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## **WOLLSTONECRAFT ON THE SUBLIME OF REASONABLE SENTIMENTS<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) frequently discussed the possibilities of women’s education, critical reading and self-reliance in her writings; and the motif of the intellectual “quest” features her journalistic pieces, argumentative works, novels, and her travelogue. She knew and read the influential literary, philosophical and political writings of the age of Enlightenment: her life was dedicated to development in her self-education. She was influenced by the Scottish moralists’—particularly, by David Hume’s and Adam Smith’s—ideas and she moved beyond the false sentiments of the age. In her rationalizing of her own emotions, Wollstonecraft—in a Kantian way—was able to sense the common roots of sense, sensibility and sentiments; namely, the sublimity of divine nature and human morality.

**Keywords:** Wollstonecraft, Kant, Smith, the sublime, sense, sensibility.

### **Introduction on an Enlightened Thinker**

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Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) was an Enlightenment thinker, a British (proto)feminist, a moralist, and an educator whose writings caused widespread outrage from the late 18th century. As an independent woman from the lower middle class, she struggled with financial difficulties from her teenage years onward: she worked as a governess and schoolteacher, founded a school, later published reviews in Joseph Johnson’s London-based journal, *The Analytical Review* and translated texts from French and German. At the gatherings of the Radical group, Wollstonecraft met Joseph Priestley, Thomas Paine, William Godwin, as well as the painter Henry Fuseli, the poet-painter William Blake, and William Wordsworth. A notorious episode in her eventful personal life was the birth of her first child out of wedlock to an American captain whom she met in the revolutionary Paris; then she married the father of her second daughter, William Godwin. Her husband edited her works after she died at the age of 38 from an infection following the birth of their child, Mary Godwin, the later Mary Shelley.

In 1789, she published a collection titled *The Female Reader* (co-edited with Mr. Cresswick, 1789), and she claimed in “The Preface” that

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<sup>1</sup> The paper was originally titled “Wollstonecraft, Kant and Smith on the Sublime (of) Sentiments” and it was presented at the New York Workshop in Early Modern Philosophy, Fordham University, New York in April 2024.

[...] supposing a young lady has received the best education, she has advanced but a few steps towards the improvement of her mind and heart—that is the business of her whole life; [...] As we are created accountable creatures we must run the race ourselves, and by our exertions acquire virtue: the outmost our friends can do is to point out the right road, and clear away some of the loose rubbish which might at first retard our progress. (Wollstonecraft, vol. 4: 59-60)<sup>2</sup>

In nearly all her writings, the radical notions of women's emancipation and women's education preoccupied Wollstonecraft. In this respect, her pedagogical and political works, as well as her autobiographical novels *Mary* (1788) and *Maria* (1798), exploring self-education, can be placed side by side. In her works, she interprets the texts of contemporary philosophers—John Locke, Edmund Burke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau—and her way of thinking takes shape through her engagement with them. The early pedagogical *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1788) was written in the style of contemporary educational manuals, while also reflecting the influence of Locke's work on the philosophy of education (cf. *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 1693). Her first polemic *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790) was written in response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), and in 1792 she published her most well-known *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In 1794, she brought forth her historical work, in which—influenced by her experience of the Reign of Terror in Paris—she reconsidered her views on the French Revolution (*An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*), while her last published work, her travelogue of her Northern journey titled *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) became a popular book.

She does not only read the influential literary, philosophical and political writings of the age of Enlightenment but her life was dedicated to her own development in her self-training. In her debate with Edmund Burke on the interpretation of the sublime and the beautiful, she was influenced by the Scottish moralists' ideas—particularly, by David Hume's and Adam Smith's emphasis on empathy and sympathy. On the one hand, moving beyond false sentiments and in her rationalizing of her own emotions, Wollstonecraft displays the romantic struggles of the isolated self. The latter feature owes a lot to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, while the passionate descriptions of the wild scenery foreshadow nineteenth-century notions on the natural sublime. On the other hand, in a Kantian way, wandering in nature and being engulfed in her self-reflection on the landscape and on the depth of her own mind, she was able to reach the common roots of sense, sensibility and sentiments: the sublimity of divine nature and human morality. In my paper, I will map and display the Smithian, Humean and Kantian “references” in Wollstonecraft's writings; namely, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), *A Vindication of the Rights of*

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, all the references to Wollstonecraft's writings with the volume and page numbers indicate her complete works edited by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (2016).

