


of the very minor wonders of the modern world that a Wales still exists', even if the Welshness that persists is one he feels that is 'becoming ever more a matter of sentiment [...] than of substance' (pp. 111-12).

Be this as it may, Thomas does ultimately concede that 'the single most persistent and distinctive identifying feature of the Welsh people [...] has been their mute, inexplicable, unbreakable determination to survive' (p. 112). One cannot escape the tones of admonition and pessimism that underscore the closing chapter and guide us to the ending of what is otherwise a powerful presentation of Welsh history. Though jarring at first, Thomas's closing jeremiads can indeed be seen to align with the book's overall conceit: indeed, he does announce in the introduction that he has 'long felt' that '[t]he Welsh [...] are not only an invisible people, they are a Tinker Bell of a people', having reminded readers of the conceit that 'her very existence [...] is entirely dependent on there being children enough who stubbornly continue [...] to believe in fairies' (p. xiii). One can scarcely claim that there has not been Welsh literature or culture since the Methodists (indeed, half of this book details the innovations that succeeded them). Second, they serve as a challenge to his subjects and audience to defy such a verdict. The very existence of this book reminds us that there is life in Welsh literature, and many yet who still believe in her. 

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<<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20079263>>

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Date of acceptance: 14 January 2023.



Susan J. Wolfson, *On Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman': The First of a New Genus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 185 pp. ISBN 978-0-2312-0625-9; £12.99 (pb).

Amidst the vast bibliography devoted to Mary Wollstonecraft, Susan Wolfson's *On Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman'* will not go unnoticed. While the book does not necessarily reveal new information about one of the most significant oeuvres of Enlightenment and Romantic Britain, it stands out for how the author adeptly unveils significant new interpretations of Wollstonecraft's pioneering text. Wolfson's eminently readable and enjoyable book contributes essential new scholarship that recontextualises our understanding of the culture and politics of the long eighteenth century, its heirs and what could be deemed as different waves, forms and proto-forms of feminist literary criticism.

This intention is made clear in the first lines, as Wolfson connects Wollstonecraft with her lasting legacy, emphasising the 'two productions' (p. 1) for

which she became widely recognised: her 1792 book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and her daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, author of *Frankenstein* (1818). Departing from Wollstonecraft herself, whom she regards as a ‘Feminist before “Feminism”’ (p. 14) and an early pioneer of ‘what we now call feminist literary critique’ (p. 103), Wolfson establishes a feminist historiography of the philosopher, expanding her intellectual heritage to that of her daughter and, by extension, to all those whose literary lives have been influenced by their works—including ours today. To achieve this, Wolfson has divided her book into eight sections, comprising an introduction, six chapters and an epilogue, which chronologically trace Wollstonecraft’s life and works. This structure allows for the organic introduction of contextual information and the incorporation of diverse reader perspectives, which has clearly helped Wolfson present quite a nuanced interpretation of Wollstonecraft, her work and studies thereof. An example of this can be found in her critiques of Mary Poovey’s presentist reading of Wollstonecraft in 1984 (pp. 133–34) and her objection to Barbara Taylor’s overly strict historical approach (p. 159), as Wolfson seems to search for a middle ground between these two positions. However, because the book is not intended as an academic study for the experts on the subject, she does not engage in highly specialised and scholarly debates *per se*.¹ Rather, she adopts a conversational tone, which she uses to bring to the discussion the voices of Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Pennell and Edmund Burke, among others.²

The Prologue (pp. 1–18) sets the overall picture of the societal fabric of Wollstonecraft’s England and hints at the scandals surrounding her life and works, such as *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden* (1796) and the unfinished *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798)—texts that Wolfson returns to in detail. While this overview is key for the general understanding of the author and the text in question, it also helps Wolfson craft the poignant story that will lead the discussion over the chapters to follow: a story led by a ‘soul’, ‘the soul of the Vindicator’ (p. 19). This narrative begins to take shape right from the Prologue, where Wolfson explores the meaning of ‘Vindication’ as defined by Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries: both the authors who influenced her writing, namely John Milton and Alexander Pope, as well as her intellectual and political adversaries, such as Edmund Burke.

