Reading the Politics of Abortion: Mary Wollstonecraft Revisited

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> The Wrongs of Woman, like the wrongs of the oppressed part of mankind, may be deemed necessary by their oppressors: but surely there are a few, who will dare to advance before the improvement of the age, and grant that my sketches are not the abortion of a distempered fancy, or the strong delineations of a wounded heart.—Mary Wollstonecraft, 1796–97[1]

The "politics of abortion": today, the phrase invokes the ongoing struggle over reproductive rights. Abortion debates focus generally on issues of agency or control, on who has the right—legally, morally, practically—to delimit a woman's reproductive experience. Feminists focus more specifically on a woman's ability to do with her body as she chooses: her right to terminate a pregnancy or to carry it through full term, her right, so the argument goes, to privacy.[2] In current debates, the issue of decisional autonomy inheres

1 Mary Wollstonecraft, "Author's Preface," *The Wrongs of Woman* in *Mary and The Wrongs of Woman*, ed. Gary Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 73. References are to this edition.

2 Since the United States Supreme Court hinged its decision in *Roe v. Wade* on a woman's right to decide, without state interference, whether to abort her pregnancy, privacy doctrine has consistently been in question. See, for example, Catharine MacKinnon, "The Male Ideology of Privacy: A Feminist Perspective on the Right to Abortion," *Radical America* 17:4 (1983), 23–35; Rosalind P. Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman's Choice: The State, Sexuality, and Reproductive Freedom* (New York: Longman, 1984); and *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950–2000*, ed. Rickie Solinger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), especially William Saletan, "Electoral Politics and Abortion: Narrowing the Message," pp. 111–23, and Dorothy E. Roberts, "Punishing Drug Addicts Who Have Babies: Women of Color, Equality, and the Right of

not just in women's reproductive choices, but also in the discourse that defends them. Arguments in favour of reproductive freedom assume political agency as a means to justify and defend the legality of abortion; that is, women and men with political voice raise that voice, and the agency it evinces, to struggle for a woman's continued right to have choices about abortion and maternity.

At the close of the eighteenth century, when Mary Wollstonecraft wrote in favour of women's rights and duties more generally and without benefit of an officially sanctioned political voice, the politics of abortion would have been significantly more ambiguous. To begin with, definitions of abortion lacked the clean lines of current lay terminology. While we commonly distinguish *abortion* from *miscarriage* and understand different influences to be at work in each word, *abortion* in the late eighteenth century applied equally to situations where a pregnancy terminated spontaneously and where this termination was sought or willed into occurrence. No qualitative difference existed between *abortion* and *miscarriage* in the discourse of the period, including medical literature. Thus, although the maternal body and that body's workings were at stake, the lack of demarcation between spontaneous and induced abortion blurred the woman's part in a halted reproductive process. Equally important, abortion was inherently about failure. A physical conception not fully formed or come to term faced destruction—delivery before its time. Abortion proved a useful polemical trope, one that inscribed a certain end while capitalizing on the ambiguities in the biological process to obfuscate the agency (or agencies) that produced that end. Consequently, the word *abortion* could expediently mark political processes as failures across the ideological spectrum of the revolutionary era. Implicit to both polemical deployments and the medicalization of this word was the pregnant body that was not, for whatever reason, doing its proper work. In neither case, however, was women's will or decisional autonomy at issue.

Yet abortion became in Wollstonecraft's final, unfinished work, *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria,* a means to argue for women's political capacities. Whereas their lack of agency, over their bodies and over

Privacy," pp. 124–55. For careful readings and crucial feedback on this essay, I would like to thank Marlon Ross, Adela Pinch, Erin O'Connor, Mark Canuel, Susan Rosenbaum, Marla Miller, Jenny Spencer, and the anonymous readers for *Eighteenth-Century Fiction.* I would also like to thank Anne Herrington, English Department Chair at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for granting research support for the production costs of this article.

processes dependent on their successful delivery of future generations of citizens, allowed for a continuance of things-as-they-are, any moment in which women's control within the reproductive process became evident signalled a more general political agency. Wollstonecraft's fragmentary novel (published posthumously in 1798) signalled just such an agency. In the plot lines and in her prefatory explanation of the purpose of the text, Wollstonecraft used abortion to make visible both the women who failed to deliver and those who had to understand them. Inscribed in terms of failure or loss, however, political agency remains, of necessity, unstable; it is not simply embodied, or exercised for certain ends. The subtle workings of Wollstonecraft's deployment of abortion may be misunderstood, however, if *Wrongs* is read through the scholarly lens that is typically trained on her.

So often "hailed" as the "founder or foremother of Western feminism," Wollstonecraft is best known for her 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.[3] There, she used the debate in revolutionary France over a national system of education to advocate a more substantive and rationalist program of instruction for women, one that would prepare them—as gendered practices of acculturation at the time, she felt, did not—for the demands of citizenship. Famously (or, perhaps, infamously), she argued that women would be "more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word better citizens" were they taught to respect themselves and exercise their minds "as rational," rather than as sensual, "creatures." For good or ill, the locus of women's empowerment in Wollstonecraft's writings has come down to us as "that [duty], which includes so many, of a mother."[4] The abortion narratives in *The Wrongs of Woman* challenge facile connections between

3 *Mary Wollstonecraft and 200 Years of Feminisms*, ed. Eileen Janes Yeo (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997), p. 1.

4 Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in *Mary Wollstonecraft: Political Writings*, ed. Janet Todd (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), pp. 241, 235. The politics of motherhood has been a staple of Wollstonecraft criticism. For celebratory readings of maternal power, see esp. Laurie Langbauer, *Women and Romance: The Consolations of Gender in the English Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 93–126; Shawn Lisa Maurer, "The Female (as) Reader: Sex, Sensibility, and the Maternal in Wollstonecraft's Fictions," *Essays in Literature* 19:1 (1992), 36–54; and Anne Mellor, "Righting the Wrongs of Woman: Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria*," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 19:4 (1996), 413–24. Rajani Sudan calls for a reconsideration of motherhood in Wollstonecraft criticism: "Mothering and National Identity in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft," *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture*, ed. Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 72–89. I second this call, though I see Wollstonecraft herself making such moves in her treatment of abortion in *Wrongs*.

Wollstonecraft's reformist politics and motherhood. What emerges is not simply (or yet again) the mother's postpartum, educational influence on future generations of children but a gestational agency with quite different political and narrative consequences.

Motherhood has received considerable attention in recent eighteenth-century scholarship, and not simply in Wollstonecraft studies. In *The Politics of Motherhood*, surveying not just the "maternal behaviors and attitudes" that the period's texts "recommended, but also ... [the] varieties of maternal possibility denied credibility in the effort to create a monolithic version of maternal excellence," Toni Bowers asks, "what silences, abandonments, and abortions became necessary to bringing forth Augustan Britain's ideal mother?"[5] The answers offered in criticism have been legion, and not at all limited to an Augustan context. Implicit to the question, however, and to many of the answers, is an embodied maternity associated with particularly liberalist forms of agency, actual or ideal. As Julie Kipp notes, "much historically grounded feminist research on motherhood ends up validating [either directly or by analysing its opposite] the idea of the 'good' mother as this was constructed in eighteenth-century texts." While Kipp focuses on the instabilities of motherhood—it was, she says, "a highly contested term ... on a variety of fronts"—her study, too, returns to the gendered subjects and subjectivities fostered by political and historical contexts: the mothers, the writers, the individuals negotiating the uneven institutional and discursive formations of the era.[6] Although I do not wish to lose sight of these embodied agents (to do so in a study of Wollstonecraft would be folly, at best), I am as interested in systemic, or structural, forms of agency as in those individuals who specifically enact or manifest them. Motherhood, as typically defined by eighteenth-century critics, tends to obfuscate consideration of these equally important and telling forms of agency. Moreover, assessing the value and political expediency of failure itself becomes difficult. Abortion cannot be reduced merely to a failed maternity, where maternity is the essential and privileged term; it performs much more complicated work, especially in Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs*.

To understand the difference abortion makes, we must examine *Wrongs* in the context of medico-legal and political discourses of

5 Toni Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 21–22.

6 Julie Kipp, *Romanticism, Maternity and the Body Politic*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism, ed. Marilyn Butler and James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 12.

abortion during the revolutionary period. The ambiguities at root in these discourses affect how the word and the act function in this, albeit incomplete, novel. Beginning with obstetrical texts and polemic, I show how abortion motivated narrative at this time. As a disruption in "natural" (or naturalized) processes, abortion demanded explanation, "reading" and resolution. Whether the failure was biological or political, it presented an opportunity for the (re)establishment of order in discursive form—a "fix," so to speak, in words for that which was lost through bodies.

Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman* participates in these cultural logics and, ultimately, exposes them. In a text that proposed to "exhibi[t] the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of" a patriarchal, unrevolutionized "society," reproductive failure acts as evidence of larger institutional and ideological failures in Britain (p. 73). Abortion emerges in response to the extant world, at times as a resistance to, and at others as an encoding of, its oppressive powers; importantly, it prescribes the loss of that most Wollstonecraftian of agencies, the mother's power to nurture and enlighten her children. Indeed, most maternal acts in the novel are undercut, mistaken, or out-and-out failures in their own right. Yet simply to address the political significations of *Wrongs*'s abortive content misses a crucial element of the work it does in the text. Wollstonecraft shifts her focus from the narrative— the failures in her novel—to the readers—the audience that must make sense of what the text contains. The locus of her novel is not in the "fix" it offers but in its exposure of the need, and the generally limited methods available, for such discursive "fixes." Situating her audience in a position to question things-as-they-are through plot lines that inscribe reproduction and motherhood, while assuming failure, Wollstonecraft sets in motion the process of reading abortion yet again. The agency of the mother, or the maternal body, and that of the reader who interprets—who negotiates the meanings of—the mother's body's actions are equally at stake, and equally unstable, in *The Wrongs of Woman.*

For many critics (feminist or otherwise), the novel itself fails. From Ralph Wardle's claim that *Wrongs* "was almost certainly doomed to failure" because Wollstonecraft valued its "thesis" more "than the novel itself" to Virginia Sapiro's contention that despite the "glimmerings" of a feminist practice in its women characters' "sharing

their common personal stories," Wollstonecraft could not "imagine ... this enlightenment ... translat[ing] into political action," to Diane Long Hoeveler's recent description of its "strange, abortive conclusions," an extensive body of scholarship writes off (or reads) *Wrongs* as an unsuccessful project.[7] For many of these critics, Wollstonecraft's narratives fall short or go awry: their manifestation of the feminist's political ideals, or their capacity to re-envision the patriarchal world, somehow founders, and apparently not from any choice on her part. The failures plotted within the unfinished novel thus transmogrify into the failure of the novel overall. Indeed, although it was Wollstonecraft's death (due to complications during childbirth) that left the novel incomplete, its unfinished form has often served in criticism as a sign of her inability to complete it.

Subtitled "A Fragment," *The Wrongs of Woman* stands precariously beside Wollstonecraft's other writings as less fully authorized (in multiple senses) than those published during her life. Her husband William Godwin prepared the text for publication and justified giving it to the public in its fragmentary form. In an editorial preface placed before Wollstonecraft's own, Godwin called upon that "melancholy delight" that "minds of taste and imagination" find "in contemplating [the] unfinished productions of genius," especially those that "if filled up in a manner adequate to the writer's conception, would perhaps have given new impulse to the manners of the world" (p. 71).[8] Referring to the "broken paragraphs" and "half-finished sentences" of

7 Ralph M. Wardle, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1951), pp. 300, 298; Virginia Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 268; Diane Long Hoeveler, "Reading the Wound: Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* and Trauma Theory," *Studies in the Novel* 31:4 (1999), 392. See also Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 96, 105.

8 Godwin went on to say that he "desire[d]" to "intrude nothing of himself into the work" and "g[ave] to the public the words, as well as ideas, of the real author," but he did piece together "an older copy" and "the more finished parts" Wollstonecraft had recently revised to create his edition. Any "additional phrases" needed to suture the versions together, he explained, are "found inclosed in brackets" to distinguish them from Wollstonecraft's prose (p. 72). Modern editors have relied on Godwin's edition, the basis of the first and only English printing of *Wrongs*, which appeared in the first two volumes of the *Posthumous Works of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 4 vols., ed. William Godwin (London: J. Johnson and G.G. and J. Robinson, 1798). Godwin transcribed the notes that he found about possible endings for the novel and appended them to his 1798 edition (4:158–67). References to these endings and to Godwin's editorial comments are from the Kelly edition of *Wrongs*.

