Theodicy versus Feminist Strategy in Mary Wollstonecraft's Fiction

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Feminist critics have found it difficult to reconcile Mary Wollstonecraft's religious faith with her feminist polemic. Nowhere is this difficulty more evident than in her fiction, which is seldom viewed as a means of gauging Wollstonecraft's thought. Wollstonecraft took fiction seriously, however; and it is in her first novel, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), and her last, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* (1798), where she most vigorously addresses the opposite poles of her thought. Modern criticism tends to give the impression that *The Wrongs of Woman* is a superior revision of *Mary*—that *Mary* is little more than a rough draft—because the later novel is driven by a didacticism that is consistent with the familiar image of Wollstonecraft as a pioneering feminist. But *Mary* has ideas as well, though, because of their religious nature, they seem incongruous with the feminist strategy she employs in her last novel. Since the novels are superficially similar in plot and situation, juxtaposition highlights the major difference in philosophic tone: religious thinking abounds in *Mary* but is conspicuously absent in *The Wrongs of Woman*. *Mary* is not merely a work of religious devotion, but a philosophical work on the nature of evil and faith in adversity. Moreover, while *The Wrongs of Woman* is a feminist polemic that takes up in fiction some of the social issues Wollstonecraft had addressed earlier in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), *Mary* is a literary theodicy, in

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which Wollstonecraft addresses contemporary and personal theological concerns.

Theodicy attempts to prove the consistency of the notion that (1) there is an omnipotent God (2) who is wholly good and (3) that there is evil and suffering in the world.[1] The formula is not syllogistic, and the problem, then, is this: how could God, being omnipotent and wholly good, see and permit evil and suffering? Theodicy seeks a religious or philosophical solution to the problem of evil where Wollstonecraft's later brand of feminism seeks a political solution to problems of social evil.

The seeming contradiction between Wollstonecraft's religious faith and her feminist principles is highlighted in the literary theodicy of her first novel. But her fiction also points to the ways in which she would ultimately attempt to resolve the occasional conflict and apparent incongruity in her thinking. The language of theodicy appears in much of Wollstonecraft's writing, and her association of theodicy with the providential themes in her fiction indicates the potential philosophical quandary she finds herself in and seeks to resolve. Wollstonecraft bases her theodicy on providence, her feminism on society, and she explores in her two major works of fiction two very different concerns—theodicy and feminism—that engage her thinking at crucial stages in her writing career.

Wollstonecraft eventually abandoned theodicy in favour of a more political approach to social evil, but her early approach to literary theodicy in *Mary* is itself a proto-feminist move that directs her towards the feminist strategy she adopts in her later writing. Both forces, however, are at work in her novels: *Mary* reveals some feminist strains of thought in its critique of the condition of women in the late eighteenth century, although its feminism is not as pronounced as in Wollstonecraft's later novel. But what critics have failed to look at closely in the first novel is its providential theme and the difficult religious questions it raises for Wollstonecraft's heroine and for her own intellectual development. For Wollstonecraft, as for most people of her day, providence is a system of events which are perceived as occurring according to the will of God. The problem of evil occurs when the actual occurrence of adversity or suffering appears to conflict with our notions of a benevolent deity. As I will show, this conflict in Wollstonecraft's early writing is resolved through her resignation to providence, so, in this way, providence

1 Dennis Richard Danielson, *Milton's Good God: A Study in Literary Theodicy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 2. Danielson's book provides a clear definition of theodicy as I use the term in this essay.

provides a comfort for mortal suffering and, thus, a form of theodical resolution in optimistic terms.[2] But the whole concept of providence also has implications for woman's place in society, and it is with these implications that Wollstonecraft struggles in her writing.

In 1788, after abandoning a philosophical novel called "The Cave of Fancy," Wollstonecraft published *Mary, A Fiction*, her only completed novel. For nearly ten years afterwards, she occupied herself primarily with writing non-fictional prose, but, in 1796, began work on a polemical novel modelled upon William Godwin's *Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), in which the political philosopher fictionalized the arguments of his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). Wollstonecraft's later novel, *The Wrongs of Woman*, published posthumously by Godwin in 1798, has received the greater critical attention but only in so far as it appears to put into fictional practice what she preached in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.[3] *The Wrongs of Woman*, however, is more than a merely fictionalized version of the *Vindication*. She repeats many of the narrative techniques—in particular characterization—that she used in her first novel.

Mary, A Fiction lacks the polemical directive of *The Wrongs of Woman*, and many critics thus have overlooked it or dismissed it simply because it is not more than what it claims to be—"a fiction." Moreover, the two novels are superficially similar in plot, as are the names of the heroines—Mary and Maria. Both women are victims of parental neglect, both are forced into loveless marriages for monetary gain, and both fall in love with men of feeling though they are bound by ties of matrimony. Because the second novel is so clearly a feminist revision of the first, critics have devoted more attention to it and have failed to explore *Mary* as a novel in its own right. In an otherwise original essay on Wollstonecraft's fiction, Tilottama Rajan epitomizes this critical commonplace: "*The Wrongs of*

2 Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is perhaps the best example of providential resignation used thematically in eighteenth-century fiction.

3 Moira Ferguson and Janet Todd, for example, discuss the book as "A Fictional Vindication" in *Mary Wollstonecraft* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), pp. 104–16. Mary Poovey, likewise, points out that Wollstonecraft deliberately chose the sentimental novel to "reformulate the insights" of the *Vindication* for the female readership who most needed to hear her message. "Mary Wollstonecraft: The Gender of Genres in Late Eighteenth-Century England," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 15 (1982), 111. Gary Kelly calls it "a Revolutionary feminist novel" in the tradition of English Jacobin novelists such as Godwin and Thomas Holcroft. *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), p. 206.

