Fuller 1941, 149). Fuller also suggests that Godwin's portrait of the character of Marguerite in his novel *St. Leon* should be understood as symbolic paean to the virtue of his wife: "The champion of the Rights of Woman found in Godwin one who would plead that cause like a brother. He who delineated with such purity of traits the form of Woman in the Marguerite of whom the weak St. Leon could never learn to be worthy—a pearl indeed whose price was above rubies—was not false in life to the faith by which he had hallowed his romance. He acted as he wrote, like a brother" (Fuller 1941, 150). It is precisely this fraternal equality with which Godwin

treated his wife that Fuller cites as the hallmark of their landmark marriage of “intellectual companionship.” She boldly claims that “Godwin’s choice of the calumniated authoress of the *Rights of Woman* for his honored wife (is) the sign of a new era” (Fuller 1941, 151). Godwin saw the truth and beauty of the inner moral life of his wife, despite the tragic choices she made in her romantic life before their union. In Wollstonecraft’s choice to express her “genius,” “tender sympathies,” and “high virtue” by “breaking bonds” in her society, and in Godwin’s choice to love and marry this virtuous rebel, Fuller finds the ultimate representation of the marriage of intellectual companions, and a symbol of an emergent age in which the highest form of marriage, the “religious” pilgrimage of husband and wife toward a common spiritual goal, might be realized on a broader scale (Fuller 1941, 149–50).

Fuller’s depiction of Wollstonecraft and Godwin is not entirely hagiographic. The likely reason why Fuller refrained from citing Godwin and Wollstonecraft as an example of a “religious” marriage might be Godwin’s scandalous suggestion in the *Memoirs* that his wife capitulated to his own atheistic persuasion on her deathbed. Moreover, Fuller’s luminous depiction of Godwin as a kind of chivalric hero overshadows her subtly critical reception of Wollstonecraft’s life and ideas. By arguing that Wollstonecraft was “a woman whose existence better proved the need of some new interpretation of Women’s rights than anything she wrote,” Fuller identifies herself as a critical reader of the *Rights of Woman* (Fuller 1941, 150). Throughout *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller challenges the Wollstonecraftian tenet that the soul has no sex by proposing that distinct masculine and feminine qualities intermingle in the human soul to varying degrees in individual men and women (Wollstonecraft 1995, 114, 135). Fuller puts a Romantic twist on the rationalist unitarian theology that serves as the metaphysical foundation of Wollstonecraft’s understanding of sex equality. While she agrees with Wollstonecraft that the human soul is immortal and created in the image of God, she disagrees that the human soul is divested of any masculine or feminine qualities. Fuller shares Wollstonecraft’s distaste for the derogatory use of terms like “masculine mind” to describe an intelligent woman, but on different grounds (Fuller 1941, 128; Wollstonecraft 1995, 188, 201–02). Fuller celebrates the distinctive “electrical” and “intuitive” quality of the feminine “genius” while insisting that the intellectual capacities of the sexes are equal (Fuller 1941, 176). Likewise, Fuller moves beyond Wollstonecraft’s view of the sexless soul by claiming that women, as they move closer to the realization of their true nature, will not lose, but will rather fulfill, the feminine part of their being (Fuller 1941, 216). In this way, Fuller’s interest in the

Romantic tradition shaped her critical engagement with Wollstonecraft’s rationalistic and universalistic approach to conceptualizing human nature. Yet while she defends a Romantic conception of the feminine soul, Fuller agrees with Wollstonecraft’s argument that men and women are subject to the same God-given moral law, and thus the subjection of women to male power within marriage is one of the worst forms of “idolatry” imaginable (Fuller 1941, 216; Wollstonecraft 1995, 105–06).

Urging women to be “sea-captains” if they choose, Fuller also shares Wollstonecraft’s argument that women can and should balance their moral commitments to their families with their right to participate in the same economic and social roles and enjoy the same civil and property right as men (Fuller 1941, 215; Wollstonecraft 1995, 275). Diverging from the political argument of the *Rights of Woman*, however, Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* never endorses women’s acquisition of the same political rights as male citizens. Fuller, like Grimké in *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, instead suggests that women exercise a vital and untainted “moral power” as paragons of virtue and social reformers when they stand outside the institutions of conventional, man-made politics (Fuller 1941, 210).