Wollstonecraft's "conception" (p. 186), Godwin's descriptions, too, can make the text seem an abortion, not because of the writer's failures, however, but because it had not come to term. That Wollstonecraft undoubtedly would have altered some (and could have altered all) of her manuscript had she lived, that it was Godwin who brought the text into the world of reading are, for me, but further binds—in *Wrongs*'s very materiality—to its readability. Wollstonecraft had, however, already thematized this issue in the novel through her use of abortion. In contrast to arguments that Godwin's apparatus sets us outside the text, supplementary to it, and engaged in its politics only by furthering or completing them, I suggest that reading draws us in, shows us that we are already there—at the very crux of the novel and the potential it embodies for change.[9]

Failed Reproduction

In natural philosophy, to study what failed was also to study what worked, and with reproduction, those interested needed all the help they could get. As the Encyclopedists put it, "the generation of bodies in general" was "a mystery to which nature reserves the secrets." Human generation was perhaps most secretive of all, because the primary modes of research—dissection and anatomy—were decidedly problematic. One could not, in this case, perform "a scholarly massacre" as William Harvey had in the royal parks of Charles I to support his ovist, epigenetic views.[10] Thus, William Hunter conceded in the preface of his celebrated *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* (1774)

9 On *Wrongs*'s apparatus "plac[ing] a frame around the text and locat[ing] us outside it," see Tilottama Rajan, "Wollstonecraft and Godwin: Reading the Secrets of the Political Novel," *Studies in Romanticism* 27 (1988), 221–51. Daniel O'Quinn offers a compelling correction to Rajan's view, arguing that Godwin's editorial sutures attempt to smooth over inconsistencies in *Wrongs* that Wollstonecraft purposefully deployed. O'Quinn, "Trembling: Wollstonecraft, Godwin and the Resistance to Literature," *ELH* 64:3 (1997), 761–88. Because O'Quinn's emphasis, like Rajan's, falls on issues of self-representation, it tends to privilege writing as a political site over reading as a political activity, leading to different conclusions from my own. See also Gary Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992).

10 *Encyclopédie*, "Génération," cited in Barbara Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imagining the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 234. "Scholarly massacre" is Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis's description of Harvey's experiments in *Venus Physique*, reprinted as *The Earthly Venus*, ed. George Boas, trans. Simone Brangier Boas (1749; New York: Johnson Reprint, 1966), p. 23. Maupertuis advocated his predecessor's experimental methods and epigenetic views while offering his own theory of generation based especially on studies of heredity; incidentally, Maupertuis wrote the *génération* entry for the *Encyclopédie*.

how difficult it had been for anatomists to find "subjects" to investigate:

> One part ... and that the most curious, and certainly not the least important of all, the pregnant womb, had not been treated by anatomists with proportionable success. Let it not, however, be objected to them, that they neglected what in fact it was rarely in their power to cultivate. Few, or none ... had met with a sufficient number of subjects, either for investigating, or for demonstrating the principal circumstances of utero-gestation in the human species.

Hunter had fared much better "owing to fortunate circumstances" and "the assistance of many friends." Still, he required nearly twenty-five years to put together his remarkable work. The anatomist needed not only access to the corpses of pregnant women with no "putrefaction" in them, but also a "favourable" season, successful injection of the blood vessels, etc.[11]

Given the importance of the subject and his unique situation, Hunter took great care in having his anatomized uteri engraved (figures 1–3). Advocating naturalistic detail in the plates, he used a large scale and heightened finishing (where appropriate) to show all parts, even the smallest, in their proper places, with their exact transformations. He brought, as he put it, the "universal language" of anatomical engraving to the maternal body, and offered it, seemingly complete, to his medical colleagues. Beginning with "subjects" near full-term and moving through dozens of plates towards the earliest moments of pregnancy (conceptions at the third, fourth, and fifth week), the *Anatomy* captures in a visual narrative form—albeit in reversed order—the "principal changes" that occur in the nine months of gestation. An engraving of three abortions stood in for an early phase of this process; the top row represented the fetus at nine weeks, the bottom two at eight weeks, the first column showing the fetuses intact and the second opened by the anatomist (see figure 4). Like the figures that came before them, the dissected abortions were supposed to make visible "the true nature" of the womb, and for Hunter, that meant the "peculiar habit and composition of parts, as well as the outward form, situation and connection of them." As was consistent with a mechanistic physiological view of the body, the uterus was divided into constituent subparts, which together provided

11 William Hunter, preface, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus Exhibited in Figures* (1774; reprint, Classics of Medicine Library, Birmingham: Gryphon Editions, 1980), n.p. The text appears in double columns in Latin and English, the latter italicized, though I have not reproduced that here. References are to this edition.

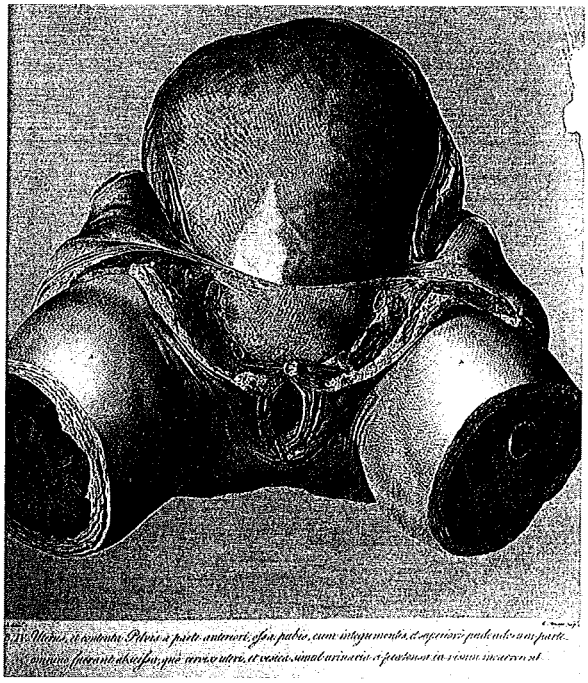


Figure 1. Plate 4. "The Uterus and its Contents." Reproduced by permission of Gryphon Editions LLC from the Classics of Medicine Library edition of William Hunter, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* (1774). Photograph: Christine Pratt.

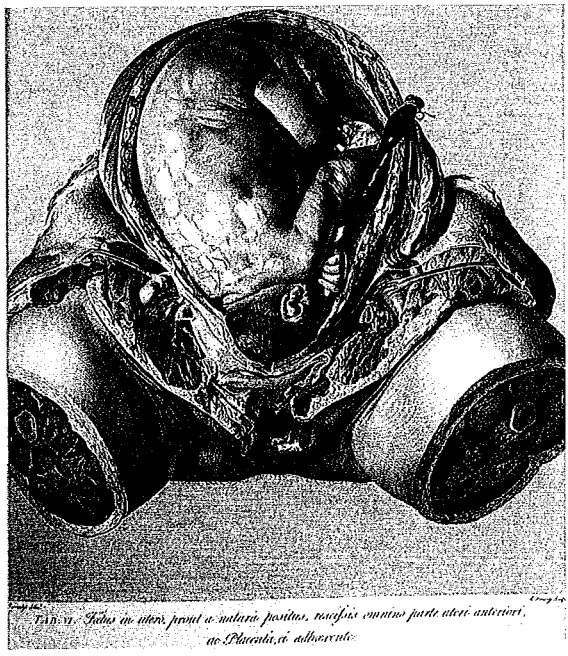


Figure 2. Plate 6. "Fetus In Utero." Reproduced by permission of Gryphon Editions LLC from the Classics of Medicine Library edition of William Hunter, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* (1774). Photograph: Christine Pratt.

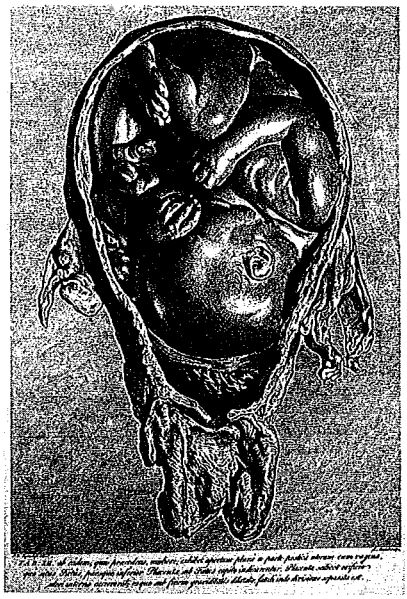


Figure 3. Plate 12. "The Womb and Vagina Fully Opened on the Back Part, to Show the Situation of the Child." Reproduced by permission of Gryphon Editions LLC from the Classics of Medicine Library edition of William Hunter, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* (1774). Photograph: Christine Pratt.

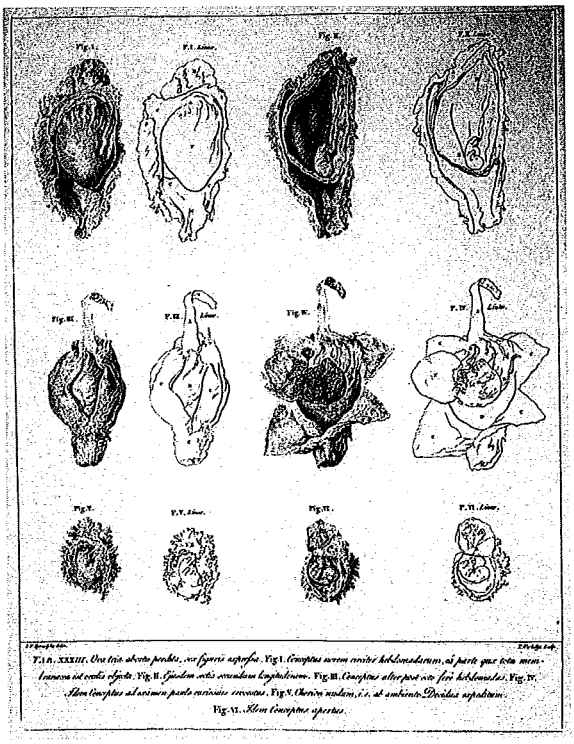


Figure 4. Plate 33. "Three Different Abortions." Reproduced by permission of Gryphon Editions LLC from the Classics of Medicine Library edition of William Hunter, *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* (1774). Photograph: Christine Pratt.

a means to understand the organ as a whole. Static as visuals must be, they nonetheless show "the structure *and* operations" of that body (emphasis added). The mother's part in reproduction became knowable through Hunter's observations and plates, but a rather gruesome irony pervades it all. The "natural knowledge" conveyed by his atlas (and others like it) depended on processes that were inactive—in effect, failed—because halted in their progression.[12]

As one of Hunter's successors claimed, the anatomy of the pregnant womb was "the very foundation of the art of midwifery": "every rule of practice, every precept," arose "solely from the anatomy and physiology of the uterus."[13] Inquiries into abortion contributed, then, not only to a general sense of utero-gestation but also to the rationalization and handling of individual experiences of reproduction. The expelled contents of the mother's womb, once dissected, became the origin of medical explications for why abortion would occur and, conversely, what was necessary to keep pregnancy on track. Hunter's *Anatomical Description,* a text published posthumously to complement the plates of his *Anatomy,* explained how he examined, "with great attention, innumerable fresh miscarriages" to understand the "state of the pregnant uterus."[14] These investigations replicated at earlier moments of generation the ways that the maternal corpse could be read to determine if death had any connection to the woman's being with child. Just as Hunter pointed to the ruptured placenta found under the fetus's head at the mouth of the womb in plate 12, which caused "the fatal hemorrhage," a "vertical sectioning" and various tearings or cuttings of an abortion's outer membranes could disclose why it came to the end it did (legends to plates 12 and 33, respectively, n.p.) (see figure 3). Thomas Denman, one of the most prominent obstetrical practitioners in the late eighteenth century, included a plate of abortions in his

12 On the seeing-is-knowing epistemology of Enlightenment anatomy and medicine, see Stafford. For a feminist interpretation of Hunter's *Anatomy* within this epistemic frame, see Ludmilla J. Jordanova, "Gender, Generation and Science: William Hunter's Obstetrical Atlas," *William Hunter and the Eighteenth-Century Medical World,* ed. W.F. Bynum and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985), pp. 385–412. See also Andrea Henderson, *Romantic Identities: Varieties of Subjectivity, 1774–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), chap. 1, which compares what she takes as the vitalist "flesh" of Hunter's engravings with the earlier skeletal anatomy of William Smellie, who trained Hunter.

13 John Burns, *The Anatomy of the Gravid Uterus, With Practical Inferences Relative to Pregnancy and Labour* (Glasgow: University Press, 1799), pp. 246–47. References are to this edition.

14 William Hunter, *An Anatomical Description of the Human Gravid Uterus and Its Contents, with Notes and Additions by Edward Rigby,* 2nd ed. (London: Henry Renshaw, 1843), pp. 63, 64.

Collection of Engravings, Tending to Illustrate the Generation and Parturition of Animals, and of the Human Species (1787) because "in every collection there must be some examples, that we may be able to distinguish the different parts of which an *ovum* is composed, the proportions which they bear to each other ... and sometimes the part of the process of utero-gestation which failed" (see figure 5). The engraving that followed the abortions, that of a "Morbid Human *Ovum*," took this general observation further, for it illustrated an embryo that "must have been blighted in the very early part of pregnancy," the placenta growing at the embryo's expense until the whole was expelled by the woman's body (see figure 6).[15] Anatomization of the material products of abortion could tell a story—plot what led to failure—but abortion was, on the whole, a much more obscure process than we might anticipate.

Significations of *abortion* in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries offered a matrix of subtle and intricate readings with what could be grave consequences. "All expulsions of the *fœtus*, before the termination of the sixth month of pregnancy, may be called abortions," Denman explained in his *Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery*, a highly influential text that first appeared in 1794–95. This definition was honed in a later, posthumous edition—a miscarriage occurring anytime up "to the end of the third month" and an abortion "between the end of the third ... and the close of the seventh"—but it remained the same in emphasis.[16] The timing of the premature "expulsion," not its impetus, defined whether abortion occurred. Such temporal distinctions had little effect on the overall definitions of the words, however. Obstetrical manuals from the 1750s through 1830s tend to refer to both spontaneous and willed termination of pregnancy as *abortion*, but because they focus primarily on the prevention or treatment of the unintended, *abortion* and *miscarriage* can appear synonymous.[17] William Buchan's *Domestic Medicine*, first published in

15 Thomas Denman, legends to "Three Human Abortions, one of which contains Twins" and "A Morbid Human *Ovum*," *A Collection of Engravings* (London: J. Johnson, 1787), n.p., original emphases.