*Woman* (1792), and *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, 1796), and in her fragmentary *Hints* (posth. 1798).

### **Reason, Sense and Sensibility (Hume and Smith)**

In her self-education, Wollstonecraft was guided by her rationality and a careful selection of works written by the mainstream seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers. She proudly and passionately asserts her Enlightenment credo in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*:

I reverence the rights of men.—Sacred rights! for which I acquire a more profound respect, the more I look into my own mind; [...] my heart is human, beats quick with human sympathies—and I FEAR God! [...] — I fear that sublime power, whose motive for creating me must have been wise and good; and I submit to the moral laws which my reason deduces from this view of my dependence on him.—It is not his power that I fear—it is not to an arbitrary will, but to unerring *reason* I submit.—Submit—yes;[...] This fear of God makes me reverence myself. (vol. 5: 34; italics in the original)

In her critical reading, she was inspired by Locke’s empiricism and had memorable (textual) debates with Burke on the French Revolution, with Rousseau on the education of women while she translated Lavater’s aphorisms with Henry Fuseli (*Aphorism on Man*, 1788).<sup>3</sup>

Wollstonecraft’s own progress also entailed the reading of the Scottish moralists’ works, and in her writings, similarly to the appearance of the Lockean influence, she relied on Hume’s ideas in the framework of her enlightened world-view (cf. Kirkley 18; O’Neill 22–5 and Cole 108–9). While Locke truly provided the basis of her ideas on rational education, she referred to Hume’s notions of human progress in history, studying “the Science of Man” (O’Neill 21). In her early collection, *The Female Reader*, she selected passages from Hume’s *The History of England* (1750s–70s) discussing Queen Elizabeth’s character (vol. 4: 279–80); and later, in the pieces of the *Analytical Review* she used his historical survey (vol. 7: 269). Moreover, in her own historical work, *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794), she again quotes Hume in the discussion of the notion of the “perfect commonwealth” (vol. 6: 166). Wollstonecraft sees that in France, after the revolutionary events, they attempted at adopting the (English) ideal that “would be eligible only when civilization has arrived at a much greater degree of perfection, and knowledge is more generally diffused than at the present period” (vol. 6: 166). Due to the insufficiency in development and the lack of “the knowledge of practical

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<sup>3</sup> See more about it in Antal 2024.

liberty,” the French Revolution was doomed to fail in the enlightened progress of history (ibid).

In addition to her referring to Hume’s historical and political writings, in her second *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft paraphrases a passage from Hume’s “A Dialogue” attached to his *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1777) that compares the treatment of French and Greek women:

But what is more singular in this whimsical nation, say I to the Athenians, is, that a frolic[k] of yours during the Saturnalia, when the slaves are served by their masters, is seriously continued by them through the whole year, and through the whole course of their lives; accompanied too with some circumstances, which still further augment the absurdity and ridicule. You[r] sport only elevates for a few days those whom fortune has thrown down, and whom she too, in sport, may really elevate for ever above you. But this nation gravely exalts those, whom nature has subjected to them, and whose inferiority and infirmities are absolutely incurable. The women, though without virtue, are their masters and sovereigns[:]. (vol. 5: 124)

The original quotation goes on: “These they reverence, praise, and magnify: To these, they pay the highest deference and respect: And in all places and all times, the superiority of the females is readily acknowledged and submitted to by every one [sic], who has the least pretensions to education and politeness” (Hume). In the dialogue, it is stated that the treatment of English women rather recalls the gallantry of the Roman. In the cited passage, not only the social status of women in the master-servant dichotomy is questioned; or rather, it is turned upside down in the festivity of the Saturnalia, but Hume also satirically criticises the sensual empowerment of the weak sex over the French men (Taylor 43–44). In her debate with Rousseau on women’s education, Wollstonecraft takes Hume’s remark *seriously*, and, in her Saturnalistic *Vindication*, she does *seriously* intend to give knowledge and virtue to the ones not having power and self-control in her age.