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony: Realizing the Rights of Woman

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) and Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) begin a new stage of the reception of the political argument of the *Rights of Woman*, fully endorsing its view that women should possess the same civil and political rights as men, in order to create a truly democratic republic. A full range of autobiographical, biographical, and contextual evidence supports the philosophical/textual evidence that Stanton and Anthony seriously, and prominently, engaged both the *Rights of Woman* and the *Memoirs* during their careers. Stanton first read the *Rights of Woman* sometime prior to 1840. In 1840, she met Mott at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in London, where they discussed Wollstonecraft at length (Stanton 1898, 83). In 1881, Stanton recounted this conversation and provided autobiographical evidence of her reading of Wollstonecraft prior to meeting Mott in the first volume of the *History of Woman Suffrage*: “She had told me of the doctrines and divisions among ‘Friends,’ of the inward light, of Elias Hicks, of Channing, of a religion of practical life, of Mary Wollstonecraft ([sic]), her social theories, and her demands of equality for women. I had

been reading Combe's 'Constitution of Man' and 'Moral Philosophy,' Channing's works, and Mary Wollstonecraft ([sic]), though all tabooed by orthodox teachers, but I had never heard a woman talk what, as a Scotch Presbyterian, I had scarcely dared to think" (Stanton, Anthony, and Gage 1889, 421). Stanton also described how she encountered Quaker families in England who "warned against (Mott's) influence" because "in a recent speech in London she quoted sentiments from Mary Wollstonecraft ([sic])" (Stanton, Anthony, and Gage 1889, 423–24). This meeting with Mott had a profound influence on Stanton, as Mott urged her to pursue her study of women's rights alongside her work for the abolition movement. Through Mott's inspiration and guidance, Stanton further developed her understanding of Wollstonecraft's life and ideas and their philosophical relevance to the American women's rights movement (Sklar 2000, 52). Mott's suggestion to Stanton in an 1848 letter that she could "borrow from S.M. Grimke's . . . and from Mary Woolstonecraft ([sic]) much that is excellent" in composing her proposed first book, provides biographical evidence of Stanton's continued exposure to the author of the *Rights of Woman* (Mott 1997, 127).

An 1871 letter to Mott contains further autobiographical evidence that Stanton was familiar with Wollstonecraft's life and ideas. Stanton passionately argued that men had cruelly orchestrated the moral condemnation of Wollstonecraft, and other radical female thinkers like Mott who had followed in her footsteps, by their fellow women: "We have had women enough sacrificed to this sentimental, hypocritical, prating about purity. This is one of man's most effective engines, for our division, & subjugation. He creates the public sentiment, builds the gallows, & then makes us hangman for our sex. Women have crucified the Mary Wolsencrafts ([sic]), the Fanny Wrights, the George Sand's, the Fanny Kemble's, the Lucretia Mott's of all ages, & now men mock us with the fact, & say, we are ever cruel to each other. Let us end this ignoble record, & henceforth stand by womanhood" (Stanton 2000, 428). Stanton used the example of the pilloried Wollstonecraft, first and foremost, to demonstrate the need for rethinking the notion of the feminine virtue of purity, just as Wollstonecraft had critiqued the notion of the feminine virtue of modesty in chapter seven of the *Rights of Woman*. She also linked the plight of Wollstonecraft to a range of other women radicals, as well as the whole of "womanhood," in order to endorse the need for a sense of female solidarity against the misogynistic culture crafted largely by men, but often unreflectively perpetuated by women. In her 1891 essay "Patriotism and Chastity," Stanton continued in the same vein by identifying "Mary Wollstonecraft" along-

side women from Cleopatra to George Eliot whose flawed lives in no way compromised their ability to bring essential "knowledge and wisdom" to society (Stanton 1891, 1–5).

Stanton met Susan B. Anthony in 1851 and encouraged Anthony's transition from abolitionism to women's rights. The two eventually formed the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869, which protested the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment without the inclusion of women's suffrage. It is unclear exactly when Anthony first read the *Rights of Woman*, but she donated her 1792 Boston edition of the work to the Library of Congress in 1904. She included a dedicatory note on the inside cover identifying Wollstonecraft as the founding mother and philosopher of the women's rights movement: "To the Library of Congress from a great admirer of this earliest work for woman's right to Equality of rights ever penned by a woman. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said 'A wholesome dissenter is the first step towards progress.'—And here we have the first step" (Anthony 1904). In Anthony's last speech to a women's suffrage convention in 1906, she provides further autobiographical evidence of her careful perusal of the *Rights of Woman*, "I never saw that great woman, Mary Wollstonecraft, but I have read her eloquent and unanswerable arguments in behalf of the liberty of womankind" (Anthony 1985, 185).