16 Denman, *An Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery*, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1794–95), 2:316. References are to this edition. The posthumous edition is based on the final London edition revised by Denman (1815); *An Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery, with Notes and Emendations by John W. Francis* (New York: E. Bliss and E. White, 1821), p. 465.

17 See William Smellie's influential *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery* (1752; reprint, Classics of Medicine Library; Birmingham: Gryphon Editions, 1990), where the various dynamics of "miscarriage" are addressed under the head "Of Abortions," and Michael Ryan, *Manual of Midwifery*, 1st American ed. from 3rd London ed. (Burlington: Smith and

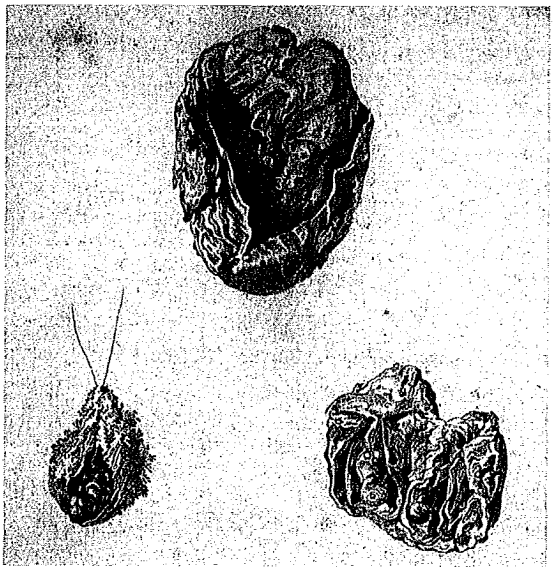


Figure 5. Denman, "Three Human Abortions" (1787). Reproduced by permission of the Archibald Malloch Rare Book Room of The New York Academy of Medicine. Photograph: R.D. Rubic.

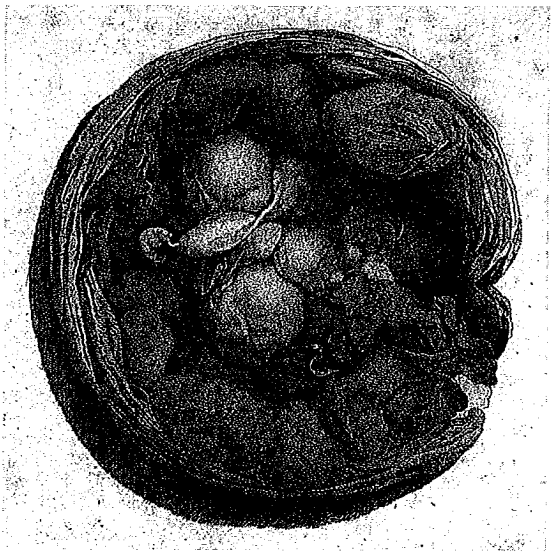


Figure 6. Denman, "Morbid Human Ovum" (1787). Reproduced by permission of the Archibald Malloch Rare Book Room of The New York Academy of Medicine. Photograph: R.D. Rubic.

Harrington), which does the same as late as 1835. Robert Gooch used the terms interchangeably in his lectures on abortion at St Bartholomew's Hospital in the early decades of the nineteenth century, published as *A Practical Compendium of Midwifery; Being the Course of Lectures on Midwifery, and on the Diseases of Women and Infants*, ed. George Skinner, 3rd American ed. (Philadelphia: Haswell, Barrington, and Haswell, 1840), pp. 122–31. I should add that the standard text used in current obstetrical training marks a distinction only between "spontaneous abortion" and "induced abortion." See *Williams Obstetrics*, 19th ed., ed. F. Gary Cunningham, et al. (Norwalk: Appleton and Lange, 1993), chap. 31.

1769 and a standard home reference book until well into the nineteenth century, firmly distinguished the acts while calling both *abortion*: the "spontaneous" warranted space in the body of the text, but the "induced" was relocated to its margins—literally, to the footnotes—and denounced as "a most unnatural crime ... [that] cannot, even in the most abandoned, be viewed without horror; but in the decent matron, it is still more unpardonable."[18] Even when practitioners began to delineate rules of medical jurisprudence in the early decades of the nineteenth century, they did not choose to differentiate *abortion* from *miscarriage* so as to simplify, through diction itself, the determination of intentional, and therefore criminal, expulsions from the involuntary and unpunishable. The first statute law on abortion in Britain, the 1803 "Offences Against the Person Act" (43 Geo. III, c.58), in fact spoke of "poisoning and the malicious using of means to procure the *miscarriage* of women" (emphasis added).[19] The key questions for the medical jurist, as Michael Ryan put them, were: "1. Has there been abortion produced? 2. Is the abortion natural or provoked? 3. Has the fœtus quickened?" Given "the immense number of causes which produce abortion," he warned practitioners as late as the 1830s to be "extremely cautious" in making their assessments.[20]

Abortion was, at this earlier time, a women's issue, but it was not associated with women's agency in the succinct manner that we typically understand it to be. Lack of a clear understanding of generation in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries left pregnancy

18 William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine, or, a Treatise on the Prevention and Cure of Diseases, by Regimen and Simple Medicines*, 22nd English ed. (Exeter: J. and B. Williams, 1828), p. 409n. Kristin Luker calls *Domestic Medicine* "the nineteenth century's equivalent of Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care*." *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 24. She notes that an American editor may have added this footnote, for it first appears in the 1797 American edition (p. 268n42). If this is the case, it nevertheless made its way into English editions, including the one that I consulted. Burns also addresses the "unfortunate and unhappy females" that "voluntarily induce" abortion only in a footnote (*Anatomy*, p. 58).

19 Cited by Josephine McDonagh, "Infanticide and the Boundaries of Culture from Hume to Arnold," *Inventing Maternity: Politics, Science, and Literature, 1650–1865*, ed. Susan C. Greenfield and Carol Barash (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 218. This same 1803 statute also repealed the 1624 "Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard children" (21 Jac. I, c.27), bringing child-murder in line with other kinds of murder. For a detailed discussion of the 1624 law and its 1803 repeal, see also McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture, 1720–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chap. 1. I will return to the 1803 law and the relationships between infanticide and abortion below.

20 Ryan, *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence, Compiled from the Best Medical and Legal Works: Being an Analysis of a Course of Lectures on Forensic Medicine, Annually Delivered in London*, 1st American ed., notes and additions R. Eglesfeld Griffith (Philadelphia: Carey and Lea, 1832), pp. 126, 129.

itself difficult to determine, much less whether an abortion was attempted or spontaneous. Many ailments could mimic pregnancy: obstruction or suppression of the menses, tumours, or the growth of moles (deformed conceptions or clotted masses of blood that built pressure and distended the woman's body much like pregnancy). (Figure 6 was brought to Denman as a mole; dissecting the mass revealed a morbid conception.) The signs of conception were decidedly ambiguous. In his *Introduction*, Denman listed changes in the breasts, sensitivity about the navel, and irritations in organs, such as the stomach or mind, with much "consent" with the uterus (1:260–65). But in each case, he also explained that these signs were uncertain, the same changes in the breasts, for instance, occurring at menopause or when menstruation was "casually obstructed" (1:262) as at pregnancy. John Burns, who was somewhat more interventionist than Denman but much less so than mid-century practitioners, cited changes in the cervix and other internal markers of conception in his 1799 *Anatomy of the Gravid Uterus*, but he also cautioned his readers: "we ought ... not to be too confident for the first 8 or 10 weeks; because then ... the signs are more fallacious than afterwards" (pp. 37–38). The surest sign was quickening, when the woman first felt the child move *in utero*. Although Maupertuis claimed that "attentive mothers" were able to feel movement "seven or eight months before birth," most placed quickening in the fourth month, which left much room for negotiation of a possible pregnancy, or identification of an expelled uterine mass, by all parties involved.[21] This ambiguity haunted cases of abortion (willed or not) and suspected infanticide. The person or circumstances responsible for terminating a pregnancy, or perinatal life, were thus more ambiguous and certainly not limited to the agency of the woman herself.

In spontaneous abortion, Nature (with a capital "N") acted as the agent, producing the premature delivery because the conditions necessary for gestation of a healthy child could not be met. The

21 Maupertuis, p. 4. Denman explains that quickening occurs anywhere "from the tenth to the twenty-fifth week, but most commonly about the sixteenth after conception"; the motion can be so "obscure" for some women that they miss it, however, and for others who wish to conceive, "fancy" may make them feel movements that are not there (1:267). See Smellie, pp. 187–88, for advice to avoid declaring a pregnancy in a situation where such an assertion could prove injurious to a woman's or her family's reputation, and *The London Practice of Midwifery; Including the Treatment During the Puerperal State, and the Principal Infantile Diseases* (Concord: Isaac Hill, 1826), p. 77, or Ryan, *Manual of Midwifery*, pp. 83, 86, for similar advice in cases where the standing of the profession itself could suffer from an incorrect assessment.

"causes" might be in the maternal or the fetal constitution, or in both, the relationship between them being conjectural at best.[22] The indistinctness seeps even into the prose of obstetric manuals. Denman, for instance, explained that

> from the examination of many *ova*, after their expulsion, it appears that their longer retention could not have produced any advantage, the *fœtus* being decayed, or having ceased to grow long before its expulsion; or the *ovum* being in such a state, that it was become wholly unfit for the office which it was designed to answer; so that if we believed there was an intelligence communicating with every part of the body, we should say, it was concluded in council, this *ovum* can never come to perfection, and the sooner it is expelled the better. (2:320–21, original emphasis)

Ovum signified a conception, which included not just the embryo, but also the components stemming from the uterus (or growing to it, as it was sometimes thought) to sustain fetal development. Denman accented that either component could prove imperfect and make abortion inevitable; indeed, "the sooner" the expulsion "the better"—presumably, for the mother, who could go on to conceive again in the future. Failed reproduction appears here as a natural event, yet much remains unclear. What might the "intelligence" be, something in the body or just "communicating with" its parts? And which body, exactly, is at issue, if both mother and fetus have contributed to the ovum? The conclusion—"this *ovum* can never come to perfection"—is certain, but who or what "concluded in council"? At other points in the text, Denman addressed how an ovum might come to such a "state," but here he merely assumed that it had. The uncertainty becomes all the more acute if we consider how he introduced this comment: "what I am about to say [about the hopelessly impaired ovum] will not, I hope, be construed as giving a licence to an irregularity of conduct, which may often be assigned as the immediate cause of abortion; or lead to the negligent use of those means which are likely to prevent it" (2:320). Denman wrote, of course, for a professional audience; in 1783, the Royal College of Physicians had created a rank dedicated to the practice of midwifery, institutionalizing

22 That the mother and fetus possessed separate circulatory systems was known as early as the 1720s; see James Blondel, *The Power of the Mother's Imagination over the Foetus* ... (London: Brotherton, 1729). By 1799, Burns inferred that "the placenta is the source of nutrition," but admitted "how [the maternal and fetal] vessels connected is still a matter of conjecture" (*Anatomy*, pp. 160, 163).

these specialists as a faculty. Denman spoke of this as a great moment in his preface to volume 1 of the *Introduction*, one sure to lead to "public benefit." Yet "irregularity of conduct" required two, different (and perhaps differently directed) qualifiers: "conduct" that immediately causes abortion; "conduct" that neglects to treat its onset. Was abortion inevitable because "longer retention could not have produced any advantage" after all? More clear than his assessment was Denman's worry about misuse of his observations—the "irregular" actions of his colleagues and their patients.[23]

A number of situations were thought capable of provoking "natural" abortions. Were the mother to experience a sudden fright or passion, a fall or accident, a severe illness or violent purge, or were she to have a physiological tendency to plethora or weakness, any of these could alone (or in combination) abruptly terminate a pregnancy. The circumstances varied, but the result was often the same: ruptured vessels, a breakdown in the connection between uterus and fetus, and expulsion before the latter was viable. James Blondel thus counselled that "anger is a Passion that puts the whole Fabrick of the Body out of Frame ... 'tis much to be feared, that the Blood, flowing with great Vehemence towards the *Uterus*, may separate the *Placenta*, and cause an Abortion." Burns pointed to a similar danger in "suddenly remov[ing]" a headache, stomach disorder, or toothache, for such trauma "throws too much energy to the uterus" and "contraction and abortion take place."[24] Nature incorporated various influences and predicaments into a definitive

23 In Kipp's discussion of the eighteenth-century "revolution in mothering," she emphasizes the "widespread development of a medical and educational advice literature industry ... and the growth of a middle-class audience for those texts" (p. 46). While I appreciate her point, and see evidence for it in the immense popularity of a text such as Buchan's *Domestic Medicine*, she paints a rather homogeneous picture of medical discourse across the century. Kipp asserts, for example, that (male) physicians tend to pathologize the female body, to mark its nature as unnatural (p. 52) in order to justify their own professional interventions; Smellie's 1752 treatise serves as evidence. Smellie was, however, working within an entirely different medical context from late-century practitioners such as Denman, who had achieved professional status and were, like the exemplary female midwife of the 1790s Kipp references, moving away from interventionist practices themselves, letting "Nature" take her course. The polemical nature of earlier obstetrical texts becomes problematically representative of the entire medical profession in Kipp's reading, and the male experts' uncertainty about their subjects has no room to emerge.