Woman rewrites the characters and situations of *Mary* so as to turn them in a more revolutionary direction"; and since her purpose is to discuss the ways in which Wollstonecraft and Godwin confront "the textuality of political writing," she discusses *Mary* only as it fails to thematize itself as political fiction in the way *The Wrongs of Woman* and *Caleb Williams* do.[4] Gary Kelly claims that "the very title of the novel suggests that it is a revision of *Mary* in the light of *Caleb Williams*, offering an alternative between novel of purpose and variation on the author's name."[5] Ralph M. Wardle simply says that, to a modern reader, *Mary* seems like "sentimental nonsense" and goes on to discuss Wollstonecraft's "pathological" preoccupation with sorrow.[6] The book, then, appears primarily as an interesting anomaly and not as an important work of fiction and philosophy.

Few critics have recognized that *Mary* is a novel of ideas, and those who do fail to address fully the religious and philosophical concerns that pervade the novel. Kelly liberates the novel from its status as a rough draft of *The Wrongs of Woman* by exploring its attack on fashionable and false sensibility, its psychological realism, its class consciousness, and its narrative structure.[7] Syndy McMillen Conger explores the connections between sensibility, education, and genius and the ways in which the text itself undermines sensibility even as it appears to praise it.[8] Kelly and Conger have provided the most substantial and perceptive commentary on *Mary* to date, but neither addresses the religious and philosophical aspects of the novel. To some readers, perhaps, these may appear too obvious. According to Moira Ferguson, for instance, the book is "a tale of spiritual endurance on the domestic scene with a less than conventional love story infused with philanthropic attitudes," but this falls far short of summarizing what Wollstonecraft created in *Mary*.[9] Since no one has explored fully the religious issues in the novel, no one has yet identified the novel as a literary theodicy; but *Mary* is an important part

4 Tilottama Rajan, "Wollstonecraft and Godwin: Reading the Secrets of the Political Novel," *Studies in Romanticism* 27 (1988), 228, 222–25.

5 Mary Wollstonecraft, *"Mary, A Fiction" and "The Wrongs of Woman,"* ed. Gary Kelly (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. xvi. References are to this edition.

6 Ralph M. Wardle, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 75.

7 Kelly, pp. 40–54.

8 Syndy McMillen Conger, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994).

9 Ferguson and Todd, p. 31. Though Ferguson and Todd collaborated on their book on Wollstonecraft, they point out in their preface that the sections on Wollstonecraft's fiction are largely the work of Ferguson.

of this tradition that is crucial to eighteenth-century and romantic literature. Reading *Mary* as a literary theodicy will also help us gauge Wollstonecraft's religious thought at this point in her life and career.

Biographies of the last twenty years or so have tended to downplay Wollstonecraft's religious thought because it is difficult to trace. Most biographies can pinpoint her religion as conventionally Church of England until 1787 when, as Godwin reports in his *Memoir*, she stopped attending church services regularly. The details of Wollstonecraft's faith are sketchy after this date, though her writing evinces proof that she maintained a general spiritual faith in providence over doctrine: as Godwin grudgingly writes, "Her religion was, in reality, little allied to any system of forms; and, as she has often told me, was founded rather in taste, than in the niceties of polemical discussion."[10] Modern biographers do little to correct the misconception, initiated by Godwin, that Wollstonecraft was a godless woman after 1787 (or 1792), though at least one is overtly defensive about it.[11] This was also the year when, at Newington Green, Wollstonecraft met Richard Price, the dissenting preacher, mathematician, and political thinker, who, it seems, had some influence on Wollstonecraft's lapsing involvement in her church; she would go occasionally to hear him preach to the local Presbyterian congregation.[12] Price stood for a moral religion that included among duties to God duties to society, a conscientious benevolence required in order to be truly virtuous; Wollstonecraft responded to his liberal platform and his emphasis on "God-given reason." Price's influence resounds in *A Vindication*

10 William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"* (1798; reprinted New York: Garland, 1974), pp. 35, 33.

11 C. Kegan Paul opens his "prefatory memoir," *Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: Haskell House, 1971), with a vague defence of Wollstonecraft's faith: "The name of Mary Wollstonecraft has long been a mark of obloquy and scorn. Living and dying as a Christian, she has been called an atheist, always a hard name, but harder still some years ago" (p. v). The biographies vary in the ease with which you can chart Wollstonecraft's faith. The easiest is Margaret George, *One Woman's "Situation": A Study of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), which draws information mostly from the letters, which are, so far, the best source for understanding Wollstonecraft's faith. Claire Tomalin, in *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, (New York: Penguin, 1992), skirts the issue altogether, except for paraphrasing the information Godwin gives, though she does sum up the lacklustre religious atmosphere of the Joseph Johnson circle, which included Fuseli, Paine, Holcroft, and Blake (p. 103).

12 Godwin, *Memoirs*, pp. 32–35; Emily Sunstein, *A Different Face: The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (New York: Harper, 1975), pp. 96–97.

of the Rights of Men, written in 1790.[13] Wollstonecraft's resigned faith in providence in the face of adversity and evil is the major theme of her first novel in 1788.

