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The radical maternal : reinterpretation of motherhood in the work of romantic period women writers

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THE RADICAL MATERNAL:
REINTERPRETATION OF MOTHERHOOD IN THE WORK OF ROMANTIC
PERIOD WOMEN WRITERS

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Brianna Marie Gormly has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in English.

Sharon Alker

Table of Contents

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction | |
| Rewriting the Feminine: from “Beauty in distress” to “rational mothers” | 1 |
| Chapter 1 | |
| “Rational Mothers” and “Better Citizens”: Mary Wollstonecraft’s Revolutionary Domesticity | 10 |
| Chapter 2 | |
| “[O]nly a mother”: Development of a Unique Maternal Subject Position in the Novels of Radical Women Writers | 21 |
| Chapter 3 | |
| Overtly Conservative, Implicitly Radical: The Portrayal of Maternity and the Maternal Body in the Work of Maria Edgeworth | 33 |
| Chapter 4 | |
| “I cannot possibly do without Anne”; “Usefulness” and Jane Austen’s Mother-like Heroines | 46 |
| Epilogue | |
| Making the Personal Political for the Romantic Period | 62 |

Introduction

Rewriting the Feminine: from “Beauty in distress” to “rational mothers”

One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers.

-Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

As the above passage from the opening of the Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) demonstrates, her influential treatise has a very clear trajectory aimed at exploding a body of work written about women by respected male writers. If this intent was not clear simply from the text's introduction, it becomes explicitly evident in a chapter entitled “Animadversions on some of the writers who have rendered women objects of pity bordering on contempt” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 150) which begins with a large section devoted to problematizing the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and concludes with a few side glances to Edmund Burke, whom Wollstonecraft had already thoroughly attacked in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). Moreover, such critiques contending with contemporary conceptions of femininity were not limited to texts written by politically radical authors. Responses to established social constructs of femininity pervade novels by various women writers of the period, seen even in Jane Austen's comic characters. Though coming from differing

ideological backgrounds these women reach a point of commonality in their objections to the way in which works by iconic male writers envision the female body. To challenge restraining conceptions of the feminine, one key approach used by the women writers I will discuss presented the female body as the maternal body. Since established conceptions regarding women's bodies understood their reproductive capacities to be restraining rather than empowering, the work of these authors rewrites the maternal subject position in order to make it useful for their arguments, demonstrating that the role of the mother necessarily has implications that reach far beyond the private sphere as opposed to being confined by the limits of domesticity.

One work that seems particularly singled out for attack in the work of women novelists is Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757, 1766).¹ The aesthetic theory presented in this text conceptualizes ideal femininity as "Beauty in distress" (Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry* 167), which appears restrained by its own natural helplessness. Predicated on an idea that the male viewer can only love what is inferior to him, Burke asserts that beauty "where it is highest in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection" (167). This passage, which begins by presenting the concept of a weak-bodied beauty, goes on to present the societal idealization of a physically ill female body. In a description of feminine beauty which is repeatedly undercut by the women writers discussed below, Burke tells how women, instinctively understanding what is perceived as beautiful, "learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness" (167). In a later section, he similarly explains: "An air of robustness and

¹ The first date is the original publication date, and the second date indicates the publication date for the text cited.

strength is very prejudicial to beauty. An appearance of *delicacy*, and even of fragility, is almost essential to it” (178). The idea that women “learn” to present the “appearance” of an unhealthy body is distinctly uncomfortable from the point of view of the modern reader and, indeed, the reception of Burke (or at least the societal constructs epitomized in his aesthetic theory) by his female contemporaries seems not to have been so very different. In fact, Burke’s idea of the beautiful is criticized in works ranging from the explicit social critique of Mary Wollstonecraft to the more implicit commentary in the novels of Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen.

For Burke the “Beauty in distress” created by this weak, sickly body is a necessary social glue. Earlier in the *Philosophical Enquiry* Burke declares, “I call beauty a social quality” (55). According to Burke, feminine beauty engenders a correct masculine response which, in turn, leads to social cohesion through heterosexual relationships: “[women] inspire us with sentiments of tenderness and affection towards their persons; we like to have them near us, and we enter willingly into a kind of relation with them” (55). This idea is further demonstrated in Burke’s later *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790, 1791). In his famous lament about the treatment of Marie Antoinette, Burke states, “little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honour and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. –But the age of chivalry is gone” (*Reflections* 112-3). Claudia L. Johnson argues that, for Burke, the French Revolution is a crisis of masculinity; “Burke is not so much lamenting the fall of Marie-Antoinette as he is the fall of sentimentalized manhood, the kind of manhood inclined to venerate her” (*Equivocal*

Beings 4).² Chaos results in the absence of a correct masculine response to the feminine beautiful.

