

ANOTHER CASSANDRA'S CRY: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S UNIVERSAL BENEVOLENCE AS ECOFEMINIST PRAXIS

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Abstract

Even before the publication of the *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) exposed the ecological strain in Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism, earlier works already had presented her as an advocate for the transformation of the power structures through the exercise of universal benevolence towards all creatures. In vindicating the central position that mothers should take in their children's education, Wollstonecraft expresses her hopes that women could actually change the power structures that govern the relationships between genders and species. It is my contention in this paper that Mary Wollstonecraft's works can be termed – using Laurence Buell's favorite metaphor – early palimpsests of ecofeminist thought.

Key-words: Mary Wollstonecraft, private affections vs. universal benevolence, discourse of sensibility, capitalist economics, ethics of care.

Resumen

Incluso antes de que la publicación de las *Cartas escritas durante una corta estancia en Suecia, Noruega y Dinamarca* (1796) dieran a conocer el lado ecologista del feminismo de Mary Wollstonecraft, en sus trabajos anteriores ya se había mostrado como una defensora de la transformación de las estructuras de poder a través de la práctica de la benevolencia universal hacia todas las criaturas. Al reivindicar la función decisiva de las madres en la educación de sus hijos, Wollstonecraft expresa su esperanza en que las mujeres realmente puedan cambiar las estructuras de poder que regulan las relaciones entre los géneros y las distintas especies. Utilizando la metáfora preferida de

Laurence Buell, defiende en este artículo que las obras de Mary Wollstonecraft pueden leerse como palimpsestos tempranos del pensamiento ecofeminista.

Palabras clave: Mary Wollstonecraft, afectos privados vs. benevolencia universal, discurso de la sensibilidad, economía capitalista, ética del cuidado.

Cassandra was not the only prophetess whose warning voice has been disregarded.

Mary Wollstonecraft's Letter XXIII of *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*

In November 1787, a 28-year old Mary Wollstonecraft was looking brightly on the new prospects opening before her. She had just moved to London to start working for the radical editor Joseph Johnson, who had assured her that she could make a very decent living by writing. Envisioning as a reality the life of independence she had always dreamed of, Mary wrote enthusiastically to her sister Everina, "I am then going to be the first of a new genus – I tremble at the attempt".¹ Exactly what type of genus she saw herself belonging to can only be for us a matter for speculation. Evidently, we assign the individual "Mary Wollstonecraft" to the genus *femina auctor*, yet this was hardly a new – albeit controversial – one in her time. Did she have in mind a particular species of this genus? If that were the case, what would be the *differentia* that distinguished that particular species from the other individuals classified as belonging to the same genus? Did Wollstonecraft envision any of the different labels that became attached to her name with the passing of time in order to mark that difference? She certainly knew Horace Walpole had referred to her as a "hyena in petticoats", but she died a year before she could see herself included as one of the "unsex'd females" of Richard Polwhele's poem, listed as a prostitute in the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, or heralded as a "benefactor of mankind" in the biography written by her husband, William Godwin.

Since Wollstonecraft's death, biographers have recreated her life depending on what every new age needed to vindicate in this extraordinary figure, "from Godwin's 'champion' at the end of the eighteenth century to Mrs Fawcett's heroine for the suffragist Cause, and from Claire Tomalin's outstanding image of the wounded lover to Janet Todd's moody drama queen as seen through the

1. TODD, Janet (ed.): *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2003, p. 139.

exasperated eyes of her sisters”.² Yet, as a recent biographer observes, even if all these faces are true, they fail to reveal to us another one, “that unnamed thing she feels herself to be”.³

This brings us back to my question: what particular type of that “new genus” did Mary Wollstonecraft have in mind when she wrote to Everina? Let us continue reading her letter, intrigued by what made her “tremble at the attempt”. “[I]f I fail”, she continues, “I *only* suffer – and should I succeed, my dear Girls will ever in sickness have a home – and a refuge where for a few months in the year, they may forget the cares that disturb the rest”.⁴ Wollstonecraft’s ambition was a practical one: she wanted to make of her passion for reading and writing a profession that would make her independent and useful. Rather than longing for any sort of authorial immortality, she hoped to be able to provide for herself and her sisters. Nothing more – and nothing less. An eagerness to help her loved ones that made her often forget about her own needs was one of the salient features of Mary Wollstonecraft’s personality. With time, that initial ambition became greater: she hoped that her writing would help reform society.

If we look at the nature of her work for any more precise definition of the particular species Mary Wollstonecraft belongs to, she remains even more elusive. “Do we call her a novelist?” Claudia L. Johnson asks, “An educationist? A political theorist? A moral philosopher? An historian? A memoirist? A woman of letters? A feminist?”⁵ She was, undoubtedly, all of these, but to opt for only one of these categories to classify her under “would not only diminish the range as well as the wholeness of her achievement, but also impose decidedly anachronistic territorial distinctions on her literary endeavour”.⁶ Championed as the mother of feminism by first wavers, modern feminists have been critical of her focus on the role that maternity plays on women’s lives and, “repelled by what they regard as her chilly prudishness,” in her views on sexuality⁷. Would it be too much to claim her now for the ecofeminist cause? After all, like Wollstonecraft’s views on women, ecofeminism

2. GORDON, Lyndall. *Vindication. A Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*. London, Virago Press, 2006, p. 3.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Todd, Janet. *Op.cit.*, p. 139.

5. JOHNSON, Claudia L. “Introduction”, in Claudia L. Johnson (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 1-6; p. 3.

