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Vindication
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Rather than emphasize Mary Wollstonecraft's failures and struggles, you have chosen to focus your book on an examination of how these tragedies enabled her triumphs. What influenced your decision to write your biography from this perspective?

Her life has a pattern of resilience, and I wanted to bring this out. Late in the book, the reader will be ready for a chapter on slanders (a wild woman, a moody sexpot who couldn't write). By that stage the reader can see how absurd these slanders are. They were set up in part as political propaganda after her death, and silenced her ideas of human rights by locking her into demeaning slots of womanhood. What's curious is that these particular slanders should have stuck for 200 years, even with feminists of my (women's lib) generation (I was at Columbia in 1968), repeated to this day. The time has come to cut free from the doom and death narrative of the troubled woman on course for suicide. So, instead of ending chapters with Wollstonecraft's two attempts at suicide, I decided to end, each time, with the upswing into another experimental phase of her life. What seemed to me triumphant was, in fact, the struggle: that she was human enough to be threatened with collapse yet had the courage to start again, to try out a new plot of existence for her sex. An early death after childbirth should not suggest (as so often) the banality of a doomed life, rather an interrupted life, which is why I needed to follow the reverberations of that life for four women in the next generation — and to suggest how those reverberations reach us.

You have said the deep subject of your book is a question that Mary Wollstonecraft herself was interested in: what is women's nature? At what point in her life did this line of inquiry become her focus?

There came a point in her late twenties, in November 1787 to be precise, when she resolved to give up on the mediocre jobs that were then open to middle-class women of no means — companion or governess — and live instead by her pen in London. At this point she wrote to her sister Everina that she felt herself to be a new kind of being: "I am then going to be the first of a new genus. I cannot tread the beaten track. It is against the bent of my nature." Everything that was innovative in her life and work takes off here.

What explains Wollstonecraft's ability to be accepted as an equal to her male counterparts in an era in which so many gifted and talented women intellectuals were excluded from the same circles?

She did not belong to the circle we might expect: that of the "Bluestockings", the intellectual women of the metropolis. In her twenties she was living in a different community of women made up of her sisters and best friend, Fanny Blood. The men who accepted her as an equal were Dissenters — she wasn't a Dissenter herself, but she was influenced by their egalitarian principles. She had the great luck to encounter exceptional men who were able to see her potential before it had fully declared itself and who welcomed her as an equal.

There was her political mentor, the Reverend Dr. Price, who was a supporter of the ideas behind the American Revolution. Then there was her benevolent editor, Joseph Johnson. It wasn't one-sided mentorship; she responded to these men with delicate feeling. She was drawn to men — often clergymen — who were gentle and understanding, the opposite of her violent father and tyrannical eldest brother. Soon after Johnson took her on, she writes to him: "I never had a father or a brother. You are both to me... Allow me to love you, my dear Sir." The quickness, candor, and responsive warmth of her voice are crucial, I think, to acceptance as a member of Johnson's circle. Even her American lover, Gilbert Imlay, who let her down in the end, took her on as a business partner and backed women's rights. His American circle in Europe is an aspect of her life explored for the first time in this biography, which looks also at the extent to which John Adams respected her political (pro-American) opinions.

Later, with the philosopher William Godwin, who also came from a Dissenting background, she devised an egalitarian form of marriage. It must be said though that one man she admired, the artist Fuseli (a member of Johnson's circle), did not accept her as an equal — or did so only so long as she did not surpass his celebrity.

As a writer, what draws you to the genre of biography, and how did the experience of researching and writing *Vindication* compare to your work for your other biographies?

I've written about this in a memoir, *Shared Lives*. Suffice to say here that reading is what I love most, and that biography is very like reading. I lend myself to a subject who can tell us a lot about an inward and creative life, and then draw back to "see" it. As far as research goes, it's a matter, each time, of approaching the material with the right questions. If you ask the right question, the story will unfold of itself. You have to ask yourself: what story do I want to tell? Each will present a different challenge — I don't think that there should be a formula for biography; each takes a form of its own, determined by the nature of the subject, and each opens up some issue, huge enough, teasing enough, to grip the biographer for a number of years. It's a bit like choosing a companion in the past with whom to live for a long time, perhaps always — a relationship that is closer in some ways than relationships with the living. *Vindication* presented the challenge of a less literary, more historical and political character than I'd so far attempted. In the course of writing I discovered her commitment to what she called the "domestic affections." This was transforming for me, in the way great books can change one. I began to see that she was talking past us to an age yet to come.

How did you arrive at *Vindication* as the title for this biography?

Primarily I meant it as a vindication of Mary Wollstonecraft both as a person in search of her true nature and as a political thinker — a release (from the myths and slanders) of what was lasting and innovative. By this I mean not merely a reference to her most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), since a lot of what she says there is now self-evident — but the need to bring women's domestic values of listening, compromise, nurture, and gentleness, which have been marginal and without public status for so long, to the very center of the political arena as a counter to perennial violence and present-day tactics of terror. This is linked with the unsolved question of women's nature which we shall have to address in the future: what, for instance, will women at full strength

contribute to civilization?