Though women writers of the period also see the female body as a locus around which crucial social relationships revolve, their understanding of the societal implications for the concept of femininity extolled by the *Philosophical Enquiry* and *Reflections* acts in direct opposition to Burke, depicting a feminine ideal that fetishizes “weakness” and “sickness” as distinctly detrimental to society. They present an alternative interpretation of the female body by reorienting the perspective through which it is understood. Instead of viewing women’s bodies primarily in the context of heterosexual relationships with men, these writers choose to foreground women’s roles as mothers. Focusing on the female body as a maternal body inherently causes the “weakness,” “sickness,” and “fragility” idealized by Burke to become detrimental to society. For these writers, women as mothers have an immensely important role overseeing the development of growing individuals. Attempts to fulfill an ideal of “weakness and imperfection” inhibits crucial maternal responsibilities, and, in many of the novels discussed below, fashionable beauties are often failed mothers.

Similarly contending with what the female body means for society, Jean-Jacques Rousseau actually recognizes the potential significance of women as mothers in his educational text *Emilius and Sophia: or, a New System of Education* (1762, 1763). However, for Rousseau, women’s influence as mothers forms an argument in support of significant constraint and regulation of women. In *Emilius and Sophia*, the female body and its reproductive capacities is the site of inherent gender difference and the

² Johnson’s reading of the dynamic of heterosexual relations in Burke’s *Reflections* has also helped inform my reading of his *Philosophical Inquiry*.

justification for women's restriction to the home. While a man can forget about gender, a woman's reproductive capacities makes her sex an ever-present, defining factor: "The male is only such at certain momentary intervals; the female feels the consequences of her sex all her life, at least during youth" (Rousseau 10). This passage goes on to describe how a woman needs "careful management in her pregnancy, repose in child-bed, ease and a sedentary life during the time of suckling her children" (10). Because the female body is a potential maternal body, a woman cannot interact with society in the same way as a man

However, even in the work of Rousseau, motherhood inevitably seems to elude this restriction to private life, which he asserts is necessitated by women's reproductive role, despite his attempts to contain such subversive possibilities. Rousseau's description of the relationship between mothers and their children betrays an immense social power: "On the good constitution of mothers depends originally that of their children; on the care of the women depends our earliest education; on the women also depend our manners, our passions, our tastes, our pleasures, and even our happiness itself" (19). The following sentence scrambles to subdue the subversive possibilities of the mother back to a normative gender hierarchy: "For this reason, the education of the women should be always relative to the men" (19). Nevertheless, the possibilities for maternal power have been introduced and haunt Rousseau's efforts to construct the mother as an inherently constrained social position. Julie Kipp's discussion of Rousseau helpfully articulates the nature of this ambivalence, stating that, for Rousseau, "maternal bodies both served as evidence of women's foundational role in society *and* testified to the need to control their access to and participation in the public sphere" (Kipp 22). Ultimately, while idealizing

the mother, Rousseau also “shrunk from her, sought to contain her, feared her incontestable access to and influence over the future citizen” (22).

While Rousseau found the social importance of the mother threatening, women writers who responded to his ideas (or at least the broader societal conceptions they reflect)³ often present the social significance of maternity as empowering. Whereas *Emilius and Sofia* depicts the potential for maternal power as necessitating its confinement to a private space in which it could be maintained and regulated, female novelists, specifically Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen, often present an idea of women’s inherent importance as mothers to make an argument that women cannot remain purely in the private sphere but, necessarily, have public importance. In fact, Kipp gestures toward this potential when she notes that “[f]or Rousseau, the maternal body constituted a site where public and private interests seemingly collapsed into one another” (24). Women writers take what is an anxious possibility for Rousseau and frame it as a positive reality, repeatedly reinterpreting the private sphere, traditional role of the mother by situating her in interactions with the public sphere.