Wollstonecraft's theodicy is a product of Enlightenment discourse on the problem of evil. The theological problem of evil is as ancient as the Book of Job, and the aim of theodicy is to vindicate God's justice in permitting the existence of evil and suffering, or, in Milton's words, to "justify the ways of God to men."[14] Theodicy was both a literary and philosophical convention when Wollstonecraft wrote her first novel, and she was no doubt familiar with its popular manifestations. After Milton, for whom the the problem of evil is easily discernible in the doctrine of original sin and not subject to human reasoning, Enlightenment thinkers such as Leibniz sought a rational solution that was consistent with faith in God and a sense of religious duty. Rejecting original sin, Leibniz argued that since God created this world it must be the best of all possible worlds. According to Leibniz, human or moral evil is the result of a human being's limitations and imperfections, but he argues that God's permission of evil is not inconsistent with God's benevolence because God acts in the best interests of the universe. A world in which there is a choice between good and evil is superior to one in which there is no freedom and therefore neither good nor evil. In *Theodicy*, Leibniz offered a dream of metaphysical optimism that became popularly associated fifty years later with writers such as Pope and Shaftesbury, and pessimistic perversions of it offered only counsels of despair for those who suffered. In *Candide* (1758), Voltaire ridicules Leibniz's optimistic rationale in the words of Pangloss, "All's for the best in the best of all possible worlds," while Pope secularizes it in his *Essay on Man* (1733); equating moral evil with physical evil, Pope concludes that "Whatever is, is right" (line 294).[15] Enlightenment thinkers had, to some degree, secularized theodicy by philosophizing it out of its doctrinal or scriptural spheres.

The emphasis of Enlightenment theodicy on finding a solution through reason to the problem of metaphysical and moral evil is no doubt what appealed to Wollstonecraft's keenly (if not always consistently) rational mind, and also to her sense of virtue and faith. For instance, in 1787, she

13 For more on the dissenting community, see Anthony Lincoln, *Some Political and Social Ideas of English Dissent, 1763–1800* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), pp. 101–50; Sunstein, pp. 96–98; Ferguson and Todd, pp. 44–54.

14 The word itself comes from the Greek *theos* (god) and *dikē* (justice), but it was Leibniz who coined the term *théodicée* in 1697 as the projected title of a work published in 1710.

15 See also in *Essay on Man*: "If plagues and earthquakes break not Heaven's design, / Why then a Borgia, or a Catiline?" (lines 155–56).

recommends to her sister William Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785), which bears the influence of Enlightenment theodicy, particularly (and most importantly to this discussion) in Wollstonecraft's rephrasing of Paley's "definition of virtue": "Virtue is the doing good to mankind in obedience to the *will* of God, and for the sake of *everlasting happiness*."[16] Implicit in Wollstonecraft's admiration of Paley's definition of virtue is her own willingness to submit to providence at this important stage in her intellectual development, and her seeming acceptance of optimistic theodicy. We also can see that this concept of benevolence shapes Wollstonecraft's portrayal of her heroine, Mary, whom "Heaven had endowed ... with uncommon humanity, to render her one of His benevolent agents, a messenger of peace" (p. 58). Mary appears to be the embodiment of Paley's principle, filtered through Wollstonecraft's own perception of providence.

Wollstonecraft was aware of other eighteenth-century thinkers who grappled with the problem of evil, such as Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, Pope, Rousseau, and Voltaire. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* testifies to her familiarity with Milton and Pope, with both of whom she takes issue throughout.[17] In the *Vindication*, she mostly responds to Pope's "On the Characters of Women." But Wollstonecraft refers to Pope's *Essay on Criticism* in her first collected letter of May 1773;[18] and both her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and her *Letters from Sweden* (1796) frequently allude to Pope. Furthermore, there can be little doubt about her familiarity with the works of Voltaire, if not on her own initiative then certainly through her association with Price, Fuseli, and, later, Godwin. As for Leibniz, Wollstonecraft quotes from his preface to *Theodicy* in chapter 4 of the *Vindication*.[19] *Mary* deliberately alludes to the Enlightenment discourse on theodicy in chapter 13, where Mary rides out alone to view the ruins of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 that had initiated a debate between Voltaire and Rousseau on the justice of God in permitting the deaths of more than ten thousand people (p. 28).[20] But the

16 *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Ralph M. Wardle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 156.

17 Steven Blakemore discusses in detail Wollstonecraft's "systematic and sustained subversion of *Paradise Lost*" in "Rebellious Reading: The Doubleness of Wollstonecraft's Subversion of *Paradise Lost*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 34:4 (1992), 451–80.

18 *Letters*, p. 51.

19 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 72. References are to this edition.

20 See Rousseau's *Lettre à Voltaire*, a reply to Voltaire's 1756 *Poème sur la désastre de Lisbonne*. Voltaire found Leibniz's popularized optimism distasteful and insensitive to those who suffer and

narrative itself raises the problem of evil—it is a novel about both suffering and religious perseverance. By juxtaposing earthly evil and suffering with the notion of an omnipotent benevolent God, the novel makes the problem become theoretical as well as theological: how could God, being all-powerful and wholly good, see and permit evil and suffering on earth?