Indeed, as Chapter 1 shows and its title anticipates, it serves her to explore ‘How Mary Wollstonecraft Became “the Author of *A Vindication of Rights of Woman*”’ despite an early life of ‘home oppressions’: the convulsive political scenery of the French Revolution, and, in the words of Woolf, the problems of being a ‘revolt all her life—against tyranny, against law, against convention’ (qtd in Wolfson, p. 19). In Chapter 2, Wolfson contrasts a variety of portraits of Wollstonecraft’s ‘plural personae’ and shows how, both in painting and writing, she was characterised as something of ‘a serious woman’ (p. 39). For this, she chooses a number of pictures that help illustrate her point, including, of course, the most famous painting by John Opie (c. 1790–1791) in which Wollstonecraft

appears as a solemn thinker: an opinion held by contemporaries such as William Hazlitt, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Blake. The impact she made on these people clearly responded, as Wolfson suggests, to her own ideas on the 'accomplished woman' and the 'submissive charms' that she seemed compelled to succumb in order to achieve 'the received opinion of female excellence' (ibid). These are indeed quotations that Wolfson rescues from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which, coupled with the references she identifies from *Paradise Lost*, Opie's portrait and Wollstonecraft's voice as fantasised by Blake in his poem 'Mary', reveal an intellectual combatant who 'will humble [her] Beauty' and 'will not dress fine' for convention (qtd in Wolfson, p. 39). As the chapter continues, the reader encounters other graphic and constructed ideas on Wollstonecraft that, as her notoriety rose, she could no longer control. However, for Wolfson's readers, as for all those who had once followed her story, it is the image of her as 'Vindicator' that endures.


Having thus given a face and a more material character to her subject, Wolfson uses Chapter 3 to examine her relationship and its far-reaching impact on the political and cultural landscape of modern Britain and beyond. To the public, the author of *Rights of Woman* became then known as the 'Amazon' who 'stepped out' (p. 59): an epithet that Wolfson here reclaims again as it not only anticipates the next steps in the author's life and career but also holds great relevance for understanding the situation seen in Chapter 2. As Wolfson reveals, the origin of such an epithet lies in a line of William Roscoe's satirical poem on 'Burke's vanquishing by a warrior woman' named 'Wollstonecraft' (qtd in Wolfson, p. 42). A revolt, an amazon, a warrior: along with the visual representation of the author, this interweaving of ideas not only gives cohesion Wolfson's story of the 'Vindicator', but also sets the tone for what will become its actual plot. The employment of these narrative techniques, once more, confirms Wolfson's ability to write for multiple audiences simultaneously—as demonstrated previously in *The Annotated Frankenstein* (2012) or *Frankenstein, créé des ténèbres* (2016)—for, through this strategy, she fully captures the ambience of the Wollstonecraftian scenes she is discussing, immersing the specialised scholar and new reader alike into the climate of the French Revolution as she prepares them for the second part of the book.

The longest and richest of all chapters, Chapter 4 opens this second part by probing into pivotal passages extracted from all thirteen chapters of *Rights of Woman*. Having taken her readers through its thematic underpinnings, Wolfson now walks us through the 'masculine'-coded 'historic page' (pp. 93–99) to the 'Utopians dreams', which depicts Wollstonecraft's thoughts on erasing all class and gendered distinctions (pp. 124–32). Wolfson then introduces a reflection on how this specific vision of Wollstonecraft impacted on the book's immediate reception (pp. 132–36). It is at this point of the text that new readers can more distinctly notice the cultural roots of many of the ideas Wollstonecraft embraced and those she contested. This is facilitated by Wolfson's mapping of two groups of authors: on the one hand, a more 'masculine' lens, as raised in the works of

Shakespeare, Rousseau, Milton and Pope; on the other hand, the textual relations of a network of women writers like Charlotte Smith and Mary Hays, who, under the influence of Catharine Macaulay, acquired the same reputation as Wollstonecraft, becoming the other protagonists of Richard Polwhele's branded *Unsex'd Females* (1798).