As I will demonstrate, a breakdown of an assumed public/private divide forms a crucial part of depictions of maternity in the work of women writers. This pattern ultimately begs the question as to whether such distinctions between public and private spheres even exist. For these women, motherhood inherently means that what is domestic relates to the public when their personal interactions with children produce individuals in the broader world. Moreover, the applicability of motherhood to broader society allows

³ As Kipp notes, the ideas about femininity presented in Rousseau’s writing are present long before his work (22).

for these women to use a traditional role to present radical ideas. Because women are mothers they should not be constrained by detrimental societal constructs, such as Burke's problematic "Beautiful" and Rousseau's restricted mother. The negative effects of such ideals, when placed on mothers, impact society as a whole. Ultimately, motherhood, with its immense control over the bodies and minds of developing individuals, presents a kind of social importance not open to men, which is perhaps why it is so threatening. Taken to its ultimate extension, the capacities inherent in the supposedly private role of the mother might contain a significance and utility to the public sphere even more valuable than what is possible in male professions.

Beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft's groundbreaking *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, I will discuss how all of these women use the maternal to reinterpret contemporary constructs of femininity, ending with Austen's *Persuasion* as the closest, though perhaps unexpected, successor of Wollstonecraft's argument.⁴ My first chapter examines the way in which Wollstonecraft formulates her arguments in the *Vindication*, particularly how her work complicates political distinctions of "radical" and "conservative." Though making a seemingly radical argument regarding the betterment of female education, Wollstonecraft bases her reasoning on established traditional roles, foregrounding women's responsibilities as mothers. This blurring of assumed political distinctions in the realm of gender issues is crucial to understanding all the authors I discuss.

⁴ Anne K. Mellor also sees Austen, through the character of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, as forming ideas that closely follow those of Wollstonecraft. However, her discussion deals with female education and rationality (Mellor 156), whereas I will be examining the way in which both authors represent maternal figures.

The following chapters all connect back to Wollstonecraft's understanding of the feminine body and maternity. In chapter two, I examine the legacy of the *Vindication* in novels by politically radical women, including Wollstonecraft's *Maria* and *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* by Mary Hays. Though their works diverge regarding what exactly this legacy means for women, Wollstonecraft and Hays come to a significant point of commonality regarding the importance of the mother, conversely demonstrated through the hardships that result in her absence. Their protagonists take an intellectual approach to rectifying this issue, using writing to fulfill their maternal responsibilities. Though the idea of an author/mother figure is unique to these texts, the way in which such a figure complicates separations between public and private roles is relevant to the work of other women writers, taken even further by Maria Edgeworth in her focus on the maternal body, as I discuss in chapter three. Like Wollstonecraft, Edgeworth demonstrates a conflict between contemporary constructions of the female body and successful motherhood, specifically in the mutilated maternal body of *Belinda's* Lady Delacour. Furthermore, ideas about appropriate femininity, particularly its supposed relegation to the private sphere, are broken down even further in Edgeworth's *Ennui*. Maternal power becomes explicitly demonstrated in the character of Ellinor, the Irish wet nurse, whose maternal body defies any such public/private divide and presents a position of power in the public sphere not open to men.

My final chapter connects the intellectual conception of motherhood, demonstrated in the writing mothers of Wollstonecraft and Hays's novels, and the importance of the maternal body, most clearly represented in the work of Edgeworth, through my analysis of the nurturing heroines in Jane Austen's novels, *Mansfield Park*

and *Persuasion*. “Usefulness” (Austen, *Persuasion* 122) becomes the central character trait of these women, and their utility refers to both active bodies and minds. Ultimately, this “usefulness” takes the uniquely powerful and uniquely feminine role of the mother, which Edgeworth develops in her focus on the maternal body, even further in the significance of this role for society at large. Austen’s “useful” (Austen, *Persuasion* 145), mother-like heroines even posit the radical possibility that the public/private position of the mother might have greater social importance than male professions.

Chapter 1

“Rational Mothers” and “Better Citizens”: Mary Wollstonecraft’s Revolutionary Domesticity

Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) might be seen as the most radical extension of writing by and about women in the Romantic period. As Anne K. Mellor describes, this was certainly the impression of her work by contemporary women writers who tried to distance themselves from Wollstonecraft’s text and its inflammatory reputation. However, often these supposedly conservative women were not as unconnected to Wollstonecraft’s legacy as they sought to present themselves (Mellor 145). Even further, Wollstonecraft’s ideas might not be so radical as to make them inaccessible to conservative writers in the first place. Overall, it becomes clear that, when dealing with issues of gender, Romantic period women writers tend to elude clear, political distinctions of “conservative” and “radical.” Though Wollstonecraft’s ideas certainly reach some radical extremes, such as her brief gesture toward female suffrage, it is less clear that she can be so definitively separated from other writers by her radicalism. In fact, Wollstonecraft often frames her arguments by working within contemporary gender norms. In this way, while radically breaking down societal constructs of femininity, Wollstonecraft employs a conservative view of feminine roles, generally justifying her positions by calling on women’s responsibilities as wives and mothers.