Though she is not a consistent rationalist, Wollstonecraft, during her most polemical phase, followed the lead of Enlightenment thinkers in seeking a rational explanation for her faith in the face of evil; as she explained in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), published two years after *Mary* in response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, her God is equivalent to reason: "it is not to an arbitrary will, but to unerring reason I submit." Evil for Wollstonecraft, like most Enlightenment theodicists, is part of the grand design: "That both physical and moral evil were not only foreseen, but entered into the scheme of providence, when this world was contemplated in the divine mind, who can doubt, without robbing Omnipotence of a most exalted attribute?"[21] To question the divine justice of God in permitting evil is impertinence. Wollstonecraft's comments in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* are indicative of her thinking, two years earlier, in *Mary*, for its major theme is resignation to faith in the divine justice of providence, with the promise of a future state that will finally vindicate God's justice and benevolence.

In Mary, Wollstonecraft essentially creates a female Job who suffers but patiently maintains her faith in the divine justice of providence and achieves a kind of Christian heroism through her notion of benevolence on earth. More than anything else, the mechanism of theodicy at work in the novel is its language: the problem of evil arises early in the novel in the explicit statement "It was the will of Providence that Mary should experience almost every species of sorrow" (p. 17).[22] Wollstonecraft makes it clear that Mary should suffer like Job and, like Job, ask the essential question of theodicy, "Why me?" For the heroine, the answer is not easily discernible, and the narrator cries out in sympathy, "Inscrutable are the ways of Heaven!" (p. 42). The language Mary

experience evil; for Voltaire, such calm reasoning about the problem of evil discounts sympathy for the anguish of human beings. The earthquake and the discourse that accompanied it no doubt inspired his attack on Leibniz in *Candide*.

21 "A Vindication of the Rights of Men," *A Wollstonecraft Anthology*, ed. Janet Todd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 75, 79.

22 The language of theodicy is in many ways complementary to the language of sensibility, but it differs in its explicit referents to providential suffering, which connect the language of feeling to a greater will than that of the individual. See Conger's fascinating study *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility*.

herself uses clearly defines her role as a female Job: "Surely life is a dream, a frightful one! and after those rude, disjointed images are fled, will light ever break in? Shall I ever feel joy? Do all suffer like me; or am I framed so as to be particularly susceptible of misery?" (pp. 51–52). The novel shows that in such instances of extreme grief, where she seems to question the justice of providence, only reason can reconcile her to her faith: "Oh! reason, thou boasted guide, why desert me, like the world, when I most need thy assistance!" (p. 52). Mary herself realizes that, on earth, she only sees through a glass darkly and cannot account for the supreme wisdom and justice of God, and that, in eternity, she will not need to "reason about" but will "*feel* in what happiness consists" (p. 41). Just as the philosophical implications of the Book of Job are more awesome than the suffering he actually endures, *Mary* constructs itself as a theodicy largely through its main character's extended internal discourse on her suffering rather than through a heavy emphasis on the situations that obtain in it. In short, the novel is thought-driven rather than plot-driven. The omniscience of the narration and Mary's own exclamations construct a philosophical discourse on the nature of evil and faith.[23]

That *Mary* is before all else a philosophical novel is not surprising, considering Wollstonecraft's own "Advertisement." She points out that the work is deliberately without a strong plot so as to delineate the thought of a female philosopher: she describes her book as "an artless tale, without episodes," in which "the mind of a woman who has thinking powers is displayed." In the novel, Mary's thinking does not progress in a linear fashion, and the plot serves functionally as a means for providing instances of thought. Wollstonecraft also points out that the "grandeur" of this woman's mind comes from "the operations of its own faculties, not subjugated to opinion; but drawn by the individual from the original source." Clearly, the "original source" is God, whom she later refers to as "the Great First Cause," revealing the influence of Enlightenment rationalizations (p. 5). Mary, like Wollstonecraft, justifies her religion by thinking about it: "Neglected in every respect, and left to the operations of her own mind, she considered every thing that came under her inspection, and learned to think" (p. 4). Like Rousseau, Mary derives her religion from a close relationship with Nature, in which she contemplates

23 See also the analysis of "Wollstonecraft's unauthorized, feminist reading of the Book of Job" in Mary Wilson Carpenter, "Sibylline Apocalyptics: Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Job's Mother's Womb," *Literature and History* 12:2 (1986), 216. I focus on Wollstonecraft's use of the story of Job as applied to the creation of a female character rather than on a polemical revision of the Old Testament tale.

God: "She began to consider the Great First Cause, formed just notions of his attributes, and, in particular, dwelt on his wisdom and goodness" (p. 5). Nature inspires her faith in the benevolence and justice of providence early in the development of her mind and, Wollstonecraft implies, initiates her thought:

> Enthusiastic sentiments of devotion at this period actuated her; her Creator was almost apparent to her senses in his works; but they were mostly the grand or solemn features of Nature which she delighted to contemplate. She would stand and behold the waves rolling, and think of the voice that could still the tumultuous deep. (p. 10)

Mary accepts implicitly the omnipotence and benevolence of God, and her religious fervour derives from her intellect rather than a blind devotion to doctrine, though the "violent emotions" occasioned by her confirmation show that her faith is not entirely of the mind (p. 12). But reason forms the foundation of her faith: she thinks it right to "examine the evidence on which her faith was built"; she reads Joseph Butler's philosophical *Analogy of Religion*; and she delights in intellectual debate with opposing views, rejoicing "to find that those she should not concur with had some reason on their side" (p. 23).

The problem of evil arises when the intellect questions the reasons for faith, but for Mary the intellect can also vindicate for the individual the divine justice of providence. Wollstonecraft writes, "it is the office of Religion to reconcile us to the seemingly hard dispensations of providence." She does not, however, mean a strict adherence to doctrine but, rather, a rational system of faith initiated by "reason and conscience" (p. 58). On a visit to a convent, Mary sees that "religion does not consist in ceremonies; and that many prayers may fall from the lips without purifying the heart" (p. 29). According to the narrator, Mary's rational mind rejects blind faith but looks to her reason to justify the suffering she experiences.