Anthony's speeches and letters also provide philosophical/textual evidence that she employed arguments that parallel the *Rights of Woman* in her own views on women's rights. She embraces Wollstonecraft's argument that equal souls have an equal right to the same education: "There is no fundamental difference between the soul of man and woman and should be no difference in education" (Anthony 1997, 335; Wollstonecraft 1995, 92, 135). Anthony also supports the Wollstonecraftian argument for female economic independence on the grounds that it would promote their full moral, intellectual, and political autonomy: ". . .there was no true freedom for woman without the possession of all her property rights, & that these rights could be obtained through legislation only" (Anthony 1997, 230; Wollstonecraft 1995, 260). Just as Wollstonecraft described women as slaves to condemn their servile condition within patriarchal society, Anthony makes the radical constitutional argument that the 1870 ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment extends suffrage to women as well as freedmen because both have suffered in a "previous condition of servitude" (Anthony 1981, 161; Wollstonecraft 1995, 240, 262). Similar to Wollstonecraft's use of the term "male aristocracy" to identify the system of male privilege as the most dangerous of all hierarchical cultures, Anthony uses the term "oligarchy of sex" to describe the "most odious aristocracy

ever established on the face of the globe” (Wollstonecraft 1995, 83–86, 167; Anthony 1981, 157). What both thinkers find especially pernicious about the male aristocracy is its all-pervasive, morally corrosive impact on the primary building block of society, the family (Anthony 1981, 157; Wollstonecraft 1995, 69, 111, 242).

The one moral and political question on which Anthony diverges from her philosophical role model regards private property. Although Wollstonecraft supported the right to private property for both sexes, and argued for the extension of women’s property rights, especially within marriage, she also condemned the corrosive impact of the quest for property and wealth on the morals of human beings (Wollstonecraft 1995, 140, 231). Anthony’s whole-hearted defense of property rights as the key to women’s independence in speeches such as “Homes of Single Women” (1877) casts a blind eye on the potential for property to corrupt even its female owners.

Stanton and Anthony founded the weekly newspaper *The Revolution* in 1868 to support women’s right to vote. Anthony served as the newspaper’s proprietor while Stanton and Parker Pillsbury served as its main editors (Matthews 1997, 129). When Stanton and Anthony opened *The Revolution’s* office, they hung two portraits on the wall—Mary Wollstonecraft and Lucretia Mott—in a symbolic gesture that established them as the founding mothers of their political cause (Sapiro 1992, 276).

Moving beyond this symbolic celebration of Wollstonecraft’s legacy, Stanton and Anthony printed a series of articles and letters in the first year of *The Revolution* which upheld the *Rights of Woman* as the philosophical source of the natural rights argument for women’s civil and political rights, and, in the tradition of Mott and Fuller, sought to rectify the negative impact of the *Memoirs* on Wollstonecraft’s posthumous reputation. In the 26 February 1868 issue, they published Sara A. Underwood’s article “Mary Wolstonecraft ([sic]) and Woman’s Rights,” which begins with the line, “Among the first acts of justice which ‘THE REVOLUTION,’ as a journal devoted to the rights of woman, should perform, is that of rescuing from the mire of calumny and obloquy heaped upon it, the name of Mary Wolstonecraft ([sic]), first defender and vindicator of those rights” (Stanton and Anthony 1991). On 2 April 1868, Stanton and Anthony published a response to Underwood’s article, “Is Man the Natural Protector of Woman?”; the author, under the pseudonym Marah, dismantles Underwood’s critical charge that Wollstonecraft “disavowed the use of the marriage rite” in her relationship to Imlay, and upholds a Wollstonecraftian view of the corruption of institutionalized marriage and the spiritual ideal of marriage as a union

of moral and intellectual equals (Stanton and Anthony 1991). On 4 June 1868, Stanton and Anthony published an anonymous article entitled “Mary Wollstonecraft” which openly and uncritically recapitulates the story of Wollstonecraft’s life without glossing over its scandalous events (Stanton and Anthony 1991). This article—possibly authored by Stanton, who strove to demonstrate the compatibility of Wollstonecraft’s life and ideas—used both the biographical facts and method of the *Memoirs* as an antidote to its original, poisoning impact on Wollstonecraft’s reputation.