In the introduction of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft asserts that the faults commonly observed in women and used to justify their inferiority stem not from inherently feminine qualities but, instead, from “a false system of education” (71). She refutes this unfair assessment of women’s intellectual capacities: “Men complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do

keenly satirize our headstrong passions and groveling vices. – Behold, I should answer, the natural effect of ignorance” (84). In a comment aimed at the work Edmund Burke, Rousseau, and other respected male writers,⁵ Wollstonecraft ascribes the origins of the current inadequate education of women to “books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers” (71). This statement, situated in the opening of the *Vindication*, frames the method by which Wollstonecraft will form her arguments for the betterment of female education throughout the text. Significantly, her main point is not to rail against women’s constraint within traditional roles (though she will also present alternatives) but, instead, to criticize the way in which society sets women up for failure in the tasks that are traditionally relegated to their responsibility.

Basing her arguments on established feminine roles and responsibilities, throughout *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argues that female education must be improved in order for women to become active participants in society. According to Wollstonecraft, a mother with a deficient education cannot possibly be a good mother, asserting that “[i]n the regulation of a family, in the education of children, understanding . . . is particularly required: strength of body and mind” (134). The same passage goes on to conclude that “reason is absolutely necessary to enable a woman to perform any duty properly” (134). Essentially, Wollstonecraft seeks to argue for the

⁵ It seems likely that Wollstonecraft is thinking of Burke and Rousseau specifically since her earlier treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* responds directly to Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, and Rousseau is one of the male writers she singles out for criticism in a chapter of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* entitled: “Animadversions on some of the writers who have rendered women objects of pity, bordering on contempt.”

intellectual improvement of women. In order to make this argument, she must contend with the potential objections of her critics that such changes to female education might conflict with women's duties in the private sphere as wives and mothers. Wollstonecraft reworks this logic to present the exact opposite, demonstrating that the development of women's minds is essential to these uniquely feminine duties. Here, and elsewhere in the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft makes her points persuasive by continually foregrounding women's importance to society in terms of accepted feminine roles.⁶

However, while employing a seemingly conservative adherence to established social roles, the *Vindication* also explodes what these roles mean for women's situation in society. For Wollstonecraft, mothers are not merely participants in the private sphere but, instead, intrinsically implicated in society at large. Wollstonecraft intriguingly connects the private role of the mother to the public role of the citizen, predicating women's citizenship on maternity. Talking of women "as citizens," Wollstonecraft states that women's citizenship comes from the position "which includes so many, of a mother" (226). Later in this chapter, Wollstonecraft employs the same concept to argue against the constrained position of women in contemporary society: "Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens" (231). In understanding women as "citizens," the *Vindication* is at once conservative and radical, working within

⁶ Wollstonecraft's use of traditional femininity might seem to be a paradigm she must work within because eighteenth-century society presents women with no other options; however, the way in which she forms her arguments around this concept can be understood as a deliberate choice considering that moments in the *Vindication* imagine women operating very much outside of accepted female roles (as discussed below).

traditional femininity but also implying a radical level of involvement for women in society.

Similarly, Wollstonecraft also deconstructs problematic social ideals while working within conservative logic regarding appropriate femininity. In particular, she contends with a conception of the female body that places restraints on women. The *Vindication* seems to attack Burke's weak, helpless femininity specifically: women who "learn to lisp, to totter in their walk" (Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry* 167). Wollstonecraft sarcastically appropriates Burke's own language into a retort against this problematic ideal: "[women] are made slaves to their persons, and must render them alluring that man may lend them his reason to guide their *tottering* steps aright" (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 226 emphasis mine). Wollstonecraft is particularly concerned with societal ideals that cause women to have beautiful instead of useful bodies. According to the *Vindication*, constructing femininity in this manner causes women to become imprisoned by their own bodies: "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison" (112). Unlike Burke and Rousseau, who interpret the female body as inherently having limitations that constrain women, Wollstonecraft argues that it is the way in which women are taught to consider their bodies that actually constrains them. By focusing on the female body as a "scepter" in the context of heterosexual love, women make their bodies a barrier from doing anything positive in society.