6. *Ibid.*

7. TAYLOR, Barbara. “The religious foundations of Mary Wollstonecraft’s feminism”, in Claudia L. Johnson (ed.): *Op. cit.*, pp. 99-118; p. 112.

conflicts with various other feminisms, by taking account of the connection with nature central in its understanding of feminism. It rejects especially those aspects or approaches to women's liberation which endorse or fail to challenge the dualistic definitions of women and nature and/or the inferior status of nature.⁸

Labels are sometimes helpful, but most of the time limiting; they help us understand the object of study while reducing it at the same time. I will not, therefore, classify Mary Wollstonecraft as an ecofeminist or even a proto-ecofeminist, if only because there are so many faces to ecofeminism. I will contend, however, that her seminal works are consistent with this central ecofeminist postulate: that the oppression of women through history goes hand in hand with their association with nature. At a time when the Scientific Revolution had deprived nature of its soul, its animation, its agency, reducing it "to brute, passive, stupid matter", and transforming it "into a machine, blindly obedient to cause and effect",⁹ can we blame Wollstonecraft for wanting to get rid of that pervasive association?

Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) hints at the new direction her thoughts were taking regarding the relationship between individuals and their environment. It was Mary's most popular work in her lifetime, and the magnificent descriptions of the natural landscapes she encountered affected deeply the English Romantic poets. On the other hand, her manifest concern about the way brutalized commerce was affecting the shape of the country and the role women played in the flourishing of the local economy, point at an ecological turn in Wollstonecraft's feminism. However, I will argue that she deals with issues that are of concern to ecofeminists in the twenty-first century even earlier in her work. From her first book, Wollstonecraft vindicates the role that women – particularly mothers or mother surrogates – should play in changing the power structures that govern the relationships between species, making universal benevolence her guiding principle. From this perspective, her works can be termed – using Laurence Buell's confessedly preferred but unused metaphor¹⁰– early palimpsests of ecofeminist thought.

Wollstonecraft's opinions on the variety of topics she addressed in her works are far from being those of the theorist observing the world from the

8. PLUMWOOD, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London, Routledge, 1993, p. 39.

9. DASTON, Lorraine. "The Nature of Nature in Early Modern Europe". *Configurations*. 6.2 (Spring 1998), pp. 149-178; pp. 150-151.

10. GAARD, Greta. "New Directions for Ecofeminism: Toward a More Feminist Ecocriticism". *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17.4 (Autumn 2010), pp. 643-665; p. 660.

safe distance of her writing desk and her books. A look at her biography reveals that direct experience informed virtually every single line she wrote. As a daughter, sister, mother, friend, domestic companion, schoolmistress, governess, writer, lover and wife, Mary had access to a range of spheres that entitled her to write with authority on what became her central concern: the fundamental role that education played in rendering women rational, independent citizens who did not need to resort to marriage for economic survival.

Her views regarding the tyranny of marriage must have been formed at a very early age, when she witnessed the violence her often drunken father inflicted on her acquiescent mother, only to be confirmed later on, when she had to rescue her sister Eliza from a calamitous marriage which threatened her sanity. As a daughter, she resented her parents' preference for her elder brother Ned and the unfairness of the girls having to give up their inheritance money in order to pay for the debts their father kept contracting in his recurrent failures to become a gentleman farmer, while Ned inherited everything and overlooked his sisters' needs. Let down by the men in her family, it is not surprising that Mary soon saw the need for a woman to become financially independent.

Her lookout for affection outside her home, Mary also encountered intellectual stimulus in a series of surrogate fathers, mothers and sisters. John Arden, the Reverend Mr. Clare, Richard Price and Joseph Johnson became, at different stages in Wollstonecraft's life, substitutes for a father she could not admire, while acting as tutors (Arden and, even more so, Mr. Clare) and mentors (Price and Johnson). However, there were also pivotal female figures who helped her shape her views on education. John Arden's daughter, Jane, became Mary's first close friend; Fanny Blood, whom she met through the Clares in Hoxton, became more than a sister to her; Mrs. Burgh – the widow of the Revd. Mr. Burgh – suggested the idea and provided the financial support for the school Mary started in Newington Green, Mrs. Burgh's Nonconformist community.

There were also women who, by introducing Mary to the world of the upper classes, indirectly opened her eyes to the pernicious effects of conventional female education. Working as a paid companion to a Mrs. Dawson of Bath, Mary had the opportunity of moving in genteel society, as she visited Bath, Windsor and Southampton. The triviality of female accomplishments she learned to abhor in these fashionable cities would only become stronger during her time as governess to the daughters of Viscount and Lady Kingsborough. Finally, while travelling through Scandinavia, she cleverly observed the way patriarchal capitalist society was flourishing at the expense of women

and nature. Mary Wollstonecraft was an avid reader, but life, more than books, shaped the direction her thoughts took when envisioning the future of society. It soon became very clear to her that a society could not be better or happier until its members were related by the type of "friendship and intimacy which can only be enjoyed by equals".¹¹ Universal benevolence was vital if this utopia was ever to become a reality.

The age-old philosophical debate concerning the concept of universal benevolence – "the idea that benevolence and sympathy can be extended to all humanity"¹² – and its political implications were particularly intense in Britain in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Among the many names who dealt with the issues of sympathy and benevolence was the prominent philosopher and preacher Richard Price, whom Mary Wollstonecraft had come to meet and admire at the Dissenting community of Newington Green. Wollstonecraft never abandoned her Anglicanism, but she took to the Dissenters' ethos of hard work, openness, logical inquiry, individual conscience and respect towards women.¹³ In his sixties when Wollstonecraft met him, Price became for her not only a mentor, but possibly the most caring of her father surrogates. The affection and admiration Wollstonecraft felt for Price is noticeable in the ardor with which she defended him from Edmund Burke's attacks in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published in November 1790, only weeks after Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

A fervent supporter of the French Revolution, Richard Price insisted on the need for humans to "cultivate to the utmost the principle of benevolence",¹⁴ which he saw as an extension of particular affections, whereas opponents to the concept – Burke, among others – considered that benevolence should be directed exclusively to those inhabiting our closest circles. Extending benevolence indiscriminately to all human beings was, for the likes of Burke, to disregard family and nation.

11. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*. Edited with an Introduction by Janet Todd. Oxford & New York, O.U.P., pp. 5-62; p.9.