24 Blondel, cited in Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 65, original emphasis. Burns, *Observations on Abortion: Containing an Account of the Manner in Which It Is Accomplished, the Causes Which Produced It, and the Method of Preventing or Treating It* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1806), p. 45.

physiological response, but these influences and predicaments could themselves be induced, or could find encouragement in the actions of the pregnant woman or those around her. Denman again provides a telling example. Addressing the "immediate causes" of abortion, he noted:

> every action in common life has been assigned as the cause of abortion; and in general that, about which the patient was employed, when the first symptom appeared, is fixed upon as the particular cause, though probably she was before in such a state, that abortion was inevitable. But if this opinion of abortion be just, then the event ought rather to be imputed to some previous indisposition, or perhaps to the excess of such actions, than to the exercise of the body on common occasions. (2:318)

The unsuitable "state" for continuance of pregnancy is now more specifically the mother's (rather than the ovum's or the fetus's). Denman emphasized some limitation in the constitution of the pregnant woman that enabled any "action" or "common occasion" to produce an abortion, but his phrasing left room, too, for intention within the seemingly unintended. The blame ought to be "some previous indisposition," but it might, "perhaps," be "the excess" of action (accidental or not).

Denman was inclined to figure women as victims of their ailments, concluding that "some weakness or imperfection originating in, or affecting the *uterus* or its appendages" generally causes abortion, "or a peculiar kind of irritability, thence proceeding ... which creates impatience of mind and restlessness of body" (2:319). But he worried, too, that women could use such "natural" explanations to rid themselves (potentially with the help of their physicians) of unwanted pregnancies. He thus returned again and again to the "careful observer" (2:319), the medical man who pays "particular attention" and has acquired "a faculty of discriminating" (1:259), whether that be for the signs of a true pregnancy or of the irritability "distinguishable enough in the female character" that may lead to spontaneous abortion (2:319). The trouble for Denman was that, even with this great care and attention, he could not—as the cited examples show—be sure. As the site of reproduction, women remained both responsible for the failed gestational process and incapable of being liable for it. It was up to midwifery experts, like Denman and his readers, to treat them well (or as well as they could) either way.

Even in a situation where the termination of a pregnancy was sought,

a situation more akin to our notions of *abortion*, lawyers and physicians alike often found it difficult to discriminate between the agent of the act and its accomplice. The pregnant woman herself could have decided to abort her fetus and then executed this decision (as we would assume), but a third party, male or female, could have forced it upon her by violence to her mind or body. Indeed, the first statute law on abortion, instituted in 1803 and mentioned above, focused more on "those guilty of administering drugs and potions to procure abortions" than on the pregnant woman.[25] Ryan's questions for the medical jurist—"has there been abortion produced?" and "is the abortion natural or provoked?"—become all the more complex. Although the woman and the procurer were both ultimately punishable under the law, the statute provisions were designed to protect the mother (emphasis falling on the sacred status of maternity), and in many cases, she was considered only as an accomplice to the act, the third party being punished as its direct agent.[26]

With the 1803 statute, abortion became allied with infanticide and any number of other crimes of bodily harm: "malicious shooting, attempting to discharge loaded fire arms, stabbing, cutting, wounding ... and also the malicious setting fire to buildings." In each of these cases, the accused would be innocent until proven guilty, the apparatuses of the courts and the medical profession being exercised by the need for reliable evidence.[27] Infanticide, like abortion, was extremely ambiguous, however, and frequently foiled the very notion of verifiable guilt. All the physiological uncertainties of conception and pregnancy could leave a woman unprepared for delivery, and a

25 William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England, 1801–1803* (London: n.p., 1806), 36:1246.

26 On abortion law and medical practice in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see John Keown, *Abortion, Doctors and the Law: Some Aspects of the Legal Regulation of Abortion in England from 1803 to 1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chaps. 1, 2; and Angus McLaren, *Reproductive Rituals: The Perception of Fertility in England from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1984), chaps. 4, 5. For the same in early America, see Luker. Common law, under which the woman could be punished, defined abortion prior to quickening as a misdemeanour, a "heinous misdemeanour," in the words of Blackstone, but still not a capital offence (cited in Ryan, *Medical Jurisprudence*, p. 132).

27 Cited in McDonagh, "Infanticide," p. 218. Prior to the 1803 law, an unmarried woman, having concealed her pregnancy and given birth to a child who died, was assumed guilty of murdering the infant and punished by hanging. McDonagh explains that "while the bill was proposed in the spirit of a necessary rationalization of the statute books at a time of political restructuring"—that is, just after the union of Britain and Ireland in 1800—"it should also be seen as a strategic intervention in the maintenance of colonial control" (p. 218).

high infant-mortality rate meant that stillbirth was a routine outcome of lying-in. There was also, as Josephine McDonagh remarks, "the shame [that] was generated by illegitimate pregnancies," which "compelled [many women] to give birth alone and in secret." Thus, the usual defence for infanticide—that the child died of "natural causes"—was troubled on many accounts; the line between a "natural" death and a violent one was murky at best. McDonagh speaks of an "epistemological shortfall," where the "difficulty of knowing" is exacerbated by a desire not to know: "for contemporary onlookers, these awful crimes did not easily ... yield their secrets," and there is "a sense," she argues, "in which ... society did not *want* to know [their] truths" (original emphasis).[28] If, as Denman asserted, "there is some reason for believing that women in a state of nature would seldom suffer abortion" (2:317), so too would be the case with infanticide, but that "state of nature" was itself subject to any number of imaginings from any number of viewpoints. It is worth noting, however, that *infanticide*, unlike *abortion*, presupposes agency.

Determining agency within failed reproductive processes was vexed in this period at best. But the authority of the medical establishment was decidedly less so, especially as the eighteenth century progressed into the nineteenth. A key shift had already occurred by the time Ryan was delineating his forensic guidelines. It was not simply that the pregnant body failed; those who knew that body could judge its failure. The professionals, that is, could "read" the situation and offer advice, whether to the "patient" or to a court of law. Women's bodies and agency (bodily or not) were subsumed in medical expertise—in effect, replaced by a discourse that explained and, ideally, precluded their abortive workings. That the professionalization of medicine, especially obstetrics, displaced women's agency (whether as midwives or as mothers) by transferring power to male practitioners has become axiomatic.[29] But the "fixes" these experts offered were hardly fixed, proven or assured, in themselves. The ascendancy of the medical profession did not resolve its uncertainties. Thus, Burns, lecturer on midwifery and member of the faculty of physicians and

28 McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture*, pp. 3–5.

29 Scholarship abounds on the medicalization of childbirth by man-midwives; see, for starters, Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); and William Ray Arney, *Power and the Profession of Obstetrics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Kipp and McDonagh both address the "intensified medical and legal supervision of parturition and motherhood" (McDonagh, "Infanticide," p. 218) as well.

surgeons in Glasgow, suggested that there was no single, definitive interpretation of the womb and its conceptions. Justifying his offering of yet another *Anatomy of the Gravid Uterus* (1799) to the public, this one in words not images (Hunter's plates acted as his visuals), Burns observed that "from the sure source of anatomy[,] ... from the same data, learned men draw very different conclusions, and teach opposite practices." This "proceeds," he wrote, "from the imperfection of our knowledge; from the difficulty of ascertaining the truth; and from our propensity to think differently from others." In the hallowed sphere of professionalized obstetrics, such could be admitted without risk. Anatomical demonstrations were not the "truth" in themselves but were the materials upon which interpretation took place to produce, over time, medical certainty; all works on the art of midwifery were "but commentaries on anatomical points" (*Anatomy*, p. ix). Burns could enumerate in his *Anatomy* five ways to induce an abortion (pp. 57–63), because his was "not a book which will likely fall into the hands of any but medical readers, and it [was] proper that they ... be apprised" of these causes (p. 57n). While explaining the particular benefits of his text—it provided such practical information, culled from his years of experience—he emphasized that he did not wish to promote his views at the expense of others. Like Denman (and others of the turn-of-the-century generation), Burns encouraged midwifery specialists to come to their own conclusions, but they had to be mindful, informed conclusions. "Only by careful study, and much reading"(p. ix)—indeed, the "greatest attention, exerted for the longest lifetime" (p. x)—can the medical man earn honour and a name, a full acquittal in times of danger (p. 238) and recognition of faithful service, come what may.

Failed Politics

We move now from physiology to political rhetoric, from discourses about bodies to discourses that use bodies for polemical effect. The obscurity of agency in the biological process of abortion made its deployment as a political metaphor all the more powerful. It was especially useful in the revolutionary period because its conceptual ambiguities as easily masked as clarified the issues of power then under debate. Abortion's uncertainty produced a remarkable narrative flexibility, for polemicists could read events through a trope

that implied a fixed result—a failure—but that also left much room for the delineation of what, or who, was responsible for it. The texts ensuing from such readings bore witness to failure and offered a means to explain and contain it, just as midwifery guides did with the "malfunctioning" pregnant body. And yet unlike medical discourse, where the body was the focus and more often than not still puzzling (despite all efforts to make it otherwise), in politics, the failure could be elided or downplayed and surer conclusions drawn. Polemicists could anatomize failed events with emphasis falling primarily, if not solely, on the figurative "child" that failed to be delivered. Apparently seamless, such rhetoric had its potential cracks, however, which were there to be read in turn.

Two brief illustrations follow, one each from the main ideological vantages of the period. The first is a passage from a Jacobin speech given in provincial France (circa 1793):

> A revolution is never made by halves; it must either be total or it will abort. All the revolutions which history has conserved for memory as well as those that have been attempted in our time have failed because people wanted to square new laws with old customs and rule new institutions with old men.[30]

The speaker recognized the individuals engaged in the process of revolution as political actors, but he did not acknowledge them as the agents of abortion itself. The "people" who wanted to produce a new nation with the "old customs" and "old men" created the very conditions that prohibited the successful delivery of political change. Though they influenced the revolution as it developed, these "people" did not terminate it themselves. Indeed, the Jacobin seemed to imply that part of their inevitable failure lay in the "people's" inability to recognize the significance of total regeneration. Revolutions abort themselves, in his opinion, because, "made by halves," they cannot survive gestation; incompletely formed, they terminate prematurely, leaving marks of their failure on historical memory. The *citoyen* offered an image of spontaneous abortion to naturalize the process of change, but he remained devoted, nonetheless, to human forms of agency. Speaking before the *sans-culottes* just prior to the commencement of the Terror, he wanted "new laws with [new] customs and ... new institutions

30 The Jacobin's statement is cited and translated by Lynn Hunt, "The Political Psychology of Revolutionary Caricatures," *French Caricature and the French Revolution, 1789–1799* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 33; see also Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 26–27.

with [new] men" to structure the Jacobin revolution of France. Only under such conditions can he envision a process of change that will not abort. Brought to term, the new would be born *as* revolution, not a settled state. Significantly, in this viable revolution, as in the failed ones that came before it, the actors are all men. As agency is always male, though not always productive, the pregnant body appears incidental—merely passively present—to this imagining of political reproduction.

The revolutionary's opponent, Edmund Burke, does the same in the third of his *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1797), but for vastly different reasons and with an equally different outcome.[31] Burke's pamphlet assessed the failure of recent peace negotiations with France, with which Britain had been at war for about four years. The most dominant voice of counter-revolution in Britain (if not Europe) in the 1790s, Burke figured "the abortion of a treaty with the regicides" as spontaneous to elide the agents, the revolutionaries, who were all too powerfully present in the events that led up to the miscarriage of the alliance. Though "his majesty," George III, "has now *only to lament*" the "abrupt termination" of the treaty negotiations, Burke found pleasure in this "our late abortive attempt" to sue the French government for peace (original emphasis). The demise of any fetus produced by such a shameful political union was necessary, in Burke's opinion, to preserve British honour and dignity: the failure to gestate an alliance with France was thus an image of *successful* politics. Were Burke to define outright the agents who aborted this alliance—were he to acknowledge the revolutionaries' instigative part in the termination of peace talks—he would align himself with the very power he has dedicated his energies to overthrow. In refusing to delineate them while praising the abortion itself, Burke leaves open the possibility that such a termination was the natural outcome of an unnatural attempt at political reproduction.[32]

The aftermath of this "aborted" treaty, however, has dire consequences for the constitution of Britain and the gendering of its political rulers. Rather than a "manly" proclamation of continued war, the British crown pledged, "after the treaty was dead and gone," to renew negotiations "in a posthumous declaration." To Burke's chagrin, his government cherished the "vulgar conception" of a

31 Edmund Burke, "Third Letter on a Regicide Peace," *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 9, ed. R.B. McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

32 Burke, pp. 311, 298, 331, respectively.

future pacification with the French. Officially promising to reopen peace talks whenever the French "shall be *disposed*" (original emphasis), Britain established the prospect of subsequent political intercourse with "a set of abandoned wretches," and it did so on their terms. This constant solicitation for peace transformed the enemy into a rightful power able, and consistently willing, to humiliate Britain, while it metamorphosed Britain into an effeminate, "unmanly" nation-state capable only of "whining lamentation ... the last resource of female weakness, of helpless infancy, of doting decrepitude." The pregnant body implicit in the trope of abortion threatens to re-emerge in the constitution of Britain itself as the nation becomes womanly and desires (in a state of weakness) to conceive another treaty with France.[33]

Unable to "utter a sentiment of vigour," the crown may have authorized a declaration of intent to reproduce yet again with the French, but Burke hoped to counter such a possibility.[34] Offering his reading of the peace process to the British public, he intended his words to act, if not as a prophylactic, as an abortifacient for any future treaty-conceptions. His pamphlet was, in effect, the potion at hand, there to be used by—or, less happily, to be inflicted upon—the British nation.