In the *Vindication*, motherhood becomes an alternative, more positive way in which to imagine the female body, contrasting with these established constructs which render it powerless. Once again, Wollstonecraft uses traditional femininity in a radical

way, demonstrating that constraining social ideals (women's "gilt cage") are directly at odds with the maternal responsibilities entailed to them: "when a woman is admired for her beauty, and suffers herself to be so far intoxicated by the admiration she receives, as to neglect to discharge the indispensable duty of a mother, she sins against herself by neglecting to cultivate an affection that would equally tend to make her useful and happy" (222). Here, she directly undercuts the ideal femininity imagined by Burke in which appropriate feminine beauty allows social ties to function correctly. Instead of foregrounding men's desire, in which women are passive objects eliciting a masculine response crucial to social cohesion, Wollstonecraft uses motherhood to focus on the importance of women's bodies in a different way. This idea becomes clear when Wollstonecraft summarizes her goal for the treatise in the *Vindication's* final chapter: "I wish especially to prove, that the weakness of mind and body, which men have endeavoured, impelled by various motives, to perpetuate, prevents [women's] discharging the peculiar duty of their sex: for when weakness of body will not permit them to suckle their children . . . is woman in a natural state?" (266). In this way, the "natural" duty of women as mothers allows Wollstonecraft to effectively reread the female body as an argument for women's active importance in society.

Ultimately, this conflict between understanding women as "rational mothers" and constructs that encourage women to be only "alluring mistresses," creates a situation in which women's "natural and artificial duties clash" (223). According to Wollstonecraft, women who attempt to act the part of the fashionable lady fail as mothers. The *Vindication* presents a biting critique of such women in its sarcastic portrayal of the stereotypical fashionable beauty. In a passage further demonstrating the mismanaged

education of women, Wollstonecraft disdainfully creates a picture of a fashionable woman based in her past observations and interactions: “whilst some terrific feature in nature has spread a sublime stillness through my soul, I have been desired to observe the pretty tricks of a lap-dog, that my perverse fate forced me to travel with. Is it surprising that such a tasteless being should rather caress this dog than her children?” (251). Later in the same section, Wollstonecraft reiterates this image with similar language, telling how she has been “disgusted by the fine lady who took her lap-dog to her bosom instead of her child” (259). Through this commentary, Wollstonecraft encapsulates everything that is wrong with contemporary conceptions of femininity: instead of being educated in a way that promotes positive maternal behaviors, fashionable women are much more likely to misplace their maternal energy on an entirely superfluous object.

In order not to overemphasize the extent to which Wollstonecraft works within established conceptions of feminine roles, it should be recognized that, at the most extreme extensions of her ideas, Wollstonecraft envisions women working far outside the norm. At points in the *Vindication*, she argues for female participation in the public sphere equal to that of men, envisioning the possibilities for women in male professions (230) and even briefly glancing toward the possibility for women’s suffrage: “I may excite laughter, by dropping an hint, which I mean to pursue, some future time, for I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed” (228). For these reasons, critics examining the confluence between Wollstonecraft’s ideas and those of her conservative contemporaries recognize the possibilities for commonality between writers of opposite political extremes but ultimately conclude that the approaches of these women are still essentially different.

Because many critics have already accessed the unexpected confluence between these two writers, scholarship comparing Wollstonecraft and her ultimate conservative opposite, Hannah More, presents a useful place to start in examining relationships between the ideas of politically radical and conservative women writers. Ana de Freitas Boe examines the similar objections of both Wollstonecraft and More in their responses to the problematic ideal of beauty presented by Burke's aesthetic ideas. However, she ultimately concludes that their logic works in divergent directions:

For Wollstonecraft, a society that no longer equated a woman's value with her body held open the possibility of true equality between the sexes. For More, a society that ceased to fetishize female beauty would create a world where women stayed in their place – the private sphere – instead of gallivanting around in the public sphere. (de Freitas Boe 362)

Harriet Guest also examines the two writers alongside each other, noting many striking congruencies in their treatises but, similarly, reaches the conclusion that More's conservatism ultimately separates her thought from that of Wollstonecraft (Guest 288). Overall, the work of these critics demonstrates that both writers actually come to agree on certain points; however, they also qualify the extent of this commonality, understanding the frameworks through which Wollstonecraft and More reach these congruent ideas to be essentially different.