12. RADCLIFFE, Evan. "Revolutionary Writing, Moral Philosophy and Universal Benevolence in the Eighteenth Century". *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54.2 (April 1993), pp. 221-240; p. 221.

13. TOMALIN, Claire. *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974, p. 71.

14. In his *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* (1758), quoted in RADCLIFFE, Evan. *Op.cit.*, p. 224.

Mary Wollstonecraft's life experience turned her into the perfect champion of universal benevolence. She had performed the role of a caring mother, even before she gave birth to her first daughter, to her own mother, to her sisters, and to Fanny Blood – even if Fanny was two years her senior. It was in her nature, she admitted, to love “most people best when they are in adversity – for pity is one of my prevailing passions”.¹⁵ If benevolence was “the top virtue in eighteenth-century England; in Mary it shed the tone of a patron, and took the warmth of affection”.¹⁶ Her views on the universality of benevolence coincided entirely with those expressed by Price, as her earliest work, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) evinces. In one of the final chapters, devoted to “Benevolence”, Wollstonecraft expresses her conviction that

[g]oodwill to all the human race should dwell in our bosoms, nor should love to individuals induce us to violate this first of duties, or make us sacrifice the interest of any fellow-creature, to promote that of another, whom we happen to be more partial to.¹⁷

The complete title of her *Original Stories from Real Life*¹⁸ is also indicative of Wollstonecraft's firm belief that not only the mind, but also the affections, required education. Her adherence to the doctrine of universal benevolence also informs the main thesis defended in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*: the need to abolish inherited honors and property and to instate a system of education that would give every single human being the same opportunities of succeeding in life. Two years later, she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, to clarify that her views concerning this new system of education also included women.

Wollstonecraft's stand on the universality of benevolence is made explicit in the reasons she offers Burke for her rejection of inheritance:

The perpetuation of property in our families is one of the privileges you most warmly contend for; yet it would not be very difficult to prove that the mind must have a very limited range that thus confines its benevolence to such

15. Letter to George Blood, in TODD, Janet (ed.): *Op. cit.*, p. 54. Similarly, she later wrote to her sister Everina: “I wish to be a mother to you both [Eliza and Everina]”; “I only live to be useful – benevolence must fill every void in *my heart*”; and to Joseph Johnson: “So reason allows, what nature impels me to – for I cannot live without loving my fellow creatures” (Ibid., pp. 139, 141 and 159).

16. GORDON, Lyndall. *Op. cit.*, p. 47.

17. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life*. London, Joseph Johnson, 1787.

18. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Original Stories from Real Life; With Conversations, Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness*. London, Joseph Johnson, 1796 [1788].

a narrow circle, which, with great propriety, may be included in the sordid calculations of blind self-love.

A brutal attachment to children has appeared most conspicuous in parents who have treated them like slaves, and demanded due homage for all the property they transferred to them, during their lives. It has led them to force their children; to break the most sacred ties; to do violence to a natural impulse, and run into legal prostitution to increase wealth or shun poverty; and, still worse, the dread of parental malediction has made many weak characters violate truth in the face of Heaven; and, to avoid a father's angry curse, the most sacred promises have been broken.¹⁹

In presenting the perpetuation of property as an instance of "blind self-love", illustrating the negative effects it has on potential heirs, Wollstonecraft was giving a negative answer to the question of whether private affections should have priority over universal benevolence, a question that had become even more politically loaded in the aftermath of the French Revolution, particularly once Britain declared war on France in 1793. According to Evan Radcliffe, "nearly every supporter of the Revolution spoke in favor of universal benevolence", which they saw as a necessary extension of private affections.²⁰ For Edmund Burke, universal benevolence destroys everything that civilization depends on: "all our social feelings and attachments, beginning in the family and ending in the nation".²¹ Richard Prince, in contrast, insisted that love of country should never prevail over a universal love of mankind; on the contrary, it should be "limited and governed by universal benevolence"²² in order to prevent our personal affections from distorting our judgment and allow us to condone any injustice committed by our country.

Wollstonecraft seems to have taken good notice of the subversive potential of the principle of universal benevolence, which could effectively do away with tradition, hierarchy and the established order, precisely the reason why conservatives saw it as a threat and distorted its meaning to render it despicable:

Universal benevolence had represented the stance most opposed to self-love; thus it occupied a morally strong position. But the conservatives' view made it into the stance that opposed domestic affection and thus gave it a much

19. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Rights of Men...* Op. cit., p. 21.

20. RADCLIFFE, Evan. *Op. cit.*, p. 229. A few pages later, Radcliffe continues, "Is private affection inconsistent with universal benevolence?", a question often debated at a meeting of the Royston book club, a well-known group in which dissenters were prominent, and asked in the *Monthly Magazine* by the "Enquirer" (William Enfield)" (*Ibid.*, p. 232).

21. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

22. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 229.

weaker moral position. They buttressed this view by portraying believers in universal benevolence not as opponents of egoism but as consummate egoists who used universal benevolence simply as a tool to achieve their selfish aims.²³

This was, in fact, the central argument of James Mackintosh's influential *Discourse on the Study of the Law of Nature and Nations* (1799), in which he condemned "every system that would sacrifice the particular affections to general benevolence" and stress[ed] that the 'duties of private life' arise 'almost all from the two great institutions of property and marriage'.²⁴ Property and marriage were precisely the "great institutions" that had been under Wollstonecraft's scrutinizing eye.

Indeed, universal benevolence also informed the purpose of reform in Wollstonecraft's feminist cause, since she was convinced that "women (or anyone) can be virtuous and perform their duties to society only when their interests are broad and include 'the love for mankind'".²⁵ When she explains in the prefatory letter to M. Talleyrand-Périgord, that she had written *Rights of Woman* moved by "an affection for the whole human race",²⁶ Wollstonecraft was putting universal benevolence at the forefront.

