

Wendy Gunther-Canada

Rebel writer: Mary Wollstonecraft and enlightenment politics

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Reviewed by Ruth Abby

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At the heart of this book lies a series of interesting and accessible readings of most of Mary Wollstonecraft's key writings: *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*; *Mary, A Fiction*; *Original Stories from Real Life*; the two *Vindications* and *The Wrongs of Women, or Maria*. For Wendy Gunther-Canada it is important to consider Wollstonecraft's writings chronologically and as a whole, for only then can we take the full measure of her thought. Reading her work in this way makes it possible both to trace the development of her thinking over time and to identify its unifying themes. Gunther-Canada emphasises that these unifying themes should not be obscured by the fact that Wollstonecraft blurred genre boundaries by writing philosophy and fiction.

Enframing the readings of Wollstonecraft's individual works is a cluster of questions about how we should interpret this feminist writer. One of Gunther-Canada's central concerns is Wollstonecraft's standing vis-a-vis the canon of western philosophy. Two related features make Wollstonecraft an outsider when it comes to the canon: she was female and self-educated. According to Gunther-Canada, Wollstonecraft began as a female reader who drew on her experience to identify and criticise the canon's depiction of women. From being a female reader unable to see her experience or potential reflected in canonical writings, and being horrified by the textual constructions of femininity she did find there, Wollstonecraft became a feminist writer. Her primary aim was to introduce female experiences and feminist perspectives into canonical debates, especially those about politics, rights and the public / private separation. Interrogating canonical works from her feminist standpoint makes Wollstonecraft the rebel writer of the title. Given that Wollstonecraft's feminist theory began as an oppositional discourse, Gunther-Canada doubts that it is appropriate to now situate her within the canon alongside her male adversaries. She speculates that Wollstonecraft would not have welcomed such incorporation, preferring to remain a radical outsider.

One of Wollstonecraft's great achievements was to "envision an autonomous political identity for women" (4). Yet as Gunther-Canada underlines, when Wollstonecraft thinks about women as political subjects, she does so with an awareness of the formative role childhood plays in the development of identity. In this she corrects one of the weaknesses of much canonical political theory that simply treats citizens as if they were always adults, tacitly denying that political education begins in childhood and in the home. Gunther-Canada offers many valuable reminders about Wollstonecraft's reflections on girlhood and the trajectory from childhood to adulthood, seeing this as a perspective she has bequeathed to contemporary feminism.

Yet as Gunther-Canada acknowledges, Wollstonecraft's belief in the formative role childhood plays for adult personality came not just from her experience as a teacher and governess but also from her reading of Rousseau. Her reflections on the best education for girls are both indebted to and highly critical of his *Emile*. This is just one of many possible illustrations of the fact that Wollstonecraft's relationship with the canon was not wholly oppositional. She both interrogated and appropriated it. Wollstonecraft didn't only rebel against tradition; she also deployed the resources of canonical writers to challenge their own conclusions. Her relationship to the patriarchal canon was thus more complicated and ambivalent than Gunter-Canada's opening remarks about her rebellious outsider status suggest. Gunther-Canada comes closer to the mark when describing Wollstonecraft as an immanent critic of the canon, but how this can be reconciled with some of her other descriptions remains unclear.

Transgressing genre boundaries was necessary for Wollstonecraft to pioneer her feminist vision and signified further her rebelliousness, for her use of varied genres was another of the features that set her writing apart from canonical works. Yet despite her injunctions about how to read Wollstonecraft, Gunther-Canada largely neglects her writings on the French Revolution and her travel writings. Examining these works in the same depth as the others would have highlighted any unifying themes more clearly as well as underscoring the diversity of Wollstonecraft's literary modes. Gunther-Canada's analysis of this aspect of Wollstonecraft's work also seems to neglect the diversity of modes in which some of the canonical figures wrote. Locke and Rousseau—two of the most important for Wollstonecraft's thinking—employed multiple literary strategies. Rousseau wrote novels and autobiography as well as philosophy and Locke wrote educational tracts as well as philosophical works. Gunther-Canada sometimes acknowledges this, and in the case of Rousseau, posits a continuity of argument from *The Social Contract* to *Emile* to *La Nouvelle Heloise*. But she doesn't draw what seems to be the logical inference that if Wollstonecraft's writing resembles Rousseau's and other men's in this way, then "this change in literary form" might not highlight the "critical challenge to the discourse of political philosophy" she claims it does (130). The fact that Wollstonecraft is not unique in deploying a range of genres also casts doubt on whether this helps to explain why she is so "little known to readers today" (156).

Another of the questions Gunther-Canada poses is how Wollstonecraft found or forged the authority to intrude herself into canonical debates. The chapter on the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* is especially illuminating here, exploring what it meant for Wollstonecraft to publish this tract anonymously and the freedom this created for her to play with the tropes of masculinity and femininity. Not announcing that the author was a woman freed Wollstonecraft from any need to establish authority for the female voice in political discourse.

Although the canon provided no models of women writing about politics, Wollstonecraft was not without predecessors from whom she could draw sustenance. One of the things promised in the Introduction is that this book will locate Wollstonecraft in the wider tradition of women writers, and thereby introduce "forgotten female voices into the conversation of political thought" (9). This interesting vein of argument is left sadly untapped, for there is no sustained account of the writers nominated as Wollstonecraft's precursors. Half a page is devoted to Bathsua Makin and to Catharine Macaulay respectively (111, 113) and a bit more to Mary Astell (111-12). Aphra Benn, Hester Chapone, Sarah Trimmer, Germaine de Stael and Mary Hays appear only in

passing. Thus the author's promise of bringing these voices into the conversation of political theory and showing how Wollstonecraft developed the tradition of women's writing remains unfulfilled.

This book is particularly strong in its analysis of the textuality of Wollstonecraft's work, when it reflects on Wollstonecraft as a reader and as a writer and imputes to her an awareness of the power of writing and reading to construct gender. Gunther-Canada portrays Wollstonecraft as deliberately setting out to create textual representations of gender that would provide alternatives to those encountered by female readers in conduct books, novels and canonical writings. The working assumption here is that the books a person reads, and in particular their depiction of gender, helps to shape the person she becomes. But one aspect of Gunther-Canada's exploration of these issues seems underexamined. She contends that women who read canonical writings suffer an identity crisis because of the way women are typically presented in these works. Female readers either have to imagine themselves as men or reject these images of women. Yet it seems probable that many women readers of the canon have identified with some of its masculine figures, values, images and ideals in a way that does not preclude criticism of the depiction of women in these texts; indeed, it might even galvanise such criticism. If Wollstonecraft could toy with gender identity when writing her first *Vindication*, why can't women readers do the same when reading these texts? Although Gunther-Canada does not disinter the theoretical presuppositions of her claims about female readers, an unduly restrictive view of reading seems to underlie them. I suspect that reading is a richer, more variegated, open-ended and less determined activity than some of Gunther-Canada's remarks allow.

The delights of this book are in the details. While it raises many interesting wider questions for Wollstonecraft interpretation, there are some inconsistencies among Gunther-Canada's wider claims or between them and her more detailed analysis of each text.

Ruth Abbey is a Senior Lecturer in political theory in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent at Canterbury. She is the author of *Nietzsche's Middle Period* (2000) and *Charles Taylor* (2000). She is currently editing a volume of essays about Charles Taylor and working and teaching on contemporary debates within liberalism.