Although David Hume (1711-1776) was regarded as the leading exponent of the notion of an innate moral sentiment, Wollstonecraft did not turn to his ideas thematically; she only quotes the above mentioned Humean “sentiments” (cf. “Mr. Hume’s sentiments,” vol. 5:124). On the one hand, most likely, Wollstonecraft could not accept Hume’s atheism; namely that his sentiments are unconnected to religious belief and virtue. As O’Neill points out, “Hume’s aim remained that of understanding the underlying forces that animated human conduct, notwithstanding the fact that in the process the irrational roots of such behavior were exposed by the harsh winds of scepticism” (O’Neill 25–26). On the other hand, for Wollstonecraft, being a life-long learner, critical thinking was crucial though she could not afford being sceptical all the way along—she needed a strong belief in progress, reason and goodness. In the eighteenth century *sense*, such terms as (common) sense, sensibility, sentiments,

sympathy, morality, and humanity were intermingled.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft herself harshly attacked “pampered sensibility” taken as “the *manie* of the day;” as it is labelled in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (vol. 5: 6). Right here, she claims the strong connection between rationality and emotions: “We ought to beware of confounding mechanical instinctive sensations with *emotions that reason deepens*, and justly terms *the feelings of humanity*. This word discriminates the active exertions of *virtue* from the vague declamation of sensibility” (vol. 5: 54; italics are mine). In her process of self-training, in order to live virtuously, she exercised rationality by tempering her impulses and relying on the guidance of her moral sense—even in her choice of readings.

Moving beyond the sensualist understanding of sentiments, she turns to Adam Smith’s interpretation of sensibility, and she refers to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Foremost, it should be emphasised that the framework of Smith’s thinking is provided by the acceptance of the strict socio-economic structure; namely, everyone has their own place in “the machinery” of the system in *The Wealth of the Nations* (1776).<sup>5</sup> In Smith’s view, the gallantry of the high society models the rules of proper behaviour, that is, of social manners and customary protocol. Accordingly, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft quotes Smith about habitual social awareness: “To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which they seek” (qtd. in vol. 5: 127). She introduces the quote with two questions looking for women who “starting out of obscurity, boldly claim respect on account of their great abilities or daring virtues” (vol. 5: 126-7). But Smith understands *great* differently, and Wollstonecraft sarcastically adds: “True! my male readers will probably exclaim; but let them, before they draw any conclusion, recollect that this was not written originally as descriptive of women, but of the rich” (vol. 5: 127). Then she asks the readers to read about the role of women in society on their own: “In Dr Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I have found a general character of people of rank and fortune that, in my opinion, might with the greatest propriety be applied to the female sex. I refer the *sagacious reader* to the whole comparison; [...]” (vol. 5: 127, italics are mine). The striking passage follows Smith’s argumentation but his focus is *truly* on the high society men while he exemplifies Lewis (Louis) XIV as “the most perfect model of a *great* prince” (Smith 1979, 54; qtd. in

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<sup>4</sup> Consult with Dr. Jonson’s *Dictionary* about the common roots of the terms in the 1750s (Johnson 1755).

<sup>5</sup> Adam Smith is obsessed about “machines” and “machinery;” and he frequently uses the words even metaphorically in *The Wealth of Nations* (see Aspromourgos 2012). In her Scandinavian *Letters*, Wollstonecraft even paraphrases several passages about “the division of labour” described by “a celebrated writer,” displaying that she knew well Smith’s economic masterpiece, *The Wealth of Nations* (qtd. in Tomaselli 187). However, in her Northern voyage, she underlines the benefits of the old-fashioned fieldwork and artisanship since she sees the healthy and rustic lifestyle of the farmers in Norway, which goes against Smith’s enlightened notion on civilized labour (vol. 6: 233-34).

Wollstonecraft vol. 5: 127–8, italics are mine). Wollstonecraft moves into a different direction, drawing parallel between the limitations of women’s life and the requirements of the privileged social status since the latter “produced a character similar to that of women, who are *localized*, if I may be allowed the word, by the rank they are placed in, by *courtesy*” (vol. 5: 127, italics in the original). Similarly to the rich, the so-called “Ladies” are not concerned about their mental development and character building; as a result, from women “the negative virtues only are expected, when any virtues are expected, patience, docility, good-humour, and flexibility; virtues incompatible with any vigorous exertion of intellect” (vol. 5: 127).