A few pages following this biographical essay, Stanton and Anthony published an editorial advertisement for their upcoming serialization of the *Rights of Woman*: “As this book is now out of print, and cannot be purchased, it will give an added value to “THE REVOLUTION” for its readers to know, that what this able woman said on this question so long ago is now to be republished” (Stanton and Anthony 1991). An anonymous reader had requested the reprinting of the *Rights of Woman* in *The Revolution* in a letter to the editor in the 19 March 1868 issue (Stanton and Anthony 1991). No American edition of the *Rights of Woman* had been published since 1856, so *The Revolution’s* faithful reproduction of the text of the 1792 London second edition filled a vacuum and spread Wollstonecraft’s ideas on women’s rights to its reading audience from 11 June to 31 December 1868 (Windle 2000, 15, 17). In the 8 July 1869 issue of *The Revolution*, Anthony offered “every club of five subscribers” the option of either receiving an extra copy of the newspaper, or receiving a “handsomely bound copy of Vol. 2, containing Mary Wollstonecraft’s ‘Rights of Woman’” (Stanton and Anthony 1991).

In 1881, Stanton, Anthony and Matilda Gage coedited and published the first two volumes of the *History of Woman Suffrage*. They dedicated volume one to 19 women “Whose Earnest Lives and Fearless Words, in Demanding Political Rights for Women, have been, in the Preparation of these Pages, a Constant Inspiration to the Editors” (Stanton, Anthony, and Gage 1889). The very first name, standing alone above the rest, is Mary Wollstonecraft. In the same volume, Gage wrote a chapter that describes the important women, including Wollstonecraft, who influenced the drive for women’s suffrage, and summarizes the political argument of the *Rights of Woman* (Stanton, Anthony, and Gage 1889, 34). Through their consistent designation of Wollstonecraft as the founding theorist of the women’s rights movement on the pages of the *History of Woman Suffrage* and *The Revolution*, Anthony and Stanton strove to overcome the negative impact of the *Memoirs* and firmly establish Wollstonecraft’s stature as the primary philosophical source in the modern

Anglo-American tradition of arguments for the establishment of the political equality of the sexes.

Stanton's speeches and letters contain substantial philosophical/textual evidence that her views on the historical causes of the subjugation of women and its educational remedies parallel the arguments of the *Rights of Woman*. Stanton contends, "Our laws and constitutions, our creeds and codes, and the customs of social life are all of masculine origin" (Stanton 1981, 212). Stanton argues that male control over customs and education—what Wollstonecraft calls "the male aristocracy"—produces a false education that indoctrinates male superiority and stunts the physical, moral, and intellectual abilities of women (Wollstonecraft 1995, 167). Stanton joins Wollstonecraft in concluding that the equal education of the sexes will dismantle the supposedly natural differences in intelligence and physical strength that men use to assert their superiority. "When there is a demand for healthy, happy, vigorous, self-reliant women," Stanton states, "they will make their appearance. . . . Woman, as she is today, is men's handiwork" (Stanton 1989, 145). She furthermore argues that "Man's intellectual superiority cannot be a question until woman has had a fair trial," echoing Wollstonecraft's suggestion, "Where is then the sexual difference, when the education has been the same?" (Stanton 1981, 29; Wollstonecraft 1995, 92). Like Wollstonecraft, Stanton supports the vigorous physical education of girls, to counteract their current physical inequality with boys, and stimulate their intellectual development: "We cannot say what the woman might be physically, if the girl were allowed all the freedom of the boy in romping, climbing, swimming, playing whoop and ball. . . . Physically, as well as intellectually, it is use that produces growth and development" (Stanton 1981, 30–31; Wollstonecraft 1995, 138). Both agree that the equal education of the sexes is a precondition of the improvement of society as a whole, since properly educated women in turn raise their children to be virtuous citizens.

Following Wollstonecraft, Stanton argues that the equal education of the sexes is also the precondition for a democratic marriage: "The first step towards higher, purer, more enduring unions is the complete education of woman" (Stanton 1989, 137; Wollstonecraft 1995, 260). For Stanton, a marriage can only be happy and stable if husband and wife "share equally in counsel and government. There can be no true dignity or independence where there is subordination to the absolute will of another, no happiness without freedom" (Stanton 1981, 34). In an 1869 speech supporting the legal reform of marriage so that women could have more freedom within it as well as the freedom to exit it, Stanton upheld Wollstonecraft's controversial life as exemplifying the most personal end of

