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Challenges to the Traditional Model of Moral Philosophy Offered in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

A Response Paper by Annaka Sikkink

In her essay “Mary Wollstonecraft and the Separation of Poetry and Politics,” Catharine Villanueva Gardner offers an interpretation of Mary Wollstonecraft’s work that challenges the commonly accepted notion of moral philosophy. Gardner contends that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Wollstonecraft’s most famous work and the one most often accepted as philosophical) does not strictly adhere to the form of the rational Enlightenment treatise, as is often assumed. Instead, Gardner contends, the work is informed by Wollstonecraft’s notion of sensibility and, as such, smudges the boundaries between rational philosophy and a more intimate, emotional style of expression. Gardner’s main goal in this essay is to identify Wollstonecraft’s notion of sensibility, as it is expressed in the *Vindication* and her other works, and to argue that this notion has a philosophical significance which changes the way Wollstonecraft’s works should be read. In particular, Gardner points out that many of the weaknesses commonly associated with the *Vindication* will be seen to depend on the notion of it as an Enlightenment treatise; they will disappear once that classification is challenged.

According to Gardner, most writers criticizing Wollstonecraft have accepted the *Vindication* almost without question as an Enlightenment treatise, i.e. one which is, by definition, associated with the emphasis of reason over passion (in a “reason/passion dichotomy” (83). These writers base their opinion of the *Vindication* as an

Enlightenment treatise on its argumentative form and on Wollstonecraft's own stated appreciation for reason. As a result, they have assumed that Wollstonecraft accepts and endorses the reason/passion dichotomy and chooses to work entirely within the rationalist/Enlightenment framework. One of the passages from the *Vindication* most often used to defend this interpretation is: "I shall be employed about things, not words! And, anxious to render my sex more respectable members of society, I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversations" (quoted in Gardner, 102). Gardner argues that, contrary to popular opinion, this statement does not indicate Wollstonecraft's complete support of Enlightenment rationality. Gardner argues that Wollstonecraft holds contempt for traditionally feminine "flowery diction," but that Wollstonecraft contrasts this objectionable form with "true sensibility." According to Gardner, it is this notion of sensibility, which is neither perfectly rational nor completely non-rational, that informs all of Wollstonecraft's work.

Gardner makes use of a wide array of Wollstonecraft's many writings, including her novels, letters, and reviews, to formulate her interpretation of Wollstonecraft's notion of true sensibility. Gardner claims that Wollstonecraft's "sensibility" is a distinct form of emotional responsiveness—one that must be cultivated in order to appreciate the truly beautiful things of life. In addition, Gardner claims that, for Wollstonecraft, a developed sensibility is necessary in order to live a moral life. It encourages love of others, which can potentially develop into love of God (or perfect love). According to Gardner,

Wollstonecraft's view can be expressed this way: "Women must be allowed the freedom to feel genuinely, and for their feelings—guided by Christian principles—to direct them towards virtue" (110).¹

According to Gardner, when Wollstonecraft's works are taken as a whole, "sensibility" can be seen through two noteworthy qualities of Wollstonecraft's writing. The first quality, somewhat counter-intuitively, is the simplicity and lack of polish in her writing. Wollstonecraft admires this quality in other writers, due to her belief that (in Gardner's words): "the writer who has true delicacy of taste will write genuinely and simply, and speak the truth, while the writer of artificial feelings will write empty, self-conscious, rhetoric" (100). The second quality, especially noticeable in the *Vindication*, is Wollstonecraft's use of "'flights of imagination' as well as frequent bursts of dramatic—even apparently rambling—hyperbole" (96). According to Gardner, this quality of writing can also be explained as genuine sensibility—as moments when Wollstonecraft's intense feeling and imagination come through in the text most strongly. Gardner argues that when sensibility is recognized in Wollstonecraft's work, it is clear that the *Vindication* is not an Enlightenment treatise. Gardner's point is that by

¹ This ideal of true sensibility is contrasted with what Wollstonecraft saw as the over-developed sensibility of many women. When not tempered by reason and understanding, this type of sensibility leads to sensualism and false morality, as well as an occupation with trivial concerns and no care for serious ones. Wollstonecraft despised this type of sensibility, from which came her critique of the flowery diction typical of much writing by and for women during her time.

intentionally using sensibility to inform her “rational” arguments, Wollstonecraft is challenging the reason/passion dichotomy. Since that dichotomy, according to Gardner, is the foundation of rationalist and Enlightenment thought, Wollstonecraft did not, and did not intend to, write a traditional Enlightenment treatise. With this in place, many of the supposed weaknesses of Wollstonecraft’s writing, including her apparent adoption of a “masculine” form of rational discourse criticized bitterly by some modern feminists, no longer apply.

I found Gardner’s argument compelling. Gardner offers ample textual support, assisted immeasurably by Wollstonecraft’s own criticism of her contemporaries, for her claims about Wollstonecraft’s notion of sensibility. Unfortunately, Gardner’s essay ends with no suggestions about how to resolve the problems created by this new interpretation of the *Vindication*. One could agree (as I do) with Gardner’s position that acceptance of the key roles that emotion and sensibility play in Wollstonecraft’s work presents a challenge to the dominant model of modern moral philosophy. One could also accept (as I do) Gardner’s critique of the traditional disciplinary divisions, especially between philosophy and literature. “Accepting that Wollstonecraft was not making any rigid distinctions between politics/morality and poetry requires us to include in our discussion of political or moral theory elements that fall into the category of the ‘non-philosophical’ on the dominant model of moral philosophy” (118). Nevertheless, despite such arguments, Gardner offers few clues as to what this implies about philosophical methodology or how to manage this integration of philosophy and poetry. Indeed, the main role Gardner attributes to

Wollstonecraft's use of sensibility and emotion is to hold our attention and capture our imaginations. This function is insufficient to establish sensibility and emotion as an essential part of Wollstonecraft's philosophy. If poetry is to be accepted as a part of philosophy, it must have more influence than to merely enliven the presentation of rational ideas. It must be shown to be significant in and inseparable from the philosopher's argument.

Thus, although Gardner's ideas are well supported and provide an unusual but informative perspective on Wollstonecraft's work, they are, at best, preliminary. This is not to say that Gardner's work is of little value. To the contrary, her essay does adequately establish that the current classification of Wollstonecraft's work ignores many of its subtleties and creates problems with her ideas and her writing that would otherwise not be there. The essay also points out how the dominant model of philosophy supports and entrenches these types of interpretations. What is missing is a more nuanced or explicit account of what constitutes philosophical methodology and how the traditional disciplinary divisions between philosophy and literature may be bridged. Having not addressed these issues—issues raised by her critique of traditional readings of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, I conclude that Gardner's work is just the first step in what will hopefully be a fruitful path for investigation.

Source

Catherine Villanueva Garder, REDISCOVERING WOMEN PHILOSOPHERS: PHILOSOPHICAL GENRE AND THE BOUNDARIES OF PHILOSOPHY (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000): Chapter "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Separation of Poetry and Politics,"