In pointing out in *Rights of Men* the situation of heirs who had to sacrifice their individual happiness in their choice of a life partner in order to satisfy their parents' wishes, Wollstonecraft had laid bare the evils inherent to the narrowness of an affection that is only directed to the private sphere. This becomes the central issue in chapters 10 and 11 of *Rights of Woman* – "Parental Affection" and "Duty to Parents" – and is taken up again in some sections of the last chapter. From her point of view, the result of a private affection that is not informed by universal benevolence deforms family relationships. In such cases, she insists, parental affection ends up being "perhaps, the blindest modification of perverse self-love", because many parents, "for the sake of their *own* children [...] violate the most sacred duties, forgetting the common relationship that binds the whole family on earth together".²⁷ Similarly, she ranks as narrow the "exclusive affection" that some women feel for their husbands, because "justice and humanity are often sacrificed".²⁸

23. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

24. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 236.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

26. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*. Op. cit., pp. 63-283; p. 65.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 232-233.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

It was a central tenet of Wollstonecraft's creed that natural affections are weak, that they should be exercised and nourished if they are to be of any value, always with the goal in mind of extending them to ever-widening circles. Otherwise, they remain simple expressions of extended self-love, even if they appear to be something else. The education of the affections, she believed, was "the only way to expend the heart; for public affections, as well as public virtues, must ever grow out of the private character, or they are merely meteors that shot athwart a dark sky, and disappear as they are gazed at and admired".²⁹ In the particular case of women, a proper education – not the "false system" she condemns in *Rights of Woman* – ought to provide them with "a chance to become intelligent; and let love to man be only a part of that lowing flame of universal love, which, after encircling humanity, mounts in grateful incense to God".³⁰

Having reached this point in an essay on ecofeminism, it is time to examine the exact degree of universality of the benevolence Mary Wollstonecraft defended. For benevolence to be truly universal, should it not encompass all life forms rather than being circumscribed to humankind? Wollstonecraft was certainly speaking for all forms of oppressed humanity but, to borrow from Sylvia Bowerbank's book title, was she speaking *for* nature?³¹ She certainly was in *A Short Residence*, but she remains conspicuously ambiguous in her two *Vindications*. It is difficult to classify Wollstonecraft as an ecologist, and yet the voice of the ecologist that had begun to speak in her journey through Scandinavia might very well have become a shout if only she had lived longer. We shall never know, but we can speculate by looking at the way her thoughts evolved through her writings, which at least present her as an advocate for universal benevolence towards all forms of sentient life.

The age in which Scientific Revolution *dis-animated* nature was also the time in which the science of ecology originated. Even if the term was not officially coined until 1869³², ecological ideas in the eighteenth-century were articulated from two broadly defined positions: an "arcadian", which advocated "a simple, humble life for man with the aim of restoring him to a peaceful coexistence with other organisms", and an "imperial" position – of which Linnaeus was an outstanding representative – which aimed at establishing

29. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

31. BOWERBANK, Sylvia. *Speaking for Nature. Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England*. Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 2004.

32. WOSTER, Donald. 2nd Edition. *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 2.

“through the exercise of reason and by hard work, man’s dominion over nature”.³³ Were we forced to describe Wollstonecraft as an ecologist of any sort, we would have to include her as belonging to the “imperial” category, at least until *A Short Residence*.

When the Wollstonecraft of *Rights of Men* speaks about nonhuman nature, it is to express her discontent when it is prevented from being of use to humankind:

Why are huge forests still allowed to stretch out with idle pomp and all the indolence of Eastern grandeur? Why does the brown waste meet the traveler’s view, when men want work? But commons cannot be enclosed without acts of parliament to increase the property of the rich! Why might not the industrious peasant be allowed to steal a farm from the heath?³⁴

For the sake of fairness, Wollstonecraft’s demands need to be placed in the context of two clashing ideological perceptions of the forest coexisting in the eighteenth century. From the Middle Ages until the seventeenth century, when forest laws progressively fell into disuse, the forest had been,

a political structure that pitted the people against the king, and by extension, against the forest. Seeing from an ideological point of view, it was also a system that – with the important exceptions of limited and licensed hunting – protected the great forests and their nonhuman inhabitants from human development.³⁵

By the end of the eighteenth-century, however, a new definition prevailed: “a forest came to be understood as an area of land designated for the production of timber and other forest products”. The emphasis was on “utility, on the economic and aesthetic benefits of trees for humankind”.³⁶ The ideological perception of the forest as an aristocratic space is discernible in Wollstonecraft’s choice of words in the passage quoted above: forests, like aristocrats, “stretch out with idle pomp”, producing nothing, stationary in their “indolence”. As Mary Favret observes, “[i]t was common for radicals of the middle class to picture the aristocracy as especially languid, lethargic figures, ensconced on their sofas and sated with pleasure”.³⁷ As a political space, the forest represents

33. *Ibid.*

34. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Rights of Men...* Op. cit., pp. 58-59.

35. BOWERBANK, Sylvia. *Speaking for Nature...* Op. cit., pp. 15-16.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

37. FAVRET, Mary A. “Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark: Traveling with Mary Wollstonecraft”, in Claudia L. Johnson (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft...*, pp. 209-227; p. 211. Further down on the same page, Favret: “The desire to move forward and outward was thus inextricably

the static status quo that contrasted with the middle-class ethos of movement in which Wollstonecraft inscribed herself.

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft was not one to stick stubbornly to her cherished opinions whenever experience opened her eyes to a new reality; this would have been extremely out of character for her. Virginia Woolf described her open-mindedness most eloquently: "Every day she made theories by which life should be lived [...]. Every day too – for she was no pedant, no cold-blooded theorist – something was born in her that thrust aside her theories and forced her to model them afresh".³⁸ Thus, although admitting to the liberating effects of capitalist economics, Wollstonecraft also warned against its dangerous upshots. The invectives on the immorality of wild commerce scattered through the pages of *A Short Residence* are particularly relevant in the midst of the crisis currently affecting the capitalist world economy, revealing Wollstonecraft as a Cassandra of sorts: "England and America owe their liberty to commerce, which created a new species of power to undermine the feudal system. But let them beware of the consequence; the tyranny of wealth is still more galling and debasing than that of rank".³⁹ Bowerbank considers Wollstonecraft an "astute ecocritic" because "in her observations on the Scandinavian environment, she comes to understand the ongoing reciprocal relationships between human settlements and nonhuman life, both animate and inanimate, that makes civilization possible".⁴⁰ Until then, such reciprocity had gone unnoticed by her.