human autonomy: the free choice of a lover. Stanton challenged the view of Wollstonecraft as a fallen woman by celebrating her as an example of the "true free lovers" who are "among the most progressive and the most virtuous of women and of men" (Stanton 2000, 395). She further suggested that Wollstonecraft was morally and socially uplifted, not degraded, by her controversial life as a free lover: "The true nobility and virtue of Mary Wollstonecraft compelled her admission into the most aristocratic and the most moral circles in England. . . while she rejected all allegiance to the marriage institution and lived or had lived openly as the mistress of the man of her choice" (Stanton 2000, 395). Stanton sees in Wollstonecraft an example of how the realization of personal autonomy, as expressed through the free choice of the object of one's love, rests at the center of human virtue. While Stanton extols the "nobility and virtue" of Wollstonecraft's life choices before her marriage to Godwin, she, like the author of the *Rights of Woman*, never endorses the complete rejection of marriage. Although they both judge the patriarchal institution of marriage to be a form of slavery, Stanton and Wollstonecraft argue that women can achieve a vital kind of freedom within the bonds of marriage by becoming self-governing individuals, and by promoting the necessary social and legal reform of the institution itself (Stanton 1981, 133; Wollstonecraft 1995, 260).

In her famous 1892 speech "The Solitude of Self," Stanton sets forth her most profound philosophical account of the foundational importance of female autonomy. Among her known intellectual influences, Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill emerge in particular as likely models for her passionate defense of "self-sovereignty" as the goal of proto-feminist social and political reform. Stanton writes, "the strongest reason for giving woman all the opportunities for higher education, for the full development of her faculties, her forces of mind and body; for giving her the most enlarged freedom of thought and action; a complete emancipation from all forms of bondage, of custom, dependence, superstition. . . is the solitude and personal responsibility of her own individual life" (Stanton 1981, 247). Wollstonecraft similarly advocates the moral, intellectual, physical, economic, and political autonomy of women, by arguing that women would not gain "power over men," but rather "over themselves," by becoming "enlightened citizens" and earning "their own subsistence, independent of men" (Wollstonecraft 1995, 138, 260). While many American women's rights advocates distanced themselves from Wollstonecraft's argument for women's economic and political independence from men, Stanton seizes the opportunity to side with her controversial predecessor. Stanton and Wollstonecraft share the view that the

independence of women cannot end with equal education, but rather must extend to self-sufficient employment outside the home and full political citizenship (Stanton 1989, 152).

Stanton and Wollstonecraft diverge, however, on the theological question of whether or not sex is incorporated into the human soul. While Wollstonecraft argues that the soul has no sex, and uses this theological notion as the metaphysical basis of her view of human equality, Stanton contends that there is “no doubt there is sex in the mortal and spiritual world” (Stanton 1989, 132). Like Fuller, Stanton was partly a student of the Romantic tradition and shared its skepticism of the Wollstonecraftian view that the only significant differences between the sexes were the greater physical strength of males and the female capacities for childbirth and nursing. Yet Stanton insists that her belief in the existence of masculine and feminine souls does not justify the belief that there are natural differences between the sexes that are reflected in their unequal social and political status. Stanton holds that while the souls of men and women are different, their complementary natures equally contribute to a kind of cosmic balance and equilibrium in the universe. Without this balance, neither sex can reach “the divinest heights of which he is capable” (Stanton 1989, 132). Although Stanton differs from Wollstonecraft on the question of the nature of the soul, she shares Wollstonecraft’s view that the universal, God-given moral law is the metaphysical foundation of the equal human rights that laws and government ought to enshrine. In her 1848 address at Seneca Falls, Stanton echoes the central moral teaching of the *Rights of Woman* with the claim that “God’s commands rest upon man as well as woman . . . I would have the same code of morals for both” (Stanton 1981, 30; Wollstonecraft 1995, 110). Stanton paid the ultimate homage to the spiritual bond she shared with Wollstonecraft by making a pilgrimage to her grave in Bournemouth, England in 1890. She recorded her seaside meditation by the graves of Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and the Shelleys in her autobiography *Eighty Years and More* (Stanton 1898, 427–28).

Remembering the *Rights of Woman*

From the publication of the *Rights of Woman* in Boston in 1792 to Susan B. Anthony’s final speech to a women’s suffrage convention in 1906, Wollstonecraft’s political theory captured the philosophical imagination, and ignited the critical fires, of many of the leading women’s rights advocates in America. Just as Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* (1690) and Montesquieu’s *Spirit of*

the Laws (1748) influenced the arguments of Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence* (1776) and Madison, Hamilton, and Jay’s *Federalist Papers* (1788), Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* was often treated as the premier philosophical text on the question of women’s rights in America and shaped the arguments of its serious readers from Hannah Mather Crocker to Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Pocock (1975) and Kloppenberg (1998), among others, have established that a transatlantic dialogue of political ideas shaped the development of American political thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like Anderson (2000) and McFadden (1999), we contend that the American women’s rights movement was no exception to this phenomenon, but we emphasize in particular that Wollstonecraft’s philosophy made an important mark on its evolution.

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