Wollstonecraft read Smith’s *Theory* critically close, and she *felt* to find the way how female virtue could be developed through the coordination of emotions and rationality. According to her, sentiments should work together with common sense not only for the sake of the common good and welfare (in a functioning modern community) but also for the sake of individual goodness. She sees that taste and sensibility should play a role alongside with moral sense and manners in the development of the civilised social human. Akin to the other Scottish enlightened thinkers, Smith took sensibility as “the receptivity of the senses,” and, within the simplified psychological framework introduced by Locke, he accepted that “men thought; women felt”—as O’Neill sums it up bluntly (O’Neill 90). Smith claimed that women— “women and weak men”—were likely to have greater (common) *sense of sensibility*, with the capability of responding to stimuli more delicately and susceptibly (1979, 37). Consequently, men are taken responsible for laying the boundaries of propriety while women are to express tenderness and delicacy of their subdued passions in their modesty. According to Wollstonecraft, “the strictures of society ensure that many women never even think of their moral character or virtue, because they are encouraged from a young age to consider only their appearance and their manners,” as Slegers remarks (309). On the one hand, it is not a surprise that Smith discussed the impact of women in “a civilized society” (cf. “civilized” vs. “barbarous nations,” Smith 1979); on the other hand, Wollstonecraft herself was greatly influenced by his gendered ideas in her own self-study. Reading Smith, she rather paid attention to the general characteristics of civilised human bonding and she strictly kept the principle of rational restraint in mind.

Wollstonecraft gives a concrete reference to the Smithian sympathy: “‘The charm of life,’ says a grave philosophical reasoner, is ‘sympathy’; [‘]nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast” (vol. 5: 160). The second half is a word-by-word quote from Smith’s *Theory* (1979, 13) but “the charm of life” is added by Wollstonecraft. In his *Theory*, Smith often highlights the general and overall functioning of human’s natural co-feeling (sensibility) in the terms of *any* passions:

Whatever is the passion which arises from any object in the person principally concerned, an analogous emotion springs up, at the thought of his situation, in the breast of every attentive spectator. [...] Pity and compassion are words appropriated to signify our fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others. Sympathy, though its

meaning was, perhaps, originally the same, may now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever. (Smith 1979, 10)

In Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, the short reference on sympathy is embedded in her debate with Rousseau, when she elaborates on the pleasing features of man's future partner in *Emile, or On Education* (1762). Quoting the paragraph, where she introduces sympathy: "The man who can be contented to live with a pretty, useful companion, without a mind, has lost in voluptuous gratifications a taste for more refined enjoyments; he has never felt the calm satisfaction, that refreshes the parched heart, like the silent dew of heaven,—of being beloved by one who could understand him.—In the society of his wife he is still alone, unless when the man is sunk in the brute" (vol 5: 160).

However, as Cole remarks, "the structure of feeling implied by this model is not compassion, but co-respondence: not 'feeling for,' but 'feeling with'" (111). Even adding that the Smithian notion is presented as "a male homosocial phenomenon," bonding 18<sup>th</sup>-century men (cf. contemporary *sensus communis*)—his "account of sympathetic response is political and even masculinist in a general way" (Cole 111-12).<sup>6</sup> In her argumentation, having given the Smithian quotation in her *Vindication*, she moves back to the attacking of Rousseau's misinterpretation of women, simply claiming that reason fails women in their quest for knowledge and virtue:

But, according to the tenour of reasoning, by which women are kept from the tree of knowledge, the important years of youth, the usefulness of age, and the rational hopes of futurity, are all to be sacrificed to render women an object of desire for a *short* time. Besides, how could Rousseau expect them to / be virtuous and constant when reason is neither allowed to be the foundation of their virtue, nor truth the object of their inquiries?" (vol. 5: 160).

She again blames Rousseau for his false argumentation that comes from his great degree of sensibility to women's charms and his being "lascivious" (vol. 5: 160).<sup>7</sup> In *Vindication*, Rousseau is presented to neglect sympathy when speaking about Emilius's ideal Sophia, and Wollstonecraft sticks to the "charms" of (his) life; that

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<sup>6</sup> In her article, Lucinda Cole even recalls the atmosphere of men's clubs (and antifeminist tendencies) to interpret the meaning of 18<sup>th</sup>-century sympathy—with references to Mandeville, Hutcheson and even Hume. See Cole 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Here, the psychological interpretation of Rousseau's passions, frustration and sublimation is rather accurate: "Had he given way to these desires, the fire would have extinguished itself in a natural manner; but virtue, and a romantic kind of delicacy, made him practise self-denial; yet, when fear, delicacy, or virtue, restrained him, he debauched his imagination, and reflecting on the sensations to which fancy gave force, he traced them in the most glowing colours, and sunk them deep into his soul" (vol. 5: 160). Wollstonecraft reads man's passions *sympathetically*.

is, her interpretation also lacks “fellow-feelings”—in reasoning there is no place for any passions; only for the passion of reasoning.