Some of Wollstonecraft's opinions regarding animals also stem from the ideological perception of the forest as the political space of the aristocracy. Thus, when she expresses her outrage at the arbitrariness of the penal law "that punishes with death the thief who steals a few pounds; but to take with violence, or trepan, a man, is no such heinous offence", she is invoking the poaching laws designed to protect the aristocracy: "For who shall dare to complain of the venerable vestige of the law that rendered the life of a deer more sacred than that of a man?"⁴¹

Following this same line of argument, the excessive fondness that genteel women display toward their dogs also deserves Wollstonecraft's censure, in

linked, for writers in Wollstonecraft's milieu, with work and economic status as well as political reform".

38. WOOLF, Virginia. *The Second Common Reader*. San Diego, New York and London, Harvest, 1986, p. 41.

39. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. 2nd Edition. London, Joseph Johnson, 1802, p. 170.

40. BOWERBANK, Sylvia. *Speaking for Nature...* Op. cit., p. 211.

41. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Rights of Men...* Op. cit., p. 14.

tune with contemporary literary representations of delicate ladies and their dogs, which became an ever more frequent sight as the middle classes started to imitate the aristocratic practice of pet-keeping. The image of “the Lady and the Lapdog” soon became the subject matter of eighteenth-century moral censure and satire.⁴² Thus, for the philanthropist Jonas Hanway, “an immoderate love of a brute animal, tho’ it may not destroy a charitable disposition, must weaken the force of it”⁴³, while Alexander Pope and Henry Fielding – among others – contented themselves with mocking this type of attachment in the characters of Belinda and Lady Coquette in, respectively, *The Rape of the Lock* (1717) and *The Modern Husband* (1732). Frequently in the satirical works of the first half of the eighteenth century, the lapdog is presented as a substitute for a human, sexual partner. In this context, according to Brown, “[t]he lady and the lapdog [...] serves as a synecdoche for the triviality and amorality of the fashionable female”.⁴⁴

Wollstonecraft does not partake of the misogynist discourse of Pope and Fielding. Rather, she is concerned about the misplaced intimacy which could make a mother fonder of her pet than of her own children, a reality she had directly witnessed while working as a governess for Lady Kingsborough’s daughters. Wollstonecraft would have agreed with Brown’s reading of Susan Ferrier’s *Marriage* (1818) that the kiss the fashionable lady bestows on her dog instead of her child becomes “[a] transgression of kin as well as kind”⁴⁵. Given Wollstonecraft’s manifest lack of hope for the improvement of aristocratic women, her views on ladies and their lapdogs are only marginally useful for my purposes here. I will deal with them towards the conclusion of this essay but, for the moment, in order to explore the degree of universality of her benevolence, it is worth turning our eyes to the much more valuable material her earlier works have to offer.

When comparing her views on animals with the more radical opinions of early modern women writers, Sylvia Bowerbank finds Wollstonecraft “conventional and condescending”.⁴⁶ She illustrates her contention by referring to

42. See BROWN, Laura. “The Lady, the Lapdog, and Literary Alterity”. *The Eighteenth Century* 52.1 (Spring 2011), pp. 31-45.

43. Quoted by *Ibid.*, p. 37.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

46. BOWERBANK, Sylvia. “The Bastille of Nature: Mary Wollstonecraft and Ecological Feminism”, in Anka Ryall and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström (eds.): *Mary Wollstonecraft’s Journey to Scandinavia: Essays*. Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003, pp. 165-184; p. 178. Bowerbank explicitly mentions Margaret Cavendish, Anne Conway and Catherine Macaulay, but extends her catalogue in her later *Speaking for Nature*.

Wollstonecraft's comments on forest management discussed above, but does not provide any example of her alleged conventionality and condescendence towards the animal kingdom. In her later *Speaking for Nature*, Bowerbank includes and studies the *Original Stories* among the educational texts designed "not only to teach children the physical properties of nature, but also to inculcate an ecological ethic of caring for nature",⁴⁷ so I must admit to being a little mystified as to the grounds for Bowerbank's earlier opinion. To be sure, concerning animals, Wollstonecraft was not a radical thinker. She did not, for instance, expressly advocate for animal rights or enter the debate on vegetarianism that had spread all over Europe in the early modern period;⁴⁸ yet, even if not radical, her views are decidedly not conventional.

Animals become a topic for discussion very early in Wollstonecraft's work, exactly in the second chapter of her first book, *Thoughts of the Education of Daughters*, which she dedicated to "Moral Discipline". Aware of the fascination animals exert on children, Wollstonecraft recommends the reading of amusing and instructive animal stories which will have "the best effect in forming the temper and cultivating the good dispositions of the heart".⁴⁹ Furthermore, true to the Rousseauian creed, she encourages the cultivation of "a taste for the beauties of nature" at a very early age.⁵⁰ It can be argued that this stance is closer to the Kantian ethics that assesses our treatment of animals in terms of how it can affect our duties to other human beings than to the Rousseauian or Benthamite approaches that took animal sentience as the root of their argument. Yet, a reader familiar with the totality of Wollstonecraft's works will not fail to position her with the latter philosophers.