Though the work of de Freitas Boe and Guest is very useful in identifying the intriguing similarities between these two seemingly different writers, it is less clear that the means by which they reach their ideas are so very different. Often Wollstonecraft and More do not actually seem to have different frameworks regarding gender at all but,

instead, follow the same reasoning in concluding that women's place in traditional feminine roles, particularly their responsibilities as mothers, dictates their importance for society as a whole. Both writers actually appear to employ common logic in their arguments for the improvement of female education. In the introduction of her treatise, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), More points to a contradiction within societal expectations for women in a way that closely resembles Wollstonecraft's argument in the *Vindication*. According to More, the standard of femininity directed by women's education conflicts with the roles they are expected to fulfill. In the opening of her *Strictures*, More declares, "It is a singular injustice which is often exercised towards women, first to give them a very defective education, and then to expect from them the most undeviating purity of conduct; -- to train them in such a manner as shall lay them open to the most dangerous faults, and then to censure them for not proving faultless" (ix). This statement seems to resonate with the contention Wollstonecraft makes in her introduction, claiming that contemporary female education inevitably conflicts with women's potential to become "affectionate wives and rational mothers."

Though specifically addressing upper class women, unlike Wollstonecraft who is concerned with the middle class, More's text also parallels the ideas of the *Vindication* in the societal importance she ascribes to women. In her first chapter, More repeatedly refers to "female influence" (25) and its important "power" (37). Moreover, it becomes clear that this "influence" of women in society, to which she repeatedly refers, can be understood as grounded in their domestic responsibilities: "you promote or injure the honour of your daughters and the happiness of your sons, of both which are you

depositories” (47). Again, this portion of More’s *Strictures* is congruent with Wollstonecraft’s logic in the *Vindication*: because women have vital responsibilities as mothers, they are inherently important to society at large and, consequently, hold a subject position that extends into the public sphere.

In this way, the similarities in the logic as well as in the conclusions of these two politically opposite women writers, necessitates a reassessment of exactly how useful or accurate the labels “radical” and “conservative,” which are generally used to categorize their work, might be.⁷ Regarding their differing political views, these labels have fairly evident meanings. For instance, Wollstonecraft can be clearly identified with the radical side of revolutionary politics, opposing Burke’s work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790, 1791), which criticizes the French Revolution, in her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). On the other end of the ideological spectrum, Hannah More writes *Village Politics* (1792), which satirizes the work of Thomas Paine and others while promoting their conservative opposition. However, as demonstrated above, their evident political differences do not necessarily lead them to diverge regarding problems and possibilities for women.

In fact, Guest, elsewhere in her discussion of Wollstonecraft and More, helpfully discusses the way in which radical/conservative distinctions breakdown when women writers deal with gender. Though Guest acknowledges that, in general, the reception of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* would have categorized it as a radical political text, she sees evidence that a “a surprising range of readers” would not have pigeonholed it as

⁷ The critics I have cited in this chapter, even Guest who goes on to argue that the contemporary understanding was more complicated, start from the assumption that these writers will be first understood, both in the context of their time and in present day scholarship, as “radical” and “conservative.”

such (Guest 274). Instead, it seems possible that this audience understood gender as “a category of concern that cuts across political differences” (274). For women like More’s friend, Mary Berry, the confluence between the arguments of Wollstonecraft and More, is “not amazing, but impossible, that they should do otherwise than agree” (Berry qtd. in Guest 274). In this way, Guest moves toward the idea that political distinctions of “radical” and “conservative” might not be applicable to the arguments of Romantic period women writers regarding conceptions of femininity. While the broader political ideas of writers like More and Wollstonecraft, such as their attitudes toward the French Revolution, might fit these labels, their stances on gender elude such categorization in a way in which their contemporaries might not have found at all contradictory with their other political views.

This unfixing of “radical” and “conservative” distinctions becomes relevant to examining the ways in which other women writers interact with the legacy of Wollstonecraft’s work. Applying these terms to conceptions of gender in a way that parallels their meanings in the realm of politics, “conservative” might be understood as adhering to established constructs of femininity and “radical” as deviating from gender norms.⁸ Employing these definitions would term many politically conservative women, like More, as radicals. Conversely, Wollstonecraft blurs this line in the other direction by presenting radical ideas about gender but doing so through adhering to an idea of traditional gender roles to justify her argument. In this way, though conservative women attempted to distance themselves from the *Vindication* because of its radical reputation,

⁸ Throughout my thesis, I will specify if I mean “radical” or “conservative” to refer to how an author is understood based on her political views. Otherwise, my use of these terms refers to the extent to which a writer adheres to or deviates from established social constructs.

analysis of Wollstonecraft's arguments presents a more mixed conservative/radical understanding of gender than might be expected. Ultimately, Wollstonecraft's gender politics, in some instances, could be more amenable to the ideas of politically conservative women and further from radical women who want to escape established roles entirely. Taken even further, this framework also opens up the possibility for considering the writing of supposedly "conservative" women as figuring gender in even more radical ways than those presented in the *Vindication*.