The last Smithian reference is to female virtue and women’s generosity; moreover, it is about the limitations of women’s opportunities in life as they cannot achieve anything great. Wollstonecraft says, “I therefore agree with the moralist [Smith] who asserts: ‘that women have seldom so much generosity as men;’ and that their narrow affections, to which justice and humanity are often sacrificed, render the sex apparently inferior” (vol. 5: 260). Women are brought up to be weak, delicate so as to incite desire (relying on men’s sensibility) but, for instance, strong bonding of just friendship is rare in the female world. As she asks angrily: “Besides, how can women be just or generous, when they are the slaves of injustice?” (vol. 5: 260) Wollstonecraft argues that the main reason for women’s ill-treatment is that they are rather ignorant lacking proper education. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith praised the economic education of women since it was tailored—or rather fashioned—in terms of the preferences, the needs of the age and the assigned roles of the female sex in society. Although his argumentation is framed by the criticism of men’s “useless” education providing a realistic description, he keeps the limited view on female virtue:

There are no public institutions for the education of women, and there is accordingly nothing useless, absurd, or fantastical in the common course of their education. They are taught what their parents or guardians judge it necessary or useful for them to learn, and they are taught nothing else. Every part of their education tends evidently to some useful purpose; either to improve the natural attractions of their person, or to form their mind to reserve, to modesty, to chastity, and to economy; to render them both likely to become the mistresses of a family, and to behave properly when they have become such. In every part of her life a woman feels some conveniency or advantage from every part of her education. (Smith 1952, 340)

Smith rather questions the idea of general education and propagates its differentiation in accordance with “the division of labour” in the forthcoming sentences. Undoubtedly, Wollstonecraft would have ardently rejected the Smithian notion, arguing for general co-education in all of her writings but, most probably, she failed to read the remark in the fifth book; the only one being related to women’s education in Smith’s works.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Wollstonecraft was able to transgress the assigned boundaries, and she interpreted virtue and taste differently in her later works. As Slegers sees, “Wollstonecraft finds in Smith an outlook sympathetic to her plight,

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<sup>8</sup> Adam Smith several times attacks “liberal education”, labelling it “tedious and expensive”; for instance, see in Book I: “Education in the ingenious arts and in the liberal professions is still more tedious and expensive. The pecuniary recompense, therefore, of painters and sculptors, of lawyers and physicians, ought to be much more liberal; and it is so accordingly” (Smith 1952, 43).

despite his own significant blind spots where it comes to women” [...]; moreover, he provides “an ethical framework” in which all humans can “be regarded and appreciated as full moral, rational creatures” (Slegers 313).

### Virtue, Morality and the Sublime (Kant)

Regarding education, Neven Leddy points out similarities in Smith’s and Wollstonecraft’s views as they both thought “that traditional Enlightenment education was not adequately serving either gender” (270). In addition to their training in domestic skills, Smith recommended the reading of sentimental novels to the fair sex, while Wollstonecraft believed that girls should learn (from) history. Moreover, in her co-educational utopian wish, she envisioned that virtue should be achieved “through exemplary political history for girls as well as boys” (Leddy 275). She claims in her *Vindication* that women’s education should be enlarged with history of ideas and even politics so that they should be able to become social beings: “They might also study politics, and settle their benevolence on the broadest basis; for the reading of history will scarcely be more useful than the perusal of romances, if read as mere biography; if the character of the times, the political improvements, arts, &c. be not observed” (vol. 5: 218). In her propagating of historical knowledge, she was influenced by Catharine Macaulay (1731–1791), the female historian of her age. Macaulay took virtue as “an ethical imperative”, claiming for the need to live virtuously in the present, and she wrote her scholarly historical survey, *The History of England* (1763–83) from that position (Mandell 128; Macaulay 2023). While in her utopian ideas, Wollstonecraft wrote about human virtue as a future programme; for her, Enlightenment meant a learning process in continuous development and also a practice to live morally.

