

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

## Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

*Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

Mary Wollstonecraft fought her way to literary brilliance from a background of family conflict, domestic abuse, and a sequence of the lowly nanny type occupations which were among the few open to women in her time. In 1788 her novel, *Mary, A Fiction*, was published and caught attention—as Fanny Burney’s fiction was contemporaneously drawing attention for its depiction of the “real life” of everyday women. Mary Wollstonecraft took up the cudgel, in a second book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, 1791, which locked horns with Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Like the American Tom Paine, in his *Rights of Man*, Mary Wollstonecraft was a passionate supporter of the French Revolution. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792, followed shortly after, and has proven to be her most lasting contribution to our culture.

*Question: What are the boundaries of the thing called Literature?*

Olaudah Equiano, Mrs. Burney, now Mrs. Wollstonecraft; do these authors’ texts belong in a course on literature? Are they literary texts or are they something else—social commentary, memoir, projections of intentions for the future? Common sense suggests we ignore this question, and delight in fascinating texts wherever we find them and can learn from them. But not everyone would agree that these fascinating texts are literature. For example Wordsworth and Coleridge were supporters of a view of imagination, which they considered the central and indispensable force in literary creation; they thought imagination transformative, able to take disparate pictures of our experience and fuse them into a unique whole, which was very different from the unfused catalogues common to writers of memoirs or commentaries. When you complete this Unit please reflect back onto the present question, which cuts to the heart of what literature really is. Would Wordsworth have accepted Equiano and Wollstonecraft as writers of *literature*? Would they have cared what Wordsworth thought?

*Question: What is Skill in Natural Prose English?*

Prose style, natural, captivating, human is one of the glories of English literature, but it is never easy to analyze. (Herbert Read’s *English Prose Style*, 1928, is old fashioned, but a splendid guide to these mysteries.) Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance, is at her best in bringing insights out of simple narration. Take her comparison of two educations, that of women and that of military men (1466-1467). “The great misfortune is this, that they both acquire manners before morals, and a knowledge of life before they have, from reflection, any acquaintance with the grand ideal outline of human nature.” This sentence, and the surrounding context, are typical of Wollstonecraft’s easy but startling analyses. What is the secret of her artistry?

*Comparative Literature:*

1. The discussion of Feminism, which we opened with Frances Burney, above, inevitably reverts to the classic issue; is there something “feminine” about women’s writing, and something “masculine” about men’s? The cutting argument of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Feminism, in its classical phase of Betty Friedan and Kate Millet, minimized the differences between the abilities and skills of men and women. (Mary Wollstonecraft does the same, exception made for the question of physical strength.) Do you see some sensibility, in the passages we have been reading from women authors, that distinguish them from “masculine style”?

2. Literature has often been viewed as a mirror of life, in which we see the realities of a time clearly reflected. (Mrs. Burney’s depiction of her mastectomy brings this to mind.) Does this seem a valuable way to view literature? Take a look at Escarpit, *The Sociology of Literature*, 1971, for insights into literature as a mirror of social life. Marxist theorists saw literature not only as a mirror but as a stage of social development. Cf. on this Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 1971.