The French Jacobin and Burke both attempted to contain with words the failed processes they addressed: in the first case, much like the period's medical discourse, so as to avoid such a failure in the present and, in the second, so as to ensure (ironically) the replication of that failure in the future. Their "expertise" in matters political could be said to subject their readers: they alone appear able to produce the desired ends. Only the course offered by Burke or by the Frenchman will seem to do. By offering a "fix," a discursive resolution for failed events, each relied on a fictional equivalency—that what he wrote (or spoke) and what would happen next must be the same. To read (or hear) these words was to ingest them passively and led, seemingly inevitably, to actions that would ensure political triumph, albeit from diametrically opposed perspectives. Each thus claimed the agency to know on behalf of his audience, who then had, it seems, no need to interpret for itself. Their polemics had to be read (or heard) to be effective in the world, however; they too could miscarry or fail

33 Burke, pp. 386, 316, 313, 298, 310, 314, respectively.
34 Burke, p. 314.

to deliver their meanings successfully. And surely other narratives of the aborted events were possible. Within Burke's treatise alone, there was the crown's version of the events, and without it, there were other pamphlets, speeches, and backroom discussions.[35] The need to read failure and the slippages of meaning it makes possible are, as we will see, a pattern that Wollstonecraft exploits in *The Wrongs of Woman.*

Potential Abortion

In the fragmentary preface to *Wrongs,* the opening passage of which serves as the epigraph of this article, Wollstonecraft used abortion as a trope to characterize her audience's views of the text she had written. It was not a revolution or a treaty that potentially aborted, but her own, as yet unfinished, novel. The trope allowed Wollstonecraft to project the conclusions that her various readers would reach about *Wrongs.* Negating the reading of her text as abortive (the most prominent of the readings she imagined it would receive, and that it has received often enough), she concentrates on those "few" who will "advance" before their "age" and "grant" that her novel and its critique are sound and of consequence. She points to the possibility of abortion, not a stabilizing "fix" for it, and plays on the trope's workings. By mediating the value of *Wrongs* through her audience's potential interpretations of it, Wollstonecraft foregrounds the pregnant body so easily elided in the medical and polemical discourses and, equally important, the practice of reading that produces meaning and authority.[36]

Wollstonecraft's trope accents rather than obscures the gender dynamics of abortion. She ensured that the female body remained visible in her readers' judgments precisely because it was Wollstonecraft herself, as "mother" of the text, who would be to blame if her political conception aborted. In contrast to Burke and the French Jacobin, who allowed the maternal woman to fall out of,

35 See, for example, Thomas Erskine, *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the Present War with France* (London: J. Debrett, 1796–97).

36 Ross Chambers posits that while "power has an interest in keeping the functioning of its authority unexamined," literary discourse "*foregrounds* the practice of reading that produces authority, and on which the whole system depends" (original emphasis). *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. xviii. Though I question his privileging of the literary, my understanding of the political workings of *Wrongs* is indebted to Chambers's theory of oppositional narrative and the possibilities of reading "otherwise."

or fall docile within, their polemics, Wollstonecraft highlighted the part she played in the gestation (successful or not) of her novel. Ultimately, after all, her mind and body—her "fancy" and her "heart"—were at stake. To see her "child," *Wrongs* itself, as an "abortion of [her] distempered fancy" was to locate in Wollstonecraft the reason for her conception's failure. To see it as nurtured and growing, but not yet come to term, however, was to recognize in her the source of its potential success: it was to acknowledge her, if not as a natural originator, at least as a natural developer of political critique. Bypassing the issue of how this fetus-text was conceived, Wollstonecraft isolates the gestational process, which might be mistaken as inactive or merely passive, to underscore its vital agency, the mother's. The difficulty is, of course, that this gestational agency is seen primarily by the ends—the child or the abortion—it produces.[37]

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft realigned medical narratives of spontaneous abortion with their material basis. The woman's part—the womb—becomes active to sustain (or not) the unborn. Recalling obstetrical discourse, it was the "patient's" body that remained a constant, the mind's impact on that body and the conceptions it carried varying with each case at hand. Wollstonecraft was, however, working out (literally) a critical conception of extant social relations. She thus transformed the relationship between abortion and women's physiology into one that could be as critically productive as it was biologically destructive. Whether her "sketches" of women's oppression were seen to abort or not, she mobilized the site of reproduction as a site of critique. The potential abortion posited by the preface is less a way to justify her polemic, however, than a revelation of the powers that tacitly exist for women in the reproductive politics shaping (materially and ideologically) her world.

We see not only Wollstonecraft's—the "motherly" writer's—agency constituted here, but also that of her (imagined) audience, for the prospect of abortion is subsumed in a context of reading. The failure of her text-conception depends as much on how it will be interpreted

37 In its plot, the novel treats conception as a mere technicality as well, an incidental element to the more significant aspects of the reproductive process: the mother's control over gestation, birth, and the child's sustenance (bodily and intellectual). Wollstonecraft accented the connection between mother and offspring, not the sexual act that brought this into being, all or most of which she depicted as traumatic for her characters. For discussion of this trauma, see Poovey, Kipp.

as on anything inherent to it or its "gestater." In this manner, Wollstonecraft activates another, seemingly passive site. For the many who will deem her novel an abortion and for the "few" who will judge it a rational critique, Wollstonecraft figures reading as a process of active engagement. She indeed concedes, in a manner that Burke and the French revolutionary do not, that her readers will satisfy their own political aims in relation to *Wrongs*. That this mobilization of reading occurs in her preface is something we, like her contemporaries, should not lose sight of. The room for different judgments on the text discloses the room for different readings of the sociopolitical "wrongs" Wollstonecraft recounts within it; it also discloses room for narrative explanations of her motivations for composing such a text. Her acknowledgment, at the start, of her audience's varied assessments shows a willingness to risk her project, and her own agency, in order to accent the political capacity of interpretation.

This mobilization of reading takes on greater significance, however, if we consider the generic form of the text that follows. While her imagined readers are seemingly genderless (Wollstonecraft does not accent their bodies, or the gender inscribed upon them, as she does her own in the preface), the form she chooses for her critique—the sentimental novel with Gothic overtones—implies a gendering of its own. These genres have a particular relationship to women as writers and readers in the revolutionary period. In earlier writings, from her reviews of novels for the *Analytical Review* to her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and, especially, her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft had criticized sentimental fiction for its effects on female readers: its leading them to idleness and to "self-destructive escape[s] into imagination."[38] But in the preface to *Wrongs*, she politicizes her audience and reading itself; she makes this most likely female audience self-conscious of their involvement (for good or ill) as they experience the sentimental form of her novel. Despite its commodification, an opportunity purchased by particular and privileged sectors of society, reading was neither a private nor a disinterested activity as Wollstonecraft represented it.[39]

38 Maurer, p. 51.

39 On Wollstonecraft's condemnation of novel-reading, see Sapiro, Poovey, and O'Quinn, as well as Maurer. For recent re-evaluations of her views, see especially Mary Nyquist, "Wanting Protection: Fair Ladies, Sensibility and Romance," *Mary Wollstonecraft and 200 Years of Feminisms*, pp. 61–85; S. Candace Ward, "Active Sensibility and Positive Virtue: Wollstonecraft's 'Grand Principle of Action,'" *European Romantic Review* 8:4 (1997), 409–31; and Mitzi Myers, "Sensibility and the 'Walk of Reason': Mary Wollstonecraft's Literary

In the context of her preface, how are we to interpret Wollstonecraft's literalization, in the novel's plot, of the pregnant body that aborts? How do we respond to her writing of abortion not as a trope, but as a narrative event? In *Wrongs*, Wollstonecraft creates protagonists who exercise their powers as mothers to contest the patriarchal configuration of society. The genealogical transmission of subjection from mother to daughter is thwarted either by induced reproductive failure—the unwillingness of women to bequeath life and inevitable oppression to their progeny—or by that more familiar Wollstonecraftian logic, the nurturing of children who inherit the mother's self-respect and self-determination. The choice that these contrary options evince is telling, however. Women are vital to society's reformation or its detrimental perpetuation through the ways they participate in reproduction. Gestational agency cuts both ways, and so too does reading. Those outside the text (like ourselves) are not the only audience Wollstonecraft imagines. Her characters read their own pasts, including their reproductive histories, as a way of speaking themselves within the novel, but they also read each other's past as an attempt to understand the world that shapes them. The conditions and consequences of reading in a world that needs change inflect the politics of *Wrongs*, destabilizing the agencies and the opportunities for social transformation that it makes possible.

Narrating Abortion

The "wrongs" of the mother are key to the litany of societal failures Wollstonecraft narrates in *The Wrongs of Woman*. Mitzi Myers has called the novel "a feminist anatomy of socioeconomic abuses,"[40] and its audience indeed encounters everything from domestic violence to sexual abuse, from the legal inequities that make married women subject to their husbands in all things to the lack of educational and economic opportunities that keep the unmarried and poor subject to

Reviews as Cultural Critique," *Sensibility in Transformation: Creative Resistance to Sentiment from the Augustans to the Romantics*, ed. Syndy McMillen Conger (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), pp. 120–44. On the "public" implications of private reading more generally in this period (that is, not tied directly to gender or early feminism), see Andrew McCann, introduction, *Cultural Politics in the 1790s: Literature, Radicalism and the Public Sphere* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), and Jon Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), both of which rely on Habermas's classic study of the public sphere.

40 Myers, "Unfinished Business: Wollstonecraft's *Maria*," *Wordsworth Circle* 11:2 (1980), 110.

bodily labour (legal or not) and social disgrace. The pervasive disempowerment of women leads inevitably to questions of whether they "have a country" (p. 159): are they part of the nation, with rights and responsibilities and protections, or merely "born slaves" (p. 79)? Motherhood is deeply implicated in this "slavery," for it is a mechanism, both ideological and material, for the reproduction of slavery.

In reading the novel, Wollstonecraft's audience not only reads about these "wrongs" but also reads individual characters' elucidations of them. *Wrongs* begins *in medias res*, with its main characters confined to a private madhouse. Maria has been imprisoned by her husband, who attempts by this means to get hold of a fortune entailed on their infant daughter; the child has been taken from Maria, whose breasts overflow with the milk her infant will never receive and whose mind equally overflows with images of the lost child and despair. Jemima is Maria's guard, a woman who has laboured her entire life and "felt the crushing hand of power" so often that, now "hardened," she "ceased to wonder at" the cruelties of the world or sympathize with its victims (p. 80). Proceeding from the women's current situation, *Wrongs* portrays the relationships that develop between Jemima and Maria and between Maria and an unjustly detained male inmate, Darnford, who becomes her lover. Crucial to the unfolding of these relationships are the individual histories—self-contained narratives within the overarching storyline—that Wollstonecraft's characters offer each other. Most are verbal, though Maria's is a memoir written for her lost child. Thus, while an unidentified third-person narrator relates the plot line that moves forward from the characters' present, this plot line is interrupted at intervals as they narrate, in their own voices, their life stories to the present moment.[41] Jemima and Maria interpret the events of their lives—in the main, their "wrongs" as daughters and as mothers—and, in explaining themselves, they attempt to contain in narrative form the societal forces that have failed them. Experiencing the characters'

41 Kelly describes this pattern as symptomatic of Jacobin fiction; retrospective personal narratives allow expression of an "understanding produced by the events and personal experience." "From Avant-Garde to Vanguardism: The Shelleys' Romantic Feminism in *Laon and Cythna* and *Frankenstein*," *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 79. McCann sees the structure of *Wrongs* similarly, "a space and discursive praxis oriented to the interactive articulation of the experiential content of women's lives," what he calls "forms of telling" (pp. 165, 166). The focus on telling, or self-expression, in both cases reduces the potential of interactivity in (and with) the novel, especially its modelling of different forms of reading.

stories directly as well as the ways they bear witness to each other, Wollstonecraft's audience is drawn into the text. *Wrongs* impels its readers, like its characters, to make sense of the failures it contains, even as the developing plot attempts to move beyond them.

Abortion first appears in the novel in Jemima's narrative, the first of the inset personal histories. Jemima took a potion to end a pregnancy, and her articulation of this act explains her motivations as well as its context, which is haunted by genealogical determinism. The experience of her mother defines Jemima, whose life and story begin with the end of her mother's. Her birth and her mother's death are simultaneous, brought on by the same sequence of events. As Jemima continues her narration, the reader sees that the "sins" of the mother are brought to bear inevitably on the daughter, and Jemima's perception of this cycle shapes her own response to finding herself with child.