Chapter 2

“[O]nly a mother”: Development of a Unique Maternal Subject Position in the Novels of Radical Women Writers

Novels by politically radical women writers, including both Mary Wollstonecraft herself and her contemporaries, are clearly indebted to the ideas presented in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In fact, as Mary Poovey explains, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), Wollstonecraft's last, unfinished work, sought to make the ideas of the *Vindication* more accessible by presenting them in the form of a novel, “a genre she felt confident women would read” (Poovey 95). Echoing the *Vindication*, *Maria* depicts the restrictions placed on women in late eighteenth-century society as directly at odds with women's domestic responsibilities, employing the accepted feminine role of mother to create a radical argument for women's social importance and agency. Mary Hays, Wollstonecraft's friend and, in many ways, the successor of her ideas (Walker 503), also continues the ideas of the *Vindication*, developing Wollstonecraft's arguments into even more radical possibilities in her novel, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796). Though Hays also depicts motherhood as a way for women to influence the wider world, she further extends the *Vindication*'s critique of social constraints on women, presenting the potential limitations of this traditional, female role. Nonetheless, though problematizing a world in which women can only be mothers, Hays's work still concurs with Wollstonecraft regarding the unique importance of the maternal role. As both Wollstonecraft and Hays create fictional interpretations of the *Vindication*, the problems and heartbreak at the core of their novels poignantly demonstrate the significance of the maternal figure through the detrimental effects of her absence.

The work of Barbara Taylor and Claudia L. Johnson has already provided useful analysis of the importance of maternity in Wollstonecraft's *Maria*. Significantly, Taylor argues that "Wollstonecraft sets Maria's maternal feelings, here represented (for the first and only time in Wollstonecraft's writings) as the mark of an authentic, uncorrupted femininity" (243). Johnson similarly sees the presentation of maternity in *Maria* as a unique development in the body of Wollstonecraft's work, making an intriguing assertion about Wollstonecraft's treatment of the female body in this text. Reading the female body as a "problem to overcome" in Wollstonecraft's earlier work, Johnson suggests that "*Maria* begins to wonder whether the female body can be treated as a solution" ("*Mary Wollstonecraft's Novels*" 199). Overall, Taylor and Johnson's readings of *Maria* clearly present helpful analysis of Wollstonecraft's positive use of maternity and the way in which it seems to present a "solution" for the protagonist; however, it seems less clear that Wollstonecraft's formulation of the mother as an empowering subject position for women is entirely unique to her last, unfinished work. As Poovey points out, in many ways, *Maria* is the *Vindication* in the form of a novel. In fact, the presentation of maternity in *Maria* seems to very closely parallel the way in which the *Vindication* rewrites women's traditional role as mothers to assert female importance in society at large. Wollstonecraft's later novel similarly demonstrates that increasing women's agency in society benefits their children and presents constraints on women, created by detrimental societal norms, as very literally inhibiting their traditional maternal role.

The text explicitly makes an argument for women's importance and agency in the public sphere through Maria's defense of herself during the adultery trial at the end of the novel, in which she both argues for a divorce from her husband, Venables, and defends

her affair with Darnford.⁹ Through Maria's voice, Wollstonecraft uses motherhood to promote radical ideas. Asserting that women should be allowed to separate themselves from bad husbands, Maria bases her argument on women's responsibility to care for children. She states that laws "force women, when they claim protectorship as mothers, to sign a contract which renders them dependent on the caprice of the tyrant" (Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 143). Such dictates are unreasonable and their negative impact on women consequently affects children. In fact, Maria depicts the demands of a bad husband as something that directly inhibits traditional feminine responsibilities, demanding: "If I am unfortunately united to an unprincipled man, am I for ever to be shut out from fulfilling the duties of a wife and mother?" (144). The immense importance of women's responsibilities gives a sense of wrongness to their powerlessness, an idea implied by the plot of the novel itself. To satisfy his vices, Venables kidnaps their child and locks Maria in a madhouse in order to gain access to the substantial inheritance that has been left to their daughter by Maria's uncle. During the trial, Maria believes her daughter to be dead due to the selfish actions of her husband, who removed the child from a mother who would have properly cared for her. Here, Maria calls on her maternal feelings as grounds for a divorce: "I deem, and ever shall deem, myself free. The death of my babe dissolved the only tie which subsisted between me and my, what is termed, lawful husband" (144).