An incident occurs in the novel that specifically raises the problem of evil and the question of God's benevolence. In chapter 20, the ship on which Mary is travelling takes on board the victims of a tragic storm at sea. Earlier in the novel, Mary finds religious justification in "the tumultuous deep" and in the contemplation of the voice that can still it; but just as the ocean testifies to the omnipotence of God, it also questions the benevolence of God: "Mary caught the poor trembling wretches as they stumbled into [the ship], and joined them in thanking that gracious Being, who though He had not thought fit to still the raging of the sea, had afforded them unexpected succour" (p. 45). Mary is perturbed by

the potential tragedy, for it reminds her of her own suffering; but, as she gazes into "the angry deep," she once again contemplates her faith and finds a justification for it in the promise of a future state of happiness: she comes to the conclusion that "The Lord God Omnipotent reigned, and would reign for ever, and ever!—Why then did she fear the sorrows that were passing away, when she knew that He would bind up the broken-hearted, and receive those who came out of great tribulation" (pp. 45–46).

The incident does not pass without the revelation of at least one tragic consequence, and here Wollstonecraft again asserts the justification of faith through the powers of the mind. Mary succours the poor woman whose husband has recently died and whose only child has been washed overboard in the storm, but Mary finds her "grossly ignorant," unable to accept Mary's reasoning faith in "the only solid source of comfort"; and Wollstonecraft clearly points out that "the poor creature could not receive comfort from the operations of her own mind" (p. 47). Mary has to adapt her solace to a more emotional level; but clearly what is at work here is the juxtaposition of the problem of evil with theodicy. In not accepting Mary's rational consolation, the poor woman, who gives way to "boisterous emotions," questions the justice of a God who permits her suffering (p. 47).

Wollstonecraft's theodicy is grounded in philosophical contemplation and reasoning. *Mary* is not mere religious cant; rather, it is an intellectual justification of faith for a post-Enlightenment audience. Mary's reason as well as her religion convinces her that she must resign herself to a faith in the divine justice of providence no matter how strenuously circumstances test her faith. She says that her soul lives "in futurity" (p. 47), and her fortitude depends on her belief in a future state where the wrongs of this world will dissolve. She therefore rejects the optimistic theodicy, such as that of Leibniz and Pope, that asserts essentially that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, and she retrieves theodicy from Pope's secularization to put it back in a religious context, though not aligned with specific doctrine. Mary's religion teaches her resignation and the hope of a future state, but it is her benevolence that renders "life supportable" (p. 68). Mary undertakes a kind of Christian heroism to ease her "aching heart" by relieving the poor (p. 50); her philanthropy in the service of God, Wollstonecraft writes, "carried her out of herself" (p. 10). Mary's Job-like patience and resignation, however, are most seriously tested by her love for Henry, whom she cannot marry. As he approaches death, she resigns herself to "The will of Heaven" (p. 64); and when he dies, "an enthusiastic devotion" seizes herself and she dedicates herself "to

the service of that Being into whose hands, she had committed the spirit she almost adored" (p. 66).

Though Mary reaffirms her faith in the divine justice of providence, Wollstonecraft's conclusion is bitter in its resignation: Mary admits that she is left with a void "that even benevolence and religion could not fill" (p. 68). And, as Mary anticipates the glorious future state, Wollstonecraft drops her first hint of polemical intent: "She thought she was hastening to that world *where there is neither marrying*, nor giving in marriage" (p. 68). But, even here, her political statement is derived from Luke 20:27–28, where Jesus tells the Sadducees, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage." Wollstonecraft uses the Gospel lesson rather subversively by giving it what we might call today a feminist slant. At the end of the novel, Wollstonecraft acknowledges what is clear from chapter 5—that Mary's suffering is largely due to her unfortunate marriage, forced upon her by her parents because she is a woman. But her theodical conclusion precludes such didacticism: Mary's resignation to the divine justice of providence undercuts any social criticism Wollstonecraft might want to make. Social criticism calls for political solutions to the problem of evil, not metaphysical ones, so it does little good to attack the evil of social institutions such as marriage in a work that so ardently anticipates the afterlife as a relief from earthly evil. Theodicy provides a justification for the evil that exists in the world and a means of dealing with it—not a solution that eradicates it.

Much of Wollstonecraft's early writing attests to her fascination with the problem of evil, which for her is not so much a religious perplexity as a philosophical quandary. Her letters prior to the publication of *Mary* firmly establish the attitude she would later incorporate into the structure of her novel. In her letters, she frequently employs the language of theodicy that pervades the novel. As early as 1779, she wrote to Jane Arden from Bath on the subject of her father's violent temper and imprudence:

> Pain and disappointment have constantly attended me since I left Beverly. I do not however repine at the dispensatons of providence, for my philosophy, as well as my religion will ever teach me to look on misfortunes as blessings, which like a bitter potion is disagreeable to the palate tho' 'tis grateful to the Stomach—I hope mine have not been thrown away on me, but that I am both the wiser, and the better for them.[24]

24 *Letters*, pp. 65–66.