Despite the presence of an Epilogue, Chapters 5 and 6 rather read as a coda. While the story of the 'Vindicator' finds its climax in them, they tell us about Wollstonecraft's trip to France immediately after the Revolution and explore the origins of her *Wrongs of Woman*, opening new routes for readers to explore. Two aspects of these chapters are particularly noteworthy: firstly, that Wolfson's novelesque strategies reach a peak here—for instance, as she reenacts Wollstonecraft's gothic style—and secondly, the emotional effects of these techniques on the reader. If, until now, the addition of facts about Wollstonecraft's life and points of analysis of her work prepared the readers for the chapter to follow, what prepares them now for an epilogue centred on the author's impact is the emotive crescendo that Wolfson achieves through her own literary techniques. Thus, echoing Woolf's final 'we hear her voice' line on Wollstonecraft in her 1929 essay *The Common Reader*, Wolfson concludes by wrapping up her arguments on the philosopher's immortal legacy.

This aligns with the spirit of the Columbia University Press' Core Knowledge series in which this book appears. The series provokes readers to re-think canonical texts by capturing new 'intellectual energy and the stimulus to creative thinking' (p. ii): a task in which Wolfson, like Wollstonecraft before her, certainly succeeds. Indeed, Wolfson skilfully connects, from the outset of her text to its end, the politics behind terms such as 'spinster' (e.g. pp. 6 and 126), 'woman' (e.g. pp. 4 and 160) and 'feminism' (e.g. pp. 15 and 159) bringing the question raised by the 'Vindicator' to contemporary debates about 'trans-inclusive language' (p. 17), 'pregnancy termination' (ibid) and 'abortion' (p. 151), as well as on female suffrage from the 1790s (p. 15) to 1975: the year in which Swiss women, coinciding with the surge in critical studies that started considering Wollstonecraft a classic, were granted the right to vote (p. 160). In this way, and contrary to Taylor's assertions, Wolfson persuasively demonstrates how relevant Wollstonecraft's ideas remain today, and that: 'this "present-day" w keeps happening, with irrefutable traction beyond the 1790s, from generation to generation' (p. 159). Wolfson codifies this by contrasting the impact of the Wollstonecraftian imaginary on her very own generation with three others. First, that of contemporaries of Wollstonecraft who, like Jane Austen, never shared anything but a historical context with her. Second, with the generation that predated Wolfson's own, as exemplified by her commentaries on her aunts and mother (p. 160). And thirdly, by a future one, represented by her very own students (pp. 159–60). It seems that Wollstonecraft is as 'alive and active' in 2024 as she was to Virginia Woolf in 1932 (qtd in Wolfson, p. 159).

The book is poised to make a significant impact in the field, appealing to all those curious to walk the historical paths of society's behaviour with Enlightenment, Romantic and always relevant Wollstonecraft. 

NOTES

- 1 Among other details, Wolfson explains essential terms such as 'presentism' (p. 159) and does not take for granted general knowledge assumed to pertain to the field, for instance, related to the historical context of the French Revolution or its slang and vocabulary like Frank alluding to the French (p. 84), or Neck meaning 'guillotine' (p. 138).
- 2 While Woolf wrote on Wollstonecraftian affairs for *The Nation* in 1929, critic Elizabeth Pennell published in 1884 the first biography of Wollstonecraft after William Godwin's 1798 controversial *Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Edmund Burke, on his part, is presented by Wolfson as a prominent antagonist of Wollstonecraft and one of the key intellectual and political figures to better understand her times.

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<<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20080686>>

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Date of acceptance: 14 January 2022.



Literary Exchanges (with Julia M. Wright, 2011) and *Native Americans and Anglo-American Culture: The Indian Atlantic* (with Tim Fulford, 2009); and he has published more than thirty-five journal articles and book chapters. Kevin is currently working on a monograph entitled *The Life and Literary Adventures of Sir Francis Bond Head*, which under contract at McGill–Queen’s University Press and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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Judith Pascoe is the George Mills Harper Professor of English at Florida State University. Her work focuses on the theatrical, visual and material culture of the British Romantic period. Pascoe has written about theatrical self-representation in the 1790s (*Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship*, 1997) and about Romantic-era collectors (*The Hummingbird Cabinet: A Rare and*