It is worth noticing that she chose to start her *Original Stories* with three chapters exclusively dedicated to illustrating the different ways in which children can be educated to treat animals with the respect due to every sentient being. Through the stories that Mrs. Mason tells her young pupils, Wollstonecraft conveys the message that an animal's life and welfare is a good in itself, even if some of them are, as one of the girls observes "of little

47. BOWERBANK, Sylvia. *Speaking for Nature...* pp. 142 and 147-148.

48. See THOMAS, Keith. *Man and the Natural World. Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984 and STUART, Tristram. *The Bloodless Revolution. Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India*. London, HarperPress, 2006. Thomas's was a seminal study of the way attitudes to animals changed in Early Modern England, dealing with vegetarianism in the last pages. To date, Stuart's *Bloodless Revolution* remains the most thoroughly researched and brilliantly written account of the way the encounter with Indian vegetarianism has affected Western culture.

49. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters...* Op. cit., p. 16.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

consequence to the world”.⁵¹ When explaining to the children “the meaning of the word Goodness”, Mrs. Mason reveals herself as an advocate of universal benevolence:

It [goodness] is, first, to avoid hurting any thing; and then, to contrive to give as much pleasure as you can. If some insects are to be destroyed, to preserve my garden from desolation, I have it done in the quickest way. The domestic animals that I keep, I provide the best food for, and never suffer them to be tormented; and this caution arises from two motives: - I wish to make them happy; and, as I love my fellow-creatures still better than the brute creation, I would not allow those that I have any influence over to grow habitually thoughtless and cruel, till they were unable to relish the greatest pleasure life affords, - that of resembling God, by doing good.⁵²

Through Mrs. Mason, Wollstonecraft exposes the principle that universal benevolence is a necessary extension of private affections. In this case, her argument is a speciesist one: our first affections towards individuals or our same species are then expanded into benevolence towards all sentient beings. However, she contemplates occasions where our affections are first directed towards individuals of different species that either come earlier into our lives or live in our vicinity, and only later in life are these affections extended to other individuals of our own species that happen to cross our path:

When I was a child, [...] I always made it my study and delight to feed all the dumb family that surrounded our house; and when I could be of use to any of them I was happy. This employment humanized my heart, while, like wax, it took every impression; and Providence has since made me an instrument of good – I have been useful to my fellow creatures. I, who never wantonly trod on an insect, or disregarded the plaint of the speechless beast, can now give bread to the hungry, physic to the sick, comfort to the afflicted”.⁵³

Particularly interesting is the use Wollstonecraft makes of Mrs. Mason to stress the importance of avoiding false sentimentality in the way children are taught to interact with animals. Sentimentality reduces the animal to a projection of our own self-love, rendering it effectively mute and us deaf to its real needs. In the course of their walk, a boy shoots at a pair of larks, leaving the male badly hurt. The girls are taught not to avert their gaze but to look at the bird and understand his suffering in order to decide what is best to do:

Look at it, said Mrs. Mason; do you not see that it suffers as much, and more than you did when you had the small-pox, when you were so tenderly nursed. Take up the hen; I will bind her wing together, perhaps it may heal.

51. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Original Stories...* Op. cit., p. 4.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

As to the cock, though I hate to kill any thing, I must put him out of pain; to leave him in his present state would be cruel; and avoiding an unpleasant sensation myself, I should allow the poor bird to die by inches, and call this treatment tenderness, when it would be selfishness. Saying so, she put her foot on the bird's head, turning her own another way.⁵⁴

The two birds are in pain but the female can be restored to health; despite her present suffering, her life is worth preserving. This is not the case with the male, whose suffering will only be prolonged till his inevitable death if let alone; therefore, the benevolent thing to do is to shorten his suffering by putting an end to his life. In doing so, Mrs. Mason explains, she is placing the bird's welfare before her own, since she finds the act of killing him hateful. To bring the message home to her readers, Wollstonecraft avoids any use of sentimentalized language in her account of the bird's piteous condition and death, and not omitting to account for the method Mrs. Mason chooses to put an end to his suffering. "Cool, certainly", Alan Richardson concedes, "but also an unforgettable lesson in overcoming empty sentiment and weak-minded fastidiousness with rational (if unavoidably fatal) kindness".⁵⁵

Wollstonecraft found much to blame for the contemporary condition of women in the discourse of sensibility. As Mitzi Myers pointed out, she had ample opportunity to immerse herself in sentimental fiction while working as a reviewer for the *Analytical Review* and saw in it a powerful weapon for female oppression.⁵⁶ This was the discourse that was fed to women not only in the sentimental novels they read, but also from the pulpit and conduct books, so that they assimilated as natural an ideology that was designed to perpetuate their dependence on men, while rendering them blind to the narrowness of their affections and, accordingly, incapable of practicing universal benevolence:

The lady who sheds tears for the bird starved in a snare, and execrates the devils in the shape of men, who goad to madness the poor ox, or whip the patient ass, tottering under a burden above its strength, will, nevertheless, keep her coachman and horses whole hours waiting for her, when the sharp frost bites, or the rain beats against the well-closed windows which do not admit a breath of air to tell her how roughly the wind blows without.⁵⁷

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

55. RICHARDSON, Alan. "Mary Wollstonecraft on Education", in Claudia L. Johnson (ed.): *Op. cit.*, pp. 24-41; p. 30.

56. MYERS, Mitzi. "Mary Wollstonecraft's Literary Reviews", in Claudia L. Johnson (ed.): *Op. cit.*, pp. 82-98.

57. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Rights of Woman...* *Op. cit.*, p. 258.