Seduced by a "fellow-servant" who promised and subsequently refused to marry her, Jemima's mother "perceived the natural, the dreaded consequence" (p. 102) of her ruin: the conception of an illegitimate child. Though trying to live within the construct of virtuous domesticity, as a labouring woman she becomes entrapped by its double standards. The "honesty ... and ... regard for her reputation," which Jemima's grandmother had "forcibly impressed" upon her, prove ineffectual in her situation as a lower-class servant. And with her virtue, Jemima's mother loses her place in the house of her mistress and her life. As Jemima tells it,

> sorrow, and the methods she adopted to conceal her condition, still doing the work of a house-maid, had such an effect on her constitution, that she died in the wretched garret, where her virtuous mistress had forced her to take refuge in the very pangs of labour, though my father, after a slight reproof, was allowed to remain in his place—allowed by the mother of six children, who, scarcely permitting a footstep to be heard, during her month's indulgence, felt no sympathy for the poor wretch. (p. 102)

Jemima's mother was punished, then destroyed, by her own error, her seducer's treachery, and the hypocrisy of her mistress, but Jemima's father suffered little or no impediment. He was free, indeed, to exacerbate the difficulties of Jemima's condition: denying her a paternal name, offering her little or no protection and few necessities for existence, and, ultimately, abusing her himself. Unlike her mother, Jemima had no one—not a mother, a father, or a mistress—

to teach her even the principles of honesty and reputation, for after her birth, she was sent to the "cheapest nurse [her] father could find" (p. 102) and left to exist "in spite of neglect" (pp. 102–3).[42] As an unwanted, unlawful child, Jemima exists outside the kinship structures that organize society; she has no name and no place to fulfil because she is refused, by her mother's death and her father's cruelty, the family situation that would have defined her.

Though Jemima's position might seem potentially freeing, allowing her to define herself rather than being defined by the rigid societal system of classification, her birth determines her life even more rigidly.[43] As the narrator explains at an early moment in the novel, before Jemima herself speaks, a "deadly blight had met her at the very threshold of existence; and the wretchedness of her mother seemed a heavy weight fastened on her innocent neck" (p. 79). Her mother's life structures her own not simply because Jemima encounters cruelty and abuse akin to that of her mother, but also because others—especially her father and stepmother, but those outside her family who are tyrannous over her as well—use the conditions of Jemima's conception and her motherlessness as evidence of her own depravity and worthlessness. To them, Jemima brings "into the world with [her]" a "wicked disposition ... inherited from [her] mother" (p. 104). These people read her life through her mother's, conveniently calling upon maternal lines of descent when her father refuses responsibility for her. The experiences of her mother are thus reproduced in Jemima by the narratives that other characters impose on her and by the novel itself. Her mother's history—the seduction, pregnancy, and early death while bearing an illegitimate child—defines what is possible for her in the oppressive society Wollstonecraft portrays. Yet *Wrongs* positions such readings of Jemima, ultimately, as *mis*readings, for they are overdetermined and overdetermining. Because she reflects back on her former life and gives voice to the ways in which her mother's "mistakes" were thrust upon her, Jemima's very speaking in the present frame of the novel reveals that other options have been (and may still be) available to her.

42 Kipp argues that "*Wrongs* calls into question the very possibility of maternal love in an environment which ... debases women's bodies, and thereby corrupts their 'instincts'" (p. 81); in Jemima's case, poverty is the particular environmental issue. Highlighting identity and embodiment, however, Kipp's reading differs from my own; see especially chap. 2.

43 Eleanor Ty argues that Jemima's history "seems to be correcting" the "myth ... of the 'fortunate orphan'—the most famous one being Fielding's Tom Jones." *Unsex'd Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 39.

As Jemima reveals her past to Maria and Darnford, she also blames her life's wretched conditions on her mother. In this instance, however, the mother's absence, not her life, prescribes Jemima's future:

> Now I look back, I cannot help attributing the greater part of my misery, to the misfortune of having been thrown into the world without the grand support of life—a mother's affection. I had no one to love me; or to make me respected, to enable me to acquire respect. I was an egg dropped on the sand; a pauper by nature, hunted from family to family, who belonged to nobody—and nobody cared for me ... I was, in fact, born ... without having any companions to alleviate [my enslavement] by sympathy, or teach me how to rise above it by their example. (p. 106)

Jemima implies that her mother could somehow have thwarted or prevented her suffering. The notion that mothers can stop the replication of their experience in their daughters by teaching and loving them is endemic to Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*, but one Jemima's own acts negate. Her story is not simply a replication of her mother's, however; it is a degeneration. She has "nobody" to claim her or care for her, or to provide her an example to follow. Motherless and bastardized, Jemima is subject to greater persecution and more humiliation. The "appellation of *bastard*" (p. 105, original emphasis), as she describes it, only compounds her powerlessness as a labouring woman in this society.[44]

As a result of these worsened circumstances, Jemima later aborts the fetus she conceived from an employer's "ferocious desire" (p. 106). Jemima was raped by her "master," as she calls him, yet even with the horrible conditions of this conception, she felt a special bond with her unborn child. She explains, "I discovered, with horror ... that I was with child. I know not why I felt a mixed sensation of despair and tenderness, excepting that, ever called a bastard, a bastard appeared to me an object of the greatest compassion in creation" (p. 107). Jemima's experience of abuse and societal invisibility leads her to redefine the category of *bastard.* Previously "a slave, a bastard, a common property" (p. 109), Jemima belonged to no one and, thus, to everyone; her illegitimate child, however, belongs very much to Jemima. She recreates the relationship between a woman's "self" and the bodily "other" within her during pregnancy, for the "other" that

44 Not until Jemima's story intertwines with Maria's does Wollstonecraft provide evidence of an improvement in her experience. Although Jemima does learn to read and has "many opportunities of improvement" (p. 111) during the time that she is mistress/housekeeper to a libertine writer, she is "cut off from human converse" (p. 113) until she meets Maria.

is the fetus becomes, through Jemima's identification with its future position in society, herself. Her response to the "medicine in a phial, which [her master] desired [her] to take, telling [her], without any circumlocution, for what purpose it was designed" (p. 107), reveals this identification. Jemima "burst into tears," thinking: "it was killing myself,—yet was such a self as I worth preserving" (p. 107). Although it begins as a man's way of erasing his reproductive "mistake," the abortion becomes Jemima's way of saving her child/self.

The master assumes from Jemima's response that his plan to end the pregnancy itself has aborted, and thus he protects his "name" by denying it to "the brat [she] laid to him" (p. 108). He agrees instead to "speak to his friend, a parish-officer, to get [it] a nurse" (p. 108). Wollstonecraft depicts a patriarchal society that knows but one way to provide for such children: through a network of men who devise ways of retaining the power of insemination while controlling its logical outcome, the legitimation and support of some and the disposal of the rest.[45] The power of the paternal word to name this child *bastard*—to reinscribe Jemima's history onto another generation—leads her to abort. She recollects:

> rage giving place to despair, [I] sought for the potion that was to procure abortion, and swallowed it, with a wish that it might destroy me, at the same time that it stopped the sensations of new-born life, which I felt with indescribable emotion. My head turned round, my heart grew sick, and in the horrors of approaching dissolution, mental anguish was swallowed up. (p. 109)

She was willing to sacrifice herself and the fetus so as not to perpetuate systems of social and economic oppression, so as not to reproduce those systems by generating another victim for their purposes. Abortion functions as a way to break the cycle of "sins" being passed from mother to child—her mother's to herself, hers to her child—and as a way for Jemima to claim and assert some independence. In refusing to pass on her own experience, she disallowed the further repetition of her mother's, but the master—as the one who provides the potion—casts a shadow over all. Jemima resists through her body (and potentially at its cost) the dire ending of her mother and the dire future of her child,

45 Death or illness was, of course, often the logical outcome of farming a child out to a wet nurse, as Wollstonecraft illustrates in Jemima's narrative and in the story of the illegitimate daughter of Venables, Maria's husband. This child's death is depicted as something Venables actually counts on, having begrudged her, from her very birth, the subsistence necessary to sustain life (pp. 149–50).

but she needs the very individual, indeed, the very socioeconomic systems, that have persecuted her to do so. Her aggressor must have purchased the abortifacient and forced it upon her for Jemima to have a means of resistance. For British lawyers and physicians at this time, he would be as much the liable agent as Jemima herself. Subject to the inequality and injustice of the patriarchal world, she used for other purposes the potion she first feared and rejected, but her actions do not radically alter the workings of power—they, in effect, require them. Jemima's agency is predicated on the existence of the hegemonic order, not its change.

Through this abortion, Jemima shows that she cannot, though on the verge of motherhood herself, imagine protecting her child in the same way that she imagined her mother, had she lived, protecting her. Denying maternal power, she simultaneously capitalizes on it in this crucial moment: as gestational agent, she shelters her offspring from society's inevitable tyranny by refusing to bring it to term. Jemima's abortion calls into question the idealization of maternity that she herself articulates when she begins her narrative and that appears at various points throughout *Wrongs*, particularly in reference to Maria's motherhood.[46] Containing the first abortion plotted in the novel, her narrative destabilizes a particularly postpartum maternal authority while it continues to assert women's agency within a world genealogically determined.

Wollstonecraft makes manifest women's capacity to refuse to reproduce inequitable structures of power, yet those structures nevertheless remain, as Jemima's continuing narration of her life (from the abortion to her present) demonstrates. The oppression of the world-that-is within *Wrongs*, though pervasive, is not total, however. The societal failures that provoke Jemima's abortion evoke, in turn, further narrative, further readings of those failures by Wollstonecraft's characters and, ideally, her audience. Just as Jemima's history complicates notions of women's agency (maternal or abortive), it becomes a means to complicate the agency of reading

46 Jemima's belief that her mother could make a difference in her own life is complicated by her grandmother's inability to help her mother, a situation that Jemima narrates but seems unable to acknowledge. Maria's mother is similarly unable to aid Maria as she matures, and yet Maria's power as a mother remains auspicious through most of the novel. This would be consistent, of course, with Wollstonecraft's treatment of middle-class motherhood in the 1792 *Vindication*, though she undermines Maria's maternity too, or at least ponders its limitations, by having Maria's daughter die in most versions of the manuscript.

too. The ways the other characters interpret her story do not so much stabilize the meaning of the "wrongs" she suffered, or offer a "fix" that would eradicate them, as expose how unstable the politics of reading failure can be.

Anatomizing Reading

As the first history of a woman's "wrongs" in *Wrongs*, Jemima's narrative both protests the patriarchal establishment and provides an opportunity for reading that establishment within the present frame of the novel. At a pause in her story, Maria admits to Jemima, "your narrative gives rise to the most painful reflections on the present state of society" (p. 115). If we accept Maria's assessment, and she, like Darnford, is a foil within the text for those of us reading outside it, Jemima's story triggers "reflection" on the world-as-it-is. Ideally (that is, for those "few who dare to advance before [society's] improvement"), it would "give rise" to critical interpretations of a world that thrives on the inhumane situations and anguish Jemima has experienced. Yet the "pain" or discomfort of this compelled thoughtfulness could as easily lead to a dismissal of the issues she has raised—to the "failure" of Jemima's protest, the miscarriage of her observations—or to a response somewhere between these two extremes. Reading (or listening) is a way of gaining access to her "wrongs," of seeing what may not have been known before, as an anatomist would the inner structures of a womb. But reading is not necessarily a way of experiencing these wrongs as Jemima does, even within the novel.

In response to her history, Maria and Darnford offer interpretations of the evils of poverty and of society's specious engagements with reforming them. *Wrongs* does not endorse their views, however, as much as enact the process of reading societal failure, with all its possibilities and risks. Maria's and Darnford's explications are, in fact, put into question by Jemima, for reading their readings, she is compelled to adjust their limited understanding. Focusing on the "wrongs" of poverty (their own class status being involved, perhaps, in this), the lovers mistake Jemima's conception of her past: it is not just poverty but "a wretchedness of situation peculiar to my sex," she says (p. 115), that makes hardship as pernicious as it is for her. A "man," she tells them, "with half my industry, and, I may say, abilities,

could have procured a decent livelihood, and discharged some of the duties which knit mankind together; whilst I"—a labouring woman without a "character," though one "who had acquired a taste for the rational, ... the virtuous enjoyments of life"—"was cast aside as the filth of society," condemned to labour "like a machine" (pp. 115–16). Jemima offers a corrective to the lovers' elucidations of how society has failed her. Maria's and Darnford's readings are not necessarily "failed" readings, but their divergence from Jemima's perspective intimates that reading—even sympathetic, reformist reading—may require its own "fix." By way of the third-person narrator, Wollstonecraft's audience witnesses Jemima's efforts to adjust the lens through which the lovers interpret her history, but its own lens remains unspecified, though reflexively involved.