Moving beyond the Humean and Smithian limited notions on women, she was thinking in terms of the general human, recalling the Kantian *sapere aude*. In *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, Wollstonecraft speaks of the slow development of mankind and the understanding of man’s motives as a socio-political being, “contemplate[ing on] the infancy of man, his gradual advance towards maturity” (vol. 6: 15). Her reference to “the infancy of man” and his “maturity” recalls Immanuel Kant’s famous opening of his “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’” (1784):

*Enlightenment is the human being’s [man’s] emergence from his self-incurred minority [Unmündigkeit; cf. immaturity]. Minority is the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! Have courage to make use of your own understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment. (Kant 1999, 17; italics in original)*

Wollstonecraft uses the word, “infancy”, that is childhood, while Kant’s *Unmündigkeit* has recently been translated as “minority” (with *des Menschen* as human being’s, that was originally “man’s”); however, the word “immaturity” is used in other English translations. Similarly to Kant, Wollstonecraft also accepted that every (hu)man dared to ask questions in order to exercise their reasoning in the understanding of others and the social world. Nevertheless, it cannot be traced back whether Kant is cited in her historical work on the French Revolution, as she names John Locke and refers to his writings on civil liberty and toleration in the introductory paragraphs (vol. 6: 16).

Overall, it is questionable whether Wollstonecraft was able to read Kant’s works in the 1780s-90s in England. Her knowledge of German is also debated though she translated Christian Gotthilf Salzmann’s children book, *Moralisches Elementarbuch* (1783) under the title *Elements of Morality for the Use of Children* (1790-91) from German. Notwithstanding, the complexity of Kant’s philosophical language could have caused difficulties to her, and the English translations of the German thinker’s works were not published in her lifetime (cf. Carlson 171). In the meetings of the Radicals at the London publisher, Joseph Johnson’s, Kant’s ideas were introduced in the discussion when Wollstonecraft was also present (Tomalin 99). Karl Leonhard Reinhold published his commentaries titled *Letters on Kantian Philosophy* (1790), while Friedrich August Nitsch’s and J. A. O’Keeffe’s popularising introductory works, and also the translation of “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” (1795-96) were available that time (Carlson 175). Wollstonecraft was probably aware of the ideas on Kant’s atheism, moral law, and enlightened reasoning; the latter two influenced her thinking greatly (Carlson 176).

Certainly, parallels can be drawn between Kant’s ethics and Wollstonecraft’s account of human—men’s and women’s—rights discussed in her two *Vindications*. As Eileen Hunt Botting claims, both thinkers focused on duty, being deontological moralists but “Kant’s metaphysical approach [...] was a priori yet nontheological, whereas Wollstonecraft’s was a priori yet theological” (80). In it, her dissenter roots could be traced and the impact of her mentor, Rev. Richard Price who taught about the divine moral law being presented as sublime morality. Botting regards Price “a Kantian moral philosopher,” and she also highlights Wollstonecraft’s Kantian approach to ethics accordingly (79). The term, “sublime morality,” is used by Wollstonecraft in her writings; for instance, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she says:

Why then do philosophers look for public spirit? Public spirit must be nurtured by private virtue, or it will resemble the factitious sentiment which makes women careful to preserve their reputation, and men their honour. A sentiment that often exists unsupported by virtue, unsupported by that sublime morality which makes the habitual breach of one duty a breach of the whole moral law. (vol. 5: 210)

Kant wrote about the rational moral law and the innate principles of acting morally, respecting human rights; while Wollstonecraft focused on virtuous life, paying also attention to women's rights in her social-utopian view. It is worth placing the above quoted passage side by side with one from Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. In her agitated tone, Wollstonecraft questions the basis for "public spirit," while Kant – in his assuring and calm voice (even poetically) – claims in his conclusion that "two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*" (Kant 1999, 269; italics in the original).