As both Myers and Stuart have observed, Wollstonecraft was not at war with “sensibility, passion, imagination, or fiction *per se*, and certainly not with narrative that feelingly renders female experience”,⁵⁸ her objections were directed against “the system of sentimental education which encouraged women to exhibit a ‘parade of sensibility’ (what Coleridge called ‘a false and bastard sensibility’) by fawning over their pets, while ignoring the acute suffering of humans *and other animals* [emphasis in the original]”.⁵⁹ It was, therefore, vital to put an end to a system that treated women “as a kind of subordinate being, and not as part of the human species”.⁶⁰

In this light, the standpoint of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* becomes an ecofeminist one, since Wollstonecraft observes that the deplorable state in which women are forced to live stems from their degrading association with nature. A very dramatic experience may very well have contributed to imprinting this idea in Wollstonecraft’s mind when, as a child, she used to witness her father treating his wife and his dogs with the same brutality. Biographer Lyndall Gordon reads from William Godwin’s *Memoirs*: “Once, hearing a dog’s howls of pain, Mary’s abhorrence became, she said, an agony. ‘Despot’ resonates like a repeated chord in the opening pages of Godwin’s memoir of her childhood”.⁶¹ More insidious than the brutal force, the “false system of education” she denounces perpetuates this association and renders women fragile and dependent: “like flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty”.⁶² It is the central argument of *Rights of Woman* that women must take back the position God gave them when making them rational beings.

In *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft had already hinted at the direction she would take in her second *Vindication*, when she insisted on the need to defend the rights that human beings “inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties”.⁶³ Any system of education that failed to nourish this exclusively human faculty was

58. MYERS, Mitzi. *Op. cit.*, p. 90

59. STUART, Tristram. *Op. cit.*, p. 594n15.

60. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Rights of Woman...* *Op. cit.*, p. 71.

61. GORDON, Lyndall. *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

62. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Rights of Woman...* *Op. cit.*, p. 71. Wollstonecraft criticizes the way Anna Laetitia Barbauld compares women to flowers in *To a Lady, with some painted Flowers*, to make the poem conclude that, like theirs, women’s “BEST ... SWEETEST empire is—TO PLEASE” (Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 123). The comparison of women with “smiling flowers”, “sweet flowers that smile” or “fairest flowers” (an instance of degradation rather than praise for Wollstonecraft) is found on several pages in the *Rights of Woman* (pp. 71, 122-123, 132 and 230).

63. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Rights of Men...* *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

degrading to the species. Thus, she accused Burke of considering the poor as "the live stock of an estate",⁶⁴ and protested that a woman is, indeed, "[...] but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order' [...] if she is not more attentive to the duties of humanity than queens and fashionable ladies in general are".⁶⁵

Barbara Taylor has observed that "[f]eminism [...] has for most of its history been deeply embedded in religious belief. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western feminists were nearly all active Christians".⁶⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft was certainly an active Christian, but not one who allowed the centrality of religion to her worldview to turn her judgment off. In tune with the Unitarians' emphasis "on private reasoned judgment as the foundation of true religion",⁶⁷ Wollstonecraft felt the need to expose her views on the way patriarchal discourse had used religion as another powerful instrument to subdue women:

Probably the prevailing opinion, that woman was created for man, may have taken its rise from Moses's poetical story, yet, as very few, who have bestowed any serious thought on the subject, ever supposed that Eve was, literally speaking, one of Adam's ribs, the deduction must be allowed to fall to the ground; or, only be so far admitted as it proves that man, from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion, and his invention to shew that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke, because the whole creation was only created for his convenience or pleasure.⁶⁸

Like the language of sensibility, religious discourse has effectively contributed to the demotion of women from their equal position as man's companion to their assimilation with the natural world that men have to tame and control. It is worth taking a cursory look at the animal imagery chosen by Wollstonecraft to illustrate her argument. Thus, a woman's dependence on her husband debases her from her natural position as his equal since it "produces a kind of cattish affection which leads a wife to purr about her husband as she would about any man who fed and caressed her".⁶⁹ Women are praised for the cardinal virtues of "[g]entleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection",⁷⁰ while

64. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

66. TAYLOR, Barbara. *Op.cit.*, p. 103.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

68. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Rights of Woman...* *Op. cit.*, p. 92.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 100. Like the comparison of the woman to a flower, Wollstonecraft resorts on another occasion to the same collocation "spaniel-like affection" to refer to the feeling that binds many married women to their husbands (*Ibid.*, p. 222). She understands

in their excessive attention to their physical appearance, they resemble caged birds: “Confined then in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch”.⁷¹ Finally, Wollstonecraft considers, it is understandable that some women become easy prey for the alluring powers of rakes, because “[t]he poor moth, fluttering round a candle, burns its wings”.⁷²

Bearing this in mind, I think it is necessary to revisit the image of the lady with her lapdog, who appears to us now as an object of pity, rather than censure and ridicule. Trapped in the narrowness of her affections, she is unable to express – or even feel – any sort of tenderness outside her dear pet. She begs our sympathy, but somehow Wollstonecraft, even though highlighting where the problem resides, failed to express it in a sympathetic language. Like the woman insensible to her coachman and horses, she observes, the one “who takes her dogs to bed, and nurses them with a parade of sensibility, when sick, will suffer her babes to grow up crooked in a nursery”.⁷³ Taking into account the conditions into which ladies like this one were raised, it is only fair to ask if she had any real choice to have acted otherwise. Separated from her children almost automatically after giving birth to them in order for them to be suckled by a wet-nurse and brought up by governesses, is it not possible that the only realm where this same lady could give free vent to her affections was precisely in her relationship with her dog? “In literary culture”, Brown observes, the pet comes to fill an emotional void that is “often highlighted as a lost or alienated familial connection”.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, these cases were not exclusive to literary culture, but very common in real life. This same lady, unable to manifest any tenderness towards her children, most certainly did not receive any from her mother, so it is only to be expected that her daughters will behave in the same fashion towards their own offspring, thus perpetuating this emotional trap.

Even if she failed to expressly manifest any sort of sympathy for this kind of woman, Wollstonecraft did provide the solution when she vindicated the decisive position of women in the system of education, arguing that the most

that this should be so, given that they are both similarly educated: “Considering the length of time that women have been dependent, is it surprising that some of them hug their chains and fawn like the spaniels? ‘These dogs,’ observes a naturalist, ‘at first kept their ears erect; but custom has superseded nature, and a token of fear is becoming a beauty’” (Ibid., p. 155).