Although Jemima attempts to endorse a particular reading of her narrative, one through the lens of gender as well as class, her remarks point to the endless regress of reading itself: to our reading of Jemima's reading of Maria's and Darnford's (imperfect) reading of Jemima's history (also a reading of readings) and so on to Wollstonecraft's "reading" of her late-eighteenth-century world. In the textual exchange of interpretations around Jemima's story, as at other moments where the novel demonstrates political (or politicized) reading, *Wrongs* accents how difficult it is to control that process or the ends it will reach. No narrative—Jemima's, *Wrongs*, or those authorized by forms of power, such as Burke's, the Frenchman's, or Denman's—"can hope to control its own reception."[47] As portrayed by Wollstonecraft, this incapacity is not simply a radical subjectivization of interpretive processes, but a means to engender in her audience an awareness of its own reading *as* a practice. As in her preface, she reminds her audience at such moments that they participate (come what may) in the political and ideological contention that is reading—and making sense of—"wrongs."[48]

Wollstonecraft heightens the consequences of reading society's failures within the novel to encourage a more self-conscious politics of reading outside it. The struggle over the meaning of Jemima's story thus persists beyond her exchange with the lovers and shapes

47 Chambers, p. 194.

48 The other, most obvious, moments that demonstrate political reading are Maria's memoirs and her "paper" read at court during the adultery proceedings. Darnford's narrative and Maria's landlady's story (embedded within Maria's memoirs) follow this pattern as well.

significantly the relationship that develops between the women characters. The narrative has a powerful impact on Maria, who embodies the maternal power more typically associated with Wollstonecraft's feminism. Because Jemima cannot control the response to her history, she also cannot control how those who hear it will come to use it, even—or, perhaps, especially—the sympathetic Maria. Maria's thoughts "take a wider range," and she is "led to consider the oppressed state of women" more generally (p. 120). She comes, nevertheless, to deploy this history for her own purposes. Through the narrator, we see how her thoughts move quickly from the "wider" context back to herself. She "lament[s] that she had given birth to a daughter" (p. 120) because Jemima's story forces her to reconsider the reproductive logic that organizes and sustains the patriarchal world. Gender replaces class as the lens through which Maria now reads the narrative (still, we might note, not reading quite as Jemima requests), allowing her to sympathize with Jemima's experience as a version of her own and, more important, to see her infant daughter's situation through that of Jemima's childhood. Maria dwells "on the wretchedness of unprotected infancy, till sympathy with Jemima changed to agony, when it seemed probable that her own babe might even now be in the very state [Jemima] so forcibly described" (p. 120). Her heightened feelings transform her daughter into a replication of Jemima's motherlessness and victimization. To resist how this would erase her maternity, Maria repositions Jemima as the abandoned (and potentially abused) daughter, hoping to "gain intelligence of her child" (p. 120). She plays on Jemima's "feelings, on this *tender point*" (p. 120, emphasis added), assuring for herself the position of apprehensive mother.[49]

Maria may offer her own challenge to patriarchal hegemony in her memoirs, but her status as a middle-class mother authorizes her handling of Jemima's narrative at this point in *Wrongs*. Maria employs

49 Feminist critics have been particularly drawn to the sympathetic companionship that develops between Maria and Jemima; it serves as a vehicle for a potential (if not actualized) solidarity between women. See especially Catherine N. Parke, "What Kind of Heroine Is Mary Wollstonecraft?," *Sensibility in Transformation*, pp. 114–15; Claudia Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 67–68; Conger, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1994); and Mellor. Maria's use of Jemima's story challenges such readings, however. It is not simply that Maria "refine[s]" her sensibility (Maurer, p. 49), or that Jemima and Maria come into a sympathetic union in the course of the novel, but that their union emerges with—has room for—affective and economic inequities, which privilege Maria.

Jemima's circumstances and language against her:

> "With your heart, and such dreadful experience, can you lend your aid to deprive my babe of a mother's tenderness, a mother's care? In the name of God, assist me to snatch her from destruction! Let me but give her an education—let me but prepare her body and mind to encounter the ills which await her sex."

"Perceiving the effect [of] her conversation," she inverts Jemima's former supplications to make Jemima responsible for positioning her daughter to speak them in the future. Maria revises Jemima's story slightly, but significantly, so Jemima can be both the child and the surrogate who can protect the child, putting Jemima's agency—to act, to read and narrate herself—into question. To adopt Kipp's words for a somewhat different context, "sympathy poses a dangerous threat to [Jemima's] autonomy."[50] Wollstonecraft's narrator explains that she has "not power to resist this persuasive torrent" and "promis[es] to ... go herself to trace the situation, and enquire concerning the health, of this abandoned daughter." Although Maria wants more, wants Jemima to articulate the "intention" that she intimates but "seem[s] unwilling to impart," the mother is "glad to have obtained the main point" and "th[inks] it best to leave [Jemima] to the workings of her own mind; convinced that she had the power of interesting [Jemima] still more in favour of herself and child, by a simple recital of facts." Maria's appropriation of her story and Jemima's own newly awakened emotions drive her to respond to this daughter as a version of herself: she is compelled not to abort—even narratively—this child, but attempts to nurture and sustain her to whatever extent she can, the gravest irony being that the matter is out of both characters' hands.[51] While Maria figures Jemima as a "second mother" for her daughter (she promises that she will "teach" the child to "consider ... herself as the prop of [Jemima's] age"), the efficacy of her appeal lies in playing upon her guard's misfortunes. This encounter ends, evocatively, with Maria acting as Jemima's mother: when she "recollect[s] herself" at their parting, she offers Jemima "a still kinder 'Adieu!' with a 'God bless you!'—that seemed," the unidentified narrator remarks, "to include a maternal benediction" (pp. 121–22).

50 Kipp, p. 30.

51 The outcome of Jemima's inquiry is, of course, that Maria's daughter has died at the hands of the nurse Venables hired to care for her. In a *deus-ex-machina*-like move, however, Wollstonecraft resurrects this child in the longest of *Wrongs*'s possible conclusions.

Maria's use of Jemima's narrative may not be as painful as the imposition of her mother's story on her, for it is predicated on sympathy rather than abuse; yet it subjects her to a power differential privileging Maria and reinscribing her former vulnerability onto her present. Because the third-person narrator, rather than Jemima or Maria, provides access to this scene, it is unclear what Wollstonecraft's readers are to make of it. The characterization of Maria's parting gestures as "maternal" emanates from the narrative voice—her farewell "seemed to include a maternal benediction" (p. 122)—but *to whom* do Maria's words "seem" so spoken? The narrator interprets, in effect reads, for us Maria's tone, both clarifying and complicating the situation at hand. Is Maria using her tone for further effect, fixing her orchestrations of Jemima's narrative; or is Jemima finding in Maria's blessing the long-awaited satisfaction of her desire for a mother; or is the narrator creating a narrative distance through which we can consider both characters and their motivations? Or is Wollstonecraft herself exercising her readers' minds by this narrative distancing, or presuming this "motherly" point-of-view as "natural" for Maria, regardless of the (narrative and affective) repercussions for Jemima? We have no way of knowing; we can only read, and perhaps submit our reading to further readings. Our conclusions carry consequences, however, as is clear from the novel's modelling of interpretive practices.

Considering Maria's memoirs in this context is instructive, for they offer *Wrongs*'s most pronounced instance of failed reading. The memoirs are the discursive embodiment of Maria's maternal desire. Separated from her daughter, she satisfies her duty to educate this child by creating a record of her own experiences. She chronicles her "wrongs" and, through acute observations on the world's workings, condemns a "constitution" that "seems to have entailed [misery] on all her kind." Maria expresses her aims thus: "from my narrative, my dear girl, you may gather the instruction, the counsel, which is meant rather to exercise than influence your mind." As many critics have argued, the memoirs manifest a specifically maternal power to resist, if not re-form, the hegemonic order; they differently educate the future's women, both Maria's child and any "daughters" produced by reading them.[52] What is overlooked or downplayed in such scholarship is that we encounter these memoirs not through the eyes of her daughter, their anticipated audience, or even Jemima, who is

52 See esp. Langbauer, Maurer, Kipp.

"promis[ed] ... [a] perusal as soon as [Darnford] returned them," but as Maria's lover—and future betrayer—reads them. Claudia Johnson calls this "a curious structural decision on Wollstonecraft's part," the memoirs being "withheld from the reader" until late in volume 1: that is, after Jemima's narrative and the struggle to claim its meaning and after Maria's romance with Darnford has been established and subtly questioned by the narrator.[53] It is as Darnford "beguile[s]" his "tedious moments" without Maria, while she, it must be noted, mourns the death of her daughter, that we encounter her narrative of motherly opposition. Though there is never a question in the memoirs that the child could read precisely as Maria would wish, Darnford's perusal and subsequent acts (in most projected endings to the novel) illustrate that he learns nothing from it. Whether his own mind is "exercised," whether he can recognize his behaviour and status as a replication of Maria's husband's, Darnford does not alter his course with her or question his power to do so (pp. 123–24).

The audience of *Wrongs* can read in the place of Maria's daughter—she is both the silent interlocutor and the active, intended reader of the memoirs—but disregarding Darnford's textual presence has risks: his being, in effect, the readerly agent that Wollstonecraft inscribes concurrently with Maria's voice and motherly aims. Besides the biting irony of the memoirs' placement in the novel, the audience risks its implication—indeed, any textual "daughter's"—in Darnford's failed understanding and unreformed acts. This is particularly important given the critical tendency to search *Wrongs* for signs of Wollstonecraft's views in the *Rights of Woman*, for Maria's history is where they are, or would be, were they not turned on their head in this manner. Here is, perhaps, another sympathetic, reformist practice of reading (like the lovers' earlier interpretations of Jemima's history) in need of a fine tuning. To neglect the politics of reading in this novel, especially for those politically invested in turning to it, is to miss the abortive possibility it can entail.

53 Johnson, p. 64. She goes on to note that, "even before the [novel's] concluding hints inform us of his desertion, Darnford is damned" (p. 65). For illuminating readings of Maria's relationship with Darnford, see also Nyquist; Myers, "Unfinished Business"; and O'Quinn. The memoirs reveal that she has replicated with Darnford her previous errors with Venables.

A second induced abortion is attempted, this time by Maria, in the longest of Wollstonecraft's drafted conclusions to *Wrongs*. Again, the retrospective judgments of the women characters are not available to us, for we read this narrative moment, in effect, as Maria and Jemima experience it.[54] Maria's actions echo Jemima's earlier abortion of her illegitimate child. Though Maria's fetus is conceived of sentiment and romance (rather than violence and economic exchange), she resists reliving the "domestic tyranny" (p. 128) she has suffered and refuses to generate another version of herself. Pregnant, unmarried, and alone, Maria "swallow[s] the laudanum; her soul was calm ... and nothing remained but an eager longing to forget herself—to fly from the anguish she endured to escape from thought—from this hell of disappointment" (p. 202). After a life struggling against the cruelty of men (father, brother, husband, lover) and the denial of her dignity as a mother, she wishes to be rid of the patriarchal world as well as the self whose desires have been complicit with it. Her station had distinguished her experience of oppression from Jemima's and could have distinguished her child's experience of illegitimacy, but women's disempowerment has now more significance to her than the privileges that might mediate it. The lack of imaginable options for a sustainable life leads Maria and her unborn to this end.[55] The image of her firstborn haunts her:

> All the incidents of her life were in arms, embodied to assail her, and prevent her sinking into the sleep of death.—Her murdered child again appeared to her, mourning for the babe of which she was the tomb.—"And could it have a nobler?—Surely it is better to die with me, than to enter on life without a mother's care!—I cannot live!—but could I have deserted my child the moment it was born?—thrown it on the troubled wave of life, without a hand to support it?" (pp. 202–3)

54 Given its detail and its advancements of earlier moments in the novel, I value this conclusion over the others that Wollstonecraft left at her death. The others are more fragmentary (Godwin refers to them as "hints" [p. 201]), but they reveal Maria's deteriorating relationship with Darnford—his "mysterious behaviour" or "A discovery" or the more specific "Her lover unfaithful"—and her response to this deterioration: she "goes into the country" in one, finds herself pregnant and miscarries in two, and attempts suicide after a miscarriage in one (pp. 201–3).

55 It is safe to imagine that this fetus is female too. Most children in the novel are daughters, with the exception of Maria's brothers, Darnford, and Venables, whom we see as sons, but who do not reproduce sons themselves.

Vague references to Jemima's and Maria's previous narratives come together here in Maria's thoughts right before she slips into unconsciousness. The desire to protect her fetus through death parallels Jemima's experience of abortion, and the medicine here *is* intended to kill both mother and child. Wollstonecraft accents Maria's decision to destroy the fetus as she destroys herself: she does not give birth only to abandon it, leaving it unsupported and vulnerable to the cruelty of society, nor does she, in this instance, spontaneously abort and then kill herself, as is projected in other endings to *Wrongs* (p. 202). Configured in such a manner, Maria's abortion/suicide signifies her agency as a mother as much as her agency as a woman trying now to avoid domestic constraints.

Wollstonecraft does not let her die, however. A "new vision" swims before her of Jemima and the "little creature" that is her firstborn restored. Jemima convinces Maria to live by holding her responsible for the motherless life this daughter will be forced to bear without her. Speaking as that child Maria formerly repositioned her to be, and as the protector of the daughter now reclaimed, Jemima reads her own history back at Maria. And Maria takes on what Jemima imagines to be her own mother's guilt for leaving her defenceless: "I snatched [your daughter] from misery—and (now she is alive again) would you leave her alone in the world, to endure what I have endured?" Maria's ability to reinterpret this narrative is put into question by her duty as a mother. Putting "her hand to her eyes" as if to shield herself from the narrative's consequences and hiding from her "daughters" (Jemima and the firstborn) the "agonizing struggle of her soul," Maria miscarries not her fetus and her motherhood but her abortive/suicidal act itself. The daughter's successful pronunciation of "Mamma!," which "Jemima had ... tutor[ed her to do] all the journey," brings Maria to tears and to life in one emotional declaration. After moments of silence in which she will not touch her child, behaving "as if afraid of killing it" (the very act she is in the process of fulfilling for her unborn), Maria cries out, "The conflict is over!—I will live for my child!" She claims life for herself, though perhaps not for the fetus she carries, and dedicates her powers once again to the future her daughter embodies. With Maria's pledge and all the possibilities and ideological reinscriptions it manifests, the novel comes to its arbitrary but no less necessary end (p. 203).