Here, she clearly distinguishes between a rational philosophical approach and a devotional religious one, for she acknowledges that her sufferings are, like bitter medicine, part of a greater scheme for goodness. And, like her heroine Mary, she gains a moral fortitude from them. She goes on to admit, however, that her justification comes from a determined act of reasoning:

> Tho' I talk so philosophically now, yet I must own, when under the pressure of afflictions, I did not think them so rationally; my feelings were then too acute, and it was not 'till the Storm was in some measure blown over, that I could acknowledge the justness of it.[25]

In a subsequent letter to Jane Arden, again she places emphasis on rationality: "Reason, as well as religion convinces me all has happen'd for the best." She admits that sufferings are ultimately beneficial, for they not only put a proper perspective on life but also give "those that are tried by them, a kind of early old age," meaning a sadly attained wisdom and moral fortitude. Two years before the publication of *Mary*, she clearly articulates what would be its theme: "Here we have no resting place nor any stable comfort but what arises from our resignation to the will of Heaven and our firm reliance on those precious promises delivered to us by Him who brought light and immortality into the world."[26] And, in her *Original Stories from Real Life*, published the same year as *Mary*, she reiterates the message of resignation adapting the language of theodicy for children: "The Almighty, who never afflicts but to produce some good end, first sends diseases to children to teach them patience and fortitude."[27]

Immediately following the publication of *Mary* and *Original Stories*, Wollstonecraft began rethinking her philosophy as it pertains to issues of theodicy. As early as 1790, Wollstonecraft considered theodicy in social terms, but she still focused on individual justice and suffering. In the October issue of the *Analytical Review*, Wollstonecraft criticized approaches to theodicy that qualify the proposition that God is wholly good in such a way that goodness has no real meaning:

> To say that the circle of life and death is right, only because nothing evil can proceed from God, is merely to confess our ignorance in a pious style; but it neither points out the necessary cause of this flux and reflux, nor extinguishes the involuntary horrour which such a system of cruelty excites.

25 *Letters*, p. 66.

26 *Letters*, pp. 69, 110.

27 *A Wollstonecraft Anthology*, p. 51.

To assert God's goodness by denying the existence of evil is an act of the will rather than the intellect; Wollstonecraft, therefore, denies the optimistic assertion that all is for the best because it does nothing to address the evil that is ostensibly present in society. She goes on to address individual evil and universal good and the inscrutable question of God's benevolence. Wollstonecraft fully acknowledges the existence of evil, but her concern lies in the reconciliation of it with her notion of a benevolent God. Indeed, she casts suspicion on the idea of universal good because it tends to infringe on the good of the individual and thus contradicts God's benevolence and omnipotence:

> It seems to derogate from either the goodness, justice or power of God, to suppose that individuals are sacrificed to promote the good of the whole;—for *that* universal good appears in a very questionable shape which arises from partial evil.

Wollstonecraft concludes that "it is therefore safest to confess our ignorance" rather than fall prey to theological voluntarism and thereby brand "the supreme being ... with cruelty and oppression or impotence" when the blame lies elsewhere. She admits that it is best to suspend judgment on the problem of evil, since "no ray of philosophy ... has yet visited this benighted land sufficiently luminous to dissipate our doubts."[28] Enlightenment theodicy, for Wollstonecraft, has failed to answer sufficiently the problem of evil, so she persists in her faith in providence.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, she attacks Burke's emotional conservatism with her rationalist philosophy, urging that reason guide humanity to the fulfilment of God's law. A month or so after the October *Review*, she managed to reconcile the problem of individual evil and the prospect of universal good. She addresses the problem of evil, but with her philosophic eye directed towards society:

> the business of the life of a good man should be, to separate light from darkness; to diffuse happiness, whilst he submits to unavoidable misery. And a conviction that there is much unavoidable wretchedness, appointed by the grand Disposer of all events, should not slacken his exertions: the extent of what is possible can only be discerned by God. The justice of God may be vindicated by a belief in a future state; but, only by believing that evil is educing good for the individual, and not for an imaginary whole. The happiness of the whole must arise from the happiness of the constituent parts, or the essence of justice is sacrificed to a supposed grand arrangement.[29]

28 Mary Wollstonecraft, review of William Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History*, *Analytical Review* 8 (1790), 141.

29 *A Wollstonecraft Anthology*, p. 79.

The "future state" Wollstonecraft refers to no longer means resignation to the divine will of providence but rather to the future good of society. She scorns efforts to improve society by satisfying the needs of the multitude because they tend to "justify oppression" rather than "correct abuses." Justice is an individual issue. Theodicy can only answer the perplexity of the individual who ponders the problem of evil, but if the evil that the individual endures promises potential individual good then the entire society benefits. She ardently defends individual rights and liberties throughout. In a review written at about the same time as the *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft insists that evil is justifiable when it procures individual good and is presumably anticipated by God, though she seems hesitant to account for all evil this way:

> The existence of evil may be denied, when, what we call by that name, is considered as the surest means of procuring the greatest good for the individual, and that it could not exist without the permission of God, who foresaw it, when he called us into being; but who that has attentively surveyed the world can deny the existence of *present* evil?