They also shared the already quoted enlightened view on the development, the progress of man expressed in their notion of improvement. For Wollstonecraft, general (and institutional) education was also crucial and she took it her mission to propagate it in all of her writings. Yet, she also emphasised "man's growing up," focusing on women's upbringing in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: "The grand end of their [cf. of daughters, wives, and mothers] exertions should be to unfold their own faculties, and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue" (vol. 5: 95). According to her, women should (l)earn to be respected (not only loved); for Kant, respect is a key motivation in the appreciation of the moral law. In this sense, every woman, beforehand, should practice self-respect of being a rational human being and also of being able to act rationally and morally with the others. In Wollstonecraft's ethics, Botting analyses the three motives as, first, it is about one's understanding "as a duty-bearing and rights-bearing subject;" then, "the understanding of one's rights and duties as bearing on other people's rights and duties," and, finally, it is about the propagation of exercising "human rights and duties on a broader social and political scale" (82). In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant explains what he means by the expression, "action from respect (*Achtung*) for law," claiming that "immediate determination of the will by means of the law and consciousness of this is called *respect*, so that this is regarded as the *effect* of the law on the subject, and not as the *cause* of the law;" whereas "any respect for a person is properly only respect for the law (of integrity and so forth) of which he gives us an example" (Kant 1999, 55–6; italics in the original). Wollstonecraft was likely to educate her female readers, and Kant spoke in maxims to his audience—being likely to even respect the morally acting female thinker as an example.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to speculating on similarities, Wollstonecraft has a concrete reference to Kant in *Hints*. The collection of fragments was "Chiefly designed to have been incorporated in the Second Part of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," as it is

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<sup>9</sup> Here, Botting also links the Kantian categorical imperative that sums up the step-by-step process Wollstonecraft describes: "*I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law*" (Kant 1999, 57, italics in the original). However, in the original German, we can see the virtuous jump in "als so": "[...] ich soll niemals anders verfahren, *als so*, dass ich auch wollen könne, meine Maxime solle ein allgemeines Gesetz werden" (Kant 1982, 28; italics are mine).

described in its first publication titled *Posthumous Works of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798), edited by William Godwin after Wollstonecraft's death. The fifth "hint" goes:

Mr Kant has observed, that the understanding is sublime, the imagination beautiful—yet it is evident, that poets, and men who undoubtedly possess the liveliest imagination, are most touched by the sublime, while men who have cold, enquiring minds, have not this exquisite feeling in any great degree, and indeed seem to lose it as they cultivate their reason. (vol. 5: 275)

This fragment shows the shared interest in the sublime in both thinkers' works. However, there is no specific quotation from Kant, and we find no similar lines in the section on "The Analytic of the Sublime" in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790; *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, 1790). For Kant, both qualities pertain to concepts, as he differentiates them:

The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of limitlessness, yet with a super-added thought of its totality. Accordingly the beautiful seems to be regarded as a presentation of an indeterminate concept of understanding, the sublime as a presentation of an indeterminate concept of reason. (Kant 1991, 90–1)

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Wollstonecraft's reading is a misconception of the Kantian terms, but she could not have the chance to read the original work; she probably became acquainted with some of Kant's ideas only through commentaries discussed at the Radicals' gatherings. Moreover, the fragmentary form is not (and cannot be) suitable for Kant's elaborate concept of the sublime, and in the other "hints," Wollstonecraft thematises pre-romantic poetry and imagination.

In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, in addition to the evaluation of the French Revolution, she also discusses the sublime in her debate with Edmund Burke. There she gives a Burkean paraphrase; namely that "Judgment is sublime, wit beautiful; and, according to your own [Burke's] theory, they cannot exist together without impairing each other's power" (vol. 5: 55). In his *Philosophical Enquiry*, in "Introduction on Taste," Burke asserts that though taste is basically normative, individual differences may arise from varying degrees of sensibility and of knowledgeable experience, and that "a perfect union of wit and judgment is one of the rarest things in the world" (2004, 69). He also remarks that both are faculties of the mind but creative wit, like imagination, delights in finding similarities, whereas critical judgment points out differences. According to Burke, imagination gives one pleasure while the critical activity is painful, whereas pleasure is associated with the beautiful, pain with the sublime (the great) in Burke's work (2004, 157). That

Wollstonecraftian reference can be the missing link to grasp how understanding, that is judgment (the reasoning faculty), becomes sublime to Mr Kant in *Hints*. Kant definitely used Burke's empiricist—and Locke's sensualist—ideas, but it is questionable whether Wollstonecraft realised the connections between the two—or rather three—philosophers. Undoubtedly, she re-interprets the beauty of eighteenth-century wit, the Lockean faculty that “is incapable of producing any thing [sic] absolutely new” (qtd. in Burke 2004, 68), enlarging its power with the sublimity of (pre-)romantic imagination.