71. Ibid., p. 125.

72. Ibid., p. 203n1.

73. Ibid., p. 258-59.

74. BROWN, Laura. *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

important education of all began at home "with a baby's mouth on the mother's breast, responding to 'the warmest glow of tenderness'".⁷⁵ Wollstonecraft recommended women to breastfeed their children as early as *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, and came back to the issue in *Rights of Men*, when urging for the need of women to act "like mothers". When that happens, "the fine lady, become a rational woman, might think it necessary to superintend her family and suckle her children, in order to fulfill her part of the social compact".⁷⁶

Wollstonecraft focused her attention on female education, but she was not blind to the flaws in the way males were raised. A short stay at Eton on her way to Ireland was enough to show her that the education boys received was as emotionally crippling as the girls'. Just as much as women had been taught from their most tender age to cultivate a distorted sensibility, boys were trained to block tenderness from their infancy, since it was considered a form of weakness. The only emotion they were encouraged to cultivate was patriotism, a love of nation which, uninformed by the greater principle of universal benevolence, remained for Wollstonecraft just another narrow form of affection. This "domestic atrophy: the disempowering and exclusion of the mother"⁷⁷ from the sphere of education, was certainly successful for a "predatory nation" that had designed a perfect system for "molding an elite of fighters and colonisers".⁷⁸

In stressing the vital role that mothers played in their children's education and in her belief that "nursery instincts, like tenderness, if empowered by

75. GORDON, Lyndall. *Op. cit.*, p. 45. Gordon is quoting Wollstonecraft's words in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*: "The suckling of a child also excites the warmest glow of tenderness – Its dependant, helpless state produces an affection, which may properly be termed maternal. I have even felt it, when I have seen a mother perform that office; and am of the opinion, that maternal tenderness arises quite as much from habit as instinct". (WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters...* *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

76. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Rights of Men...* *Op. cit.*, p. 23. Tristram Stuart has also studied the political connotations of breastfeeding, which he traces back to Rousseau: "The front page of the *Discourse of Inequality* – as if symbolizing his [Rousseau's] manifesto – depicted a woman, broken free from her chains, with one breast fully exposed. This enthusiasm caught on. By 1783 the first portrait of a woman breast-feeding was displayed in public; in 1794 Prussia legally required every fit woman to breast-feed her baby; and the bared breast of Liberty – symbol of egalitarian sympathy freed from its misguided social fetters – became the mascot of the French revolutionary public" (STUART, Tristram. *Op. cit.*, p. 197.)

77. GORDON, Lyndall. *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

the right training to think and act, could one day redeem the world”,⁷⁹ Wollstonecraft was anticipating the feminist ethics of care articulated by, among others, Gilligan, Noddings, Robinson, Ruddick or Held.⁸⁰ The educator in her had observed that tenderness was a key element in bringing up a mentally and emotionally healthy child, who would one day become a responsible, independent citizen. Not only did she theorize about it, but she put it in practice during the time she worked as a governess and in her own school at Newington Green. Margaret, the elder of Lady Kingsborough’s daughters, wrote down in middle age a record of her youth that reveals Wollstonecraft as her only source of instruction and affection:

[T]he society of my father’s house was not calculated to improve my good qualities or correct my faults; and almost the only person of superior merit whom I had been intimate in my early days was an enthusiastic female who was my governess from fourteen to fifteen years old, for whom I felt an unbounded admiration.⁸¹

True to her conviction that private affections are limited, Wollstonecraft also believed that children had to experience education outside the domestic sphere. However, she resented the common practice of the middle classes of sending their boys to boarding schools, away from the family, and insisted on the benefits of a day school, where children were able to interact with their equals in an external environment but could go back every day to the warmth of the family household, the primal site of affection. “Few”, she believed, “have had much affection for mankind, who did not first love their parents, their brothers, sisters, and even the domestic brutes, whom they first played with”.⁸² Not only did she include nonhuman animals in this family circle where love is first experienced, but she also defended that “[h]umanity to animals should be particularly inculcated as part of national education [...]”.

79. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-6.

80. See, for instance, GILLIGAN, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*. Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1982; NODDINGS, Nel. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley, CA., University of California Press, 1984; RUDDICK, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Boston, MA., Beacon Press, 1989; ROBINSON, Fiona. *Globalizing Care: Ethics, Feminist Theory, and International Relations*. Boulder CO., Westview Press, 1999; NODDINGS, Nel. *Starting at Home: Caring and Social Policy*. Berkeley, CA., University of California Press, 2002; and HELD, Virginia. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford, O.U.P., 2006.

81. Quoted in GORDON, Lyndall. *Op. cit.*, pp. 95-96.

82. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Rights of Woman...* *Op. cit.*, p. 246.

Justice, or even benevolence, will not be a powerful spring of action unless it extend to the whole creation.⁸³

Virginia Woolf observed that the originality of the theories Wollstonecraft expressed in her two *Vindications* "has become our commonplace".⁸⁴ She might as well have extended her opinion to those included in *A Short Residence*. In her last completed book, Wollstonecraft had compared herself to an unheard Cassandra, lamenting "the baleful effect of extensive speculations on the moral character":

A man ceases to love humanity, and then individuals, as one clashes with his interest, the other with his pleasures: to business, as it is termed, everything must give way; nay, is sacrificed, and all the endearing charities of citizen, husband, father, brother, become empty names.⁸⁵

The tides of time have proven Wollstonecraft right; like doomed Cassandra, her warning prophecy has remained largely unheard. She foresaw the power of the capitalist ethos to destroy the bonds that unite human beings, while she witnessed the devastating effects on the natural environment. Wollstonecraft identified where the problem resided but also pointed at the solutions; they bear a striking resemblance to those coming from later ecofeminist theoretical positions and from the grassroots activists that daily put them into practice. Her originality has, indeed, become our commonplace.

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83. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

84. WOOLF, Virginia. *Op. cit.*, p. 158.

85. WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary. *Letters Written During a Short Residence...* pp. 255-56.

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