Wollstonecraft admits that evil has the potential for universal good, but she apparently is baffled still by the inscrutability of the problem of evil.[30]

Claire Tomalin writes of Wollstonecraft's faith in providence that "had such Christian resignation prevailed with her there would have been no *Vindication*."[31] Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* marks an important turning point in her thinking, a point at which the theodicy of *Mary* evolves into the feminist strategy of *The Wrongs of Woman*. Tomalin's biography tends to paint a distorted picture of Wollstonecraft's faith, but Wollstonecraft had to rethink her resignation to the divine will of providence in order for her strategy to work in the *Vindication*. It is important to remember, however, that the *Vindication* is in many ways an ostensibly religious work.[32] She bases her argument

30 Mary Wollstonecraft, review of Catherine Macaulay, *Letters on Education: with Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects*, *Analytical Review* 8 (1790), 250. Wollstonecraft makes reference to an unnamed "German writer," whose ideas she fears her readers might think it blasphemous to repeat. It is likely that she is referring to Leibniz. Elsewhere in her review, however, she slights the philosophy of Lord Bolingbroke, who helped Pope systemize his argument in *The Essay on Man* (p. 251).

31 Tomalin, p. 59.

32 Wollstonecraft invokes religion for her attack on the Bible and on Rousseau, Milton, Pope, and others. She mounts her attack on Rousseau on the grounds that, when he misunderstands woman, he misunderstands the nature of God and humanity as well. For more on her response to Milton, see Blakemore. Wollstonecraft's handling of biblical material has generated some interesting new studies: she obviously deals with Genesis by way of Milton, but William Richey recently has explored her feminist rereadings of the Fall in the light of the new translation of the Bible that the radical priest Alexander Geddes was preparing during his acquaintance

upon her own rational Christianity that asserts "God is Justice itself"; thus "women were destined by providence to acquire human virtues" and thus to receive education on equal terms with all humans (pp. 100, 20). Wollstonecraft maintains her faith in providence throughout but limits the work's explicit language of theodicy only to its opening chapters. She attacks Rousseau's illogical thinking on the basis of its inconsistency with rational theodicy; Rousseau's assertion in *Émile* that humankind introduced evil and defiled God's immaculate creation is a prime target for Wollstonecraft's justification of the divine will of God. Mounting her attack on Rousseau's illogic, she asserts that, when God created humanity:

> he could see that present evil would produce future good. Could the helpless creature whom he called from nothing break loose from his providence, and boldly learn to know good by practising evil, without his permission? No. — How could that energetic advocate for immortality argue so inconsistently?

She distinctly establishes her faith in God's omnipotence, benevolence, and justice at the outset of her *Vindication*: "Firmly persuaded that no evil exists in the world that God did not design to take place," she proudly exclaims, "I build my belief on the perfection of God" (pp. 14–15). And she elsewhere points out that morality chiefly is derived from "the character of the supreme Being" and that God "must be just, because he is wise, he must be good, because he is omnipotent" (p. 46). Thus, Wollstonecraft reasons her faith.

When Wollstonecraft wrote of present evil producing future good, however, she intimated an earthly paradise. For the heroine of her first novel, the promise of heaven renders present evil tolerable. But the *Vindication* found Wollstonecraft at a point at which she was no longer willing to suffer the evils of this life in anticipation of a heavenly reward. As Tomalin suggests, she no longer was content to accept "the seemingly hard dispensations of providence." Instead, she sought a solution rather than a reconciliation. By the time she wrote the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft clearly saw the problem of evil in a different light; her individual concern about faith becomes a question of injustice, and resignation is not a defence in the face of such a formidable foe. It is clearly a message she did not wish to send. Rather, Wollstonecraft looked towards a future state on earth, refusing to accept that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds: "Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all

with Wollstonecraft at Newington Green. "'A More God-like Portion': Mary Wollstonecraft's Feminist Rereadings of the Fall," *English Language Notes* 32:2 (1994). Also, see Carpenter for more on Wollstonecraft's treatment of the Book of Job.

was right originally: a crowd of authors that all *is* now right: and I, that all will *be* right" (p. 15). And, as theodicy dissolves from her argument, she invokes Pope's theodicy once again:

> "Whatever is, is right," [Rousseau] then proceeds triumphantly to infer. Granted; —yet, perhaps, no aphorism ever contained a more paradoxical assertion. It is a solemn truth with respect to God. He, reverentially I speak, sees the whole at once, and saw its just proportions in the womb of time; but man, who can only inspect disjointed parts, finds many things wrong; and it is a part of the system, and therefore right, that he should endeavour to alter what appears to him to be so, even while he bows to the Wisdom of his Creator, and respects the darkness he labours to disperse. (pp. 84–85)

Wollstonecraft, therefore, did not discount the individual act of theodicy, but she acknowledged the incompatibility of its philosophy with that of social change and progress. God's ways remain ultimately inscrutable, though Wollstonecraft appreciates the characteristically human act of pondering them respectfully. But humanity, with its limited perspective, should strive foremost for perfecting what is wrong in the system, for this too is part of God's design. And, thus, Wollstonecraft returned to fiction in 1796 with a new strategy.

Wollstonecraft clearly understood this strategy when she revisited the situations of *Mary* nearly a decade later in *The Wrongs of Woman*, in focusing upon forced marriages as one of the major wrongs of society's treatment of women. By 1797, Wollstonecraft was displeased with *Mary*, and she clearly meant to rewrite it from an entirely different perspective.[33] In that revision, she avoided any substantial religious references and any contemplation of the divine justice of providence. She attacked social injustice and increased the intensity of the language of suffering. Maria does not ponder the existence of evil but accepts it as a consequence of being born a woman. Therein lies Wollstonecraft's feminist strategy: evil is a fact of female existence, and Wollstonecraft uses the language of suffering to expose the futility of theodicy and the reckless asceticism of providential resignation.