In her last works, Wollstonecraft writes about the *experience* of the sublime in nature, not providing a Kantian (or Burkean) theorising but descriptions of her lived experience. From her early youth, she loved wandering in nature, and later—having read Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (*Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, 1782, posth.)—, she realised the significance of her rambles. In her *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), she accounts how her imagination and emotions (passions) are combined through sympathy to result in the lived experience of sublime humanity:

Nature is the nurse of sentiment,—the true source of taste;—yet what misery, as well as rapture, is produced by a quick perception of the beautiful and sublime, when it is exercised in observing animated nature, when every beauteous feeling and emotion excites responsive sympathy, and the harmonized soul sinks into melancholy, or rises to extasy, [...]. (vol. 6: 271)

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She provides stunning descriptions of Northern forests, waterfalls and mountains exemplifying the natural sublime and foreshadowing the romantics' view on the greatness of nature. As a contrast, rather anti-romantically, Kant theorises his sublime experience as follows: “the *dominance* which reason exercises over *imagination* with a view to extending it to the requirements of its own realm (the practical) and letting it look out beyond itself into the infinite, which for it [viz. the imagination] is an *abyss*” (Kant 1991, 115, italics in the original). In the thought of the sublime, Kant's critical approach is to control the poetic, *italicised* vocabulary of his language since “the *sublime* is what pleases immediately by reason of its own opposition to the interest of sense. [...] It is an object (of nature) the *representation of which determines the mind to regard* [viz. think] *the elevation of nature beyond our reach as equivalent to a presentation of ideas*” (Kant 1991, 118-119, italics in the original).

### Conclusion on “sublime, impassioned thoughts”

There is a puzzling passage in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* about “anthropophobia” and its sublimity:

[...] isolation from all society is looked upon as something sublime, provided it rests upon ideas which disregard all sensible interest. To be self-sufficing, and so not to stand in need of society, yet without being unsociable, i.e. without shunning it, is something approaching the sublime—a remark applicable to all superiority to wants. [...] to those which they inflict upon themselves, (one which is based on antipathy in questions of principle,) is sublime because it is founded on ideas, whereas that springing from sympathy can only be accounted beautiful. (Kant 1991, 129-30)

In a rather Rousseauvian way, Kant evaluates loneliness, and he even refers to Robinsonades. Similarly, Wollstonecraft also favoured loneliness to gather her thoughts and then to find her way back to her fellow-humans. During her solitary walks in nature, she allowed herself to be immersed not only in her thoughts of sublime reasoning but also in her passionate, impulsive imagination. In her *Hints*, she praises the poets' creative power:

It is the individual manner of seeing and feeling, pourtrayed [sic] by a strong imagination in bold images that have / struck the senses, which creates all the charms of poetry. A great reader is always quoting the description of another's emotions; a strong imagination delights to paint its own. A writer of genius makes us feel; an inferior author reason. (vol. 5: 276)

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In her emphasis on originality, she goes so far as to say that while a good reader quotes from others, one with a vivid imagination finds delight in creation. Wollstonecraft, who throughout her life (and work) struggled to keep her emotions controlled and followed the voice of reason on the path to virtue, accepts the greatness of the genius, of the artist's imagination. In her last essay from April 1797 titled "On Artificial Taste" (also known as "On Poetry," posth. 1798), she speaks of "sublime, impassioned thoughts" the creative artist is able to incite in the readers (vol. 7: 9).

Wollstonecraft's main aim was not only to educate her readers but also to become an exemplary reader in her life-long quest for true knowledge and virtue. Her thinking was being formed in the debates she had with the philosophers of her age. Attacking Burke's and Rousseau's sensualism in their treatment of women, she insisted on her rationality (common sense) that being combined with the Humean-Smithian interpretation of sensibility (sympathy) made it possible for her to reach the concept of duty-based Kantian morality. Through her critical and *passionate reasoning*, she experienced her "emotions that reason deepen[ed]," then moved to the understanding of the sublime, divine essence of humanity in her com-passion. In the course of her progress, she was able to comprehend the greatness (sublimity) of divine morality in nature and to grasp the sublime of human sentiments in poetic imagination. In her lived experience of the sublime, she interconnected the Kantian respect for the moral law, seeing every human as an example of the law, with the

sentiments of sympathy in order to *imagine* a utopian vision of an egalitarian and just society.

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