As it is for Jemima in the face of Maria's use of her history, or for Maria as she faces the consequences of reclaiming her maternal status, the trick is for us not to stop reading, not to close off the process of political reading because Wollstonecraft's text reaches an end. The reader's impulse is often to judge the politics of *Wrongs*—and, indeed, Wollstonecraft's writings overall—by means of the conclusions they reach. In my reading, Jemima's calling of Maria back from her abortion/suicide could be said to rewrite the transmission of "sins" from mother to child yet again, for in this potential conclusion Maria may live and support her child(ren), presently unfettered by paternal power, with the help of a sympathetic female companion. This arrangement would be the first shared effort to raise a family in the text, and Wollstonecraft may, by these means, be setting in motion a new narrative of domestic and political possibility. In it, women would be the sole members of a potentially re-envisioned society and possess an agency that is productive, that does not destroy the child and, consequently, maternal power. Women may, then, collectively reproduce the future's (unsubjected) female citizens. I would have to emphasize, however, that as with Jemima's experience of abortion, this end is not isolated from the oppressive institutions and ideologies that Wollstonecraft's characters (and, through them, *Wrongs*) protest. The community with which we are left is by no means immune from suspect power dynamics; Jemima and Maria's relationship is shaped by them and so too would the group's continuance be. Wollstonecraft takes, as Johnson argues, "a decisive turn away from the moral and political normativity of the male body" in discourse of the revolutionary period, but how, we may ask, comprised only of women, will her alternative community perpetuate itself? Will it terminate with the deaths of Maria, Jemima, and the daughter(s), or is it, like resistance through abortion, predicated on the hegemonic order that abuses women, who would seek shelter in such a community?[56] We could endlessly enumerate the limits to

56 Johnson, p. 60. On Jemima's remaining a paid servant in this household, see, besides Johnson, Janet Todd, *Women's Friendship in Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). On Maria's risking a "co-opt[ation] back into what she is trying to escape," see Rajan, p. 230. Celebratory readings of this ending abound; see especially Lucinda Cole, "(Anti)Feminist Sympathies: The Politics of Relationship in Smith, Wollstonecraft, and More," *ELH* 58 (1991), 107–40; as well as Maurer, Mellor, and McCann.

Wollstonecraft's vision in *Wrongs*, but to do so is to "fix" the text—to reduce it by stabilizing it to one form of meaning—while distracting ourselves from the politically generative process of reading itself.

In its fragmentary state, Wollstonecraft's novel asks its readers not to find a revolution within it but to participate in the imagining necessary for change. Yet had Wollstonecraft lived long enough to finish *Wrongs*—were the novel, that is, complete—our role would be the same. The text's revolutionary possibility lies not simply in what has been written, its substance and conclusions, but in how it openly engages societal failure and reading practices through its structural workings. An issue of impending failure always looms over *Wrongs*, for the novel, as a novel, must come to an end. Its political vision must come to *the fiction of an ending* due to its narrative form, but the failures it criticizes (like the vicissitudes of the political realm more generally) remain. Wollstonecraft needed her audience to continue to engage society's failures, indeed, to resist a mere discursive resolution as if that would be enough. And like her contemporaries, we need the lessons she offered. We mistake political process if that process is only what we can see *in* the novel (finished or not), and not, too, what readers—then as now—do with and by means of it.

The Wrongs of Woman asks us, in effect, to question our notion of political "ends"—of successful politics. In her preface and the plot's demonstration of reading, Wollstonecraft poses the possibility that judgment is not a sign (much less *the* sign) of political advancement. "Surely there are a few," she began, a few who would precede the world's much-needed change and not pass a final verdict of abortion on her sketches. What the sketches were—what her political "conception" was and, ultimately, would be—she left unspoken. But it was, after all, still gestating, and not because Wollstonecraft was still composing *Wrongs*, but because her trope of potential abortion represented it as in process. Her modelling of reading practices (failed or not) in *Wrongs* only extended this idea by showing the novel—indeed, any political narrative—*as* process. Instead of passing judgment, Wollstonecraft asks us repeatedly to attend to the processes by which judgments are made and to see how unstable and implicated they can be. To adjudicate, to focus on the "ends" (the conclusions, the political projections) we reach and leave *Wrongs* at that, is to risk emptying the act of reading of its ideological significance and us of our agency, even as we clearly make use of both.

And yet this is so often what we do with Wollstonecraft. As a precursor for feminist and liberal politics alike, she can be a troubling figure, one whose work must be clearly delineated and stabilized (order re-established through criticism) so as to authorize current projects and positions. Narrative containment of this "foremother" is as necessary for scholars who laud her work as unproblematic, a core of radical possibility, as for those who see it as a liability, an ideologically determined body of thought that must be explored and moved beyond.[57] In offering these "fixes" for Wollstonecraft's writings, however, critics hazard eliding the politics of reading: their own and, what is as important, their readers'. Ironically like eighteenth-century medical discourse or the polemics of Burke and the French Jacobin, scholarship can presume an agency for itself but neglect that agency in the case of its audience.

There is, of course, no end to reading. No interpretation stops or "fixes" or aborts definitively this process. There is, in effect, only further reading, as perusal becomes understanding or dissent—whether spoken, written, narrated, or merely thought—which comes under consideration in turn. Shifting from Wollstonecraft back to the politics of abortion at the turn of the twenty-first century, we can see an example of this in the struggle over the meanings of fetal images. Lennart Nilsson's photographs dramatizing fetal development have become, as many have noted, the prototype of anti-abortion-rights messages post-*Roe v. Wade* (see figures 7–9).[58] Anti-abortion activists appropriated such images and redeployed their humanization of the fetus to build a case for the rights of the "pre-born" as against those of the women whose bodies carried them. In the United States at least, fetal images have become so overdetermined, it is not a stretch to say that as a culture, we hardly read them; the images merely signify

57 On the consequences of reading Wollstonecraft as a political precursor, see Susan Gubar, "Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of 'It Takes One to Know One,'" *Feminist Studies* 20:3 (1994), 453–73; Tom Furniss, "Nasty Tricks and Tropes: Sexuality and Language in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*," *Studies in Romanticism* 32 (1993), 177–209; and Anna Wilson, "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Search for the Radical Woman," *Genders* 6 (1989), 88–101. These essays replicate a tendency to treat her 1792 *Vindication* as Wollstonecraft's final statement on the status of women, a tendency I consider troublesome given the very different approach to similar issues in *Wrongs*.

58 See especially Petchesky, and Karen Newman, *Fetal Positions: Individualism, Science, Visuality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). Nilsson's photographs first appeared as "Drama of Life before Birth," *Life* (30 April 1965), and were reprinted in *A Child Is Born* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1965).

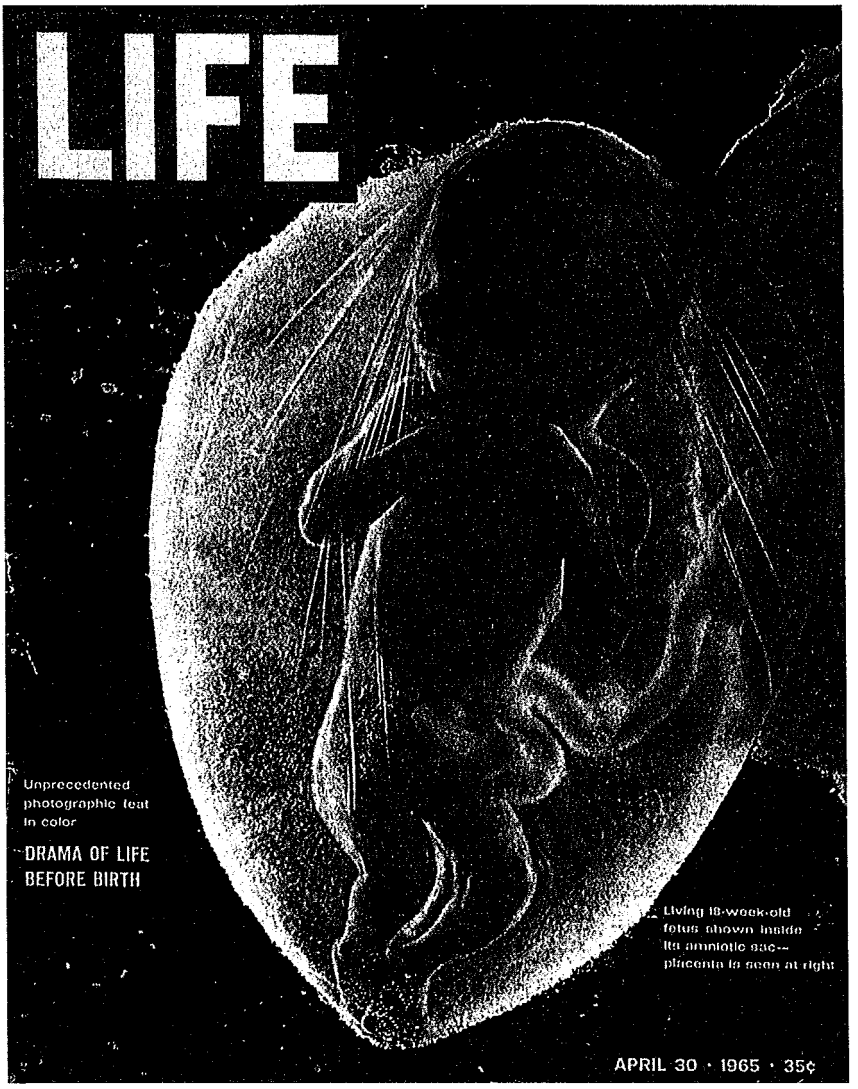
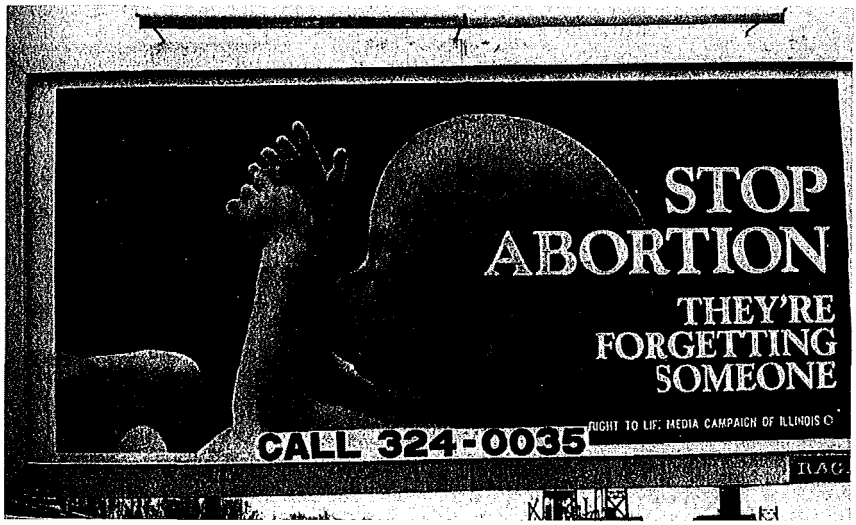


Figure 7. Cover of *Life* magazine, 30 April 1965. Photo: Lennart Nilsson/ Albert Bonniers Forlag AB, *A Child Is Born* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1965). Reproduced by permission.

Figure 8 (above). Fetus at 2 months, 1 week. Photograph: Lennart Nilsson/Albert Bonniers Forlag AB, *A Child is Born* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1965). Reproduced by permission.

Figure 9 (below). Illinois billboard, late 1980s. Photograph: Bruce Railsback. Photograph originally published in Celeste M. Condit, *Decoding Abortion Rhetoric: Communicating Social Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990). Reproduced by permission.



the political debate at hand. Feminist scholars have, however, begun the work of reinterpreting such images, correctively analysing them and their contexts in turn. To consider the materiality and history of the photographs is to ironically challenge the idea of "life" itself. Though portrayed by Nilsson and anti-abortionists as representations of *in utero* existence, nearly all the photographs are of fetuses that were spontaneously or surgically aborted. Like Hunter's *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, these images capture fetal development only when it has failed to continue. The "living being" is thus a fiction, produced as much by the viewers' ideological investments as the camera lens and strategic cropping.[59] Other reassessments accent the photographs' erasure of the woman's body, their complicity with a cultural logic that pregnant women are always already mothers (with all that entails), and their facilitation of social policy and legal decisions that make women themselves disappear.[60]

The struggle over the meaning of fetal images is also a struggle over the practices of reading that can, and will (if only momentarily), determine that meaning. As with Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs*, the potential for societal change is not simply in the content of the visuals, in recognition of the bodies they contain or erase, or in the narratives that we produce about them, but in the processes (feminist or not) of reading and interpretation themselves.

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59 "Living being" is the term that Axel Ingelman-Sundberg uses in the preface to Nilsson, *A Child Is Born*, n.p.

60 For the latter, see Rachel Roth, *Making Women Pay: The Hidden Costs of Fetal Rights* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).