The Wrongs of Woman, in several places, appears to answer the theodicy of *Mary, A Fiction* in its own terms. Wollstonecraft sharpened her

33 Wollstonecraft wrote to her sister, Everina, "As for my Mary, I consider it as a crude production, and do not very willingly put it in the way of people whose good opinion, as a writer, I wish for" (*Letters*, p. 385).

feminist attack, only vaguely discernible at the end of her first novel. To do this, she discounted theodicy and its philosophical justifications but borrowed its language to make the evil more acute and more universal. Also, this novel is more plot-driven than her first so that she can illustrate through situations her social criticism. Wollstonecraft makes it clear that *Mary* is about the mind of an individual woman, but *The Wrongs of Woman*, though it is subtitled *Maria*, is clearly about the suffering of all women. To underline its universality, she introduced an additional woman protagonist, Jemima, from a lower social class, whose account is perhaps Wollstonecraft's most severe indictment of society. In her first chapter, Wollstonecraft introduces the characters so as to mark a distinct contrast with Mary's enlightened religious devotion. Instead of a heroic philanthropy, Jemima practises a "misanthropy of despair" (p. 82); and where Mary understands the beneficence of "the Great First Cause," Maria contemplates "the most terrific of ruins—that of a human soul" (p. 83). Unhampered by Mary's egocentricity, Maria considers "the oppressed state" of all women (p. 120); and the language of suffering leads up to her climactic melodramatic exclamation for all of her sex, "Why was I not born a man, or why was I born at all?" (p. 139). Wollstonecraft is no longer interested in questioning the divine will of providence because the answer is no longer relevant to the issues at hand.

Wollstonecraft seems most pointedly to address *Mary* in the first chapter of her second novel. With contempt, she evoked the theodicy of her first novel: "life, however joyless, was not to be indolently resigned, or misery endured without exertion, and proudly termed patience" (p. 76). She scoffs at the female Job and providential resignation. While *Mary* only hints at sexual injustice in its conclusion, *The Wrongs of Woman* declares it openly: Maria asks, "Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?" (p. 79). Jemima, however, realizes the futility of pondering the iniquity of the universe: "she had felt the crushing hand of power, hardened by the exercise of injustice, and ceased to wonder at the perversions of the understanding, which systematize oppression" (p. 80).

Wollstonecraft implies that theodicy justifies not only God but oppression as well; for, if people accept that all is for the best, then the incentive for making things better evaporates. Wollstonecraft again seems to share the same distaste for optimistic rationale that Voltaire ridicules in his attack on Leibniz. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, she clearly has arrived at an understanding that theodicy may soothe a theologically troubled individual but does little to assuage the evils of society. As Darnford points out,

theodicy is hopelessly inappropriate for addressing social problems: borrowing words from *Mary*, he disparages philosophers such as Edmund Burke who rationalized social evils through theodicy, "insisting that it is the lot of the majority to be oppressed in this life ... as the only way to justify the dispensations of Providence" (p. 115). Wollstonecraft adapted the language of theodicy to politicize evil and suffering in her final work. Clearly, in *The Wrongs of Woman*, she revised her philosophical justification of faith to fit her feminist strategy. She understood that her attack on social evil and suffering would be futile as theodicy.

In her biography of Wollstonecraft, Edna Nixon asserts that, at the time of the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft's "faith in a Being perfectly wise, governed by reason, must be taken as the core of her religion"; Nixon goes on to add that "she had not yet experienced in life the degree of injustice and sorrow which, it would seem, no Being governed wholly by reason could tolerate."[34] Though Wollstonecraft's first novel attests to her familiarity with suffering, there is still a compulsion to view Wollstonecraft's change in literary outlook as a manifestation of a shift in her own faith away from resignation towards doubt. Janet Todd provocatively describes Wollstonecraft's philosophy by 1794: "It appears that belief in reason has survived the horrors of the Revolution and the miseries of Wollstonecraft's own experience, but that trust in an all-knowing and all-loving God, so present as comfort in the early works, has been a victim of the onslaught."[35] Certainly, the intense despair of Wollstonecraft's letters to Gilbert Imlay in the second half of 1795 finds her recoiling from "the despotic hand of fate" rather than rushing to the loving arms of God.[36] Still, if Wollstonecraft's faith in reason has remained intact, it is important not to forget how closely intertwined her faith in reason is with her faith in God. Her change in literary strategy neither signifies a shift in her own personal faith nor precludes one. Her last specific reference to her own faith, written after quarrelling with Godwin, is: "how can you blame me for taken [sic] refuge in the idea of a God, when I despair of finding sincerity on earth?"[37]

The biographies, nonetheless, leave the impression that Wollstonecraft's major status as a pioneering feminist is somehow at odds with her role as a religious thinker; this attitude may contribute to the lacklustre critical reception of her fiction in the twentieth century. Both novels

34 Edna Nixon, *Mary Wollstonecraft: Her Life and Times* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1971), p. 97.

35 Ferguson and Todd, p. 83.

36 *Letters*, p. 295.

37 *Letters*, p. 404.

display rigorous thinking on some difficult issues still prevalent in popular discourse. Wollstonecraft was troubled throughout her entire life by seeming providential injustice—when bad things happen to good women, such as her heroine Mary, her friend Fanny Blood, and herself—but she learned to avoid cosmic complaint in favour of political action. Wollstonecraft's two major works of fiction demand a consideration of these two seemingly contradictory lines of thought in her career—theodicy and feminism—because, in them, she addresses many of the same problems modern feminists must confront when their religious faith seems at odds with their feminist principles.

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