Though Wollstonecraft's argument against social dictates that condone the malicious actions of her husband, asserting instead for the empowerment of women based

⁹ Even her adultery cannot be entirely condemned as it is based on Maria's maternal feelings. She wishes "that [her daughter] had a father whom her mother could respect and love" (71).

on their responsibility for the protection of their children, becomes most explosive in the climatic trial scene, the text builds these ideas through its preceding depiction of Maria's confinement in the madhouse. Moreover, Maria's literal imprisonment resonates with the imagery of physical confinement Wollstonecraft employs in her *Vindication*. Though Maria's "confinement that froze her into a nook of existence" (64) is a situation specific to her character, she presents herself as really no different from women in general. After entertaining thoughts of escaping the madhouse, Maria concludes that fleeing from her prison would really serve no purpose: "Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?" (64). Situating Maria as representative of her gender, allows Wollstonecraft to make her protagonist into a metaphor for the ideas presented in the *Vindication* regarding social constructs that restrict women. The novel's presentation of the literal imprisonment of a mother might be read as a fictional successor to the *Vindication*'s "gilt cage" (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 112) in which "artificial duties" (223) conflict with maternal responsibilities.

Whether demonstrated by the figurative imprisonment of women in ornamental bodies presented in the *Vindication* or depicted by Maria's very real confinement, the problems created by restrictions on women are directly related to maternal responsibilities. Similar to the way in which social constructs of femininity confine women in sickly, weak bodies which "will not permit them to suckle their children" (266) as Wollstonecraft argues in the *Vindication*, Maria's imprisonment very clearly inhibits her role as a mother. The beginning of the first chapter introduces Maria's feelings regarding her situation through the horrifying wrongness of separating a woman from her child. She is "tortured by maternal apprehension" (Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 61), wondering

what has become of her daughter. The text's depiction of this torture employs the image of maternal breastfeeding, further echoing the end of the *Vindication* quoted above. Maria acutely feels her "bosom bursting with the nutriment for which this cherished child might be now pining in vain" (61). In this way, Wollstonecraft's presentation of the maternal in *Maria* continues concepts developed in the *Vindication* which employ women's traditional responsibilities to form an argument against a restrictive feminine ideal.

Though *Maria* presents a very obvious and deliberate extension of the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft's novel is not the only successor of her earlier treatise. While Wollstonecraft's tactic seems to be to turn the logic of her opposition against itself, other women might see contemporary gender norms as so problematic that attempts to work within them are complicated as well. Wollstonecraft's argument, presented in both her fictional and nonfictional texts, might be summarized as such: Her critics want women to be appropriately feminine (which is inherently tied to traditional female roles), but women cannot adequately fulfill their responsibilities as mothers unless they are given social power; therefore, women's social power is inherently necessitated by their maternal role. Ultimately, a woman like Maria should have the power to act independently of her husband by virtue of the fact that she is a mother.

However, the "gilt cage" of the *Vindication* does not present a singular, definite reading. Though Wollstonecraft ultimately depicts the confinement of women as something that prevents them from acting as mothers, Hays, in her *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, understands social restrictions on women as confining them within traditional roles. While *Maria* rewrites motherhood into an argument for women's agency in society, Hays's Emma views becoming a mother as simply doing the best she can within her

confined position as a woman while aspiring to a role in the public space equal to men. In this way, though critiquing the same problematic societal ideals of which Wollstonecraft complains, Hays takes this commentary in a more radical direction.

Unlike Wollstonecraft, who works within some aspects of accepted femininity, Hays problematizes the limitation of women to traditional roles. Tossed into a detrimental state of dependence, Emma laments, “Why was I not educated for commerce, for a profession, for labour?” (Hays 32). The text further attacks the helpless position in which society places women through Emma’s later letters to her friend and mentor, Mr. Francis. After Emma expresses anxiety regarding her precarious situation following her father’s death, Mr. Francis admonishes her: “You have talents cultivate them, and learn to rest on your own powers” (36). Though this seems to be perfectly good advice, Emma demonstrates that Mr. Francis’s optimistic philosophy is highly problematic when applied to women: “The character, you tell me, is modified by circumstances: the customs of society, then, have enslaved, enervated, and degraded women” (39). In a later letter, she laments that “[w]hile men pursue interest, honor, pleasure,” women, instead, “remain insulated beings, and must be content tamely to look on, without taking any part in the great, though often absurd and tragical, drama of life” (85). Unlike the work of Wollstonecraft, Emma does not see a solution within women’s roles as they exist, but instead finds tragedy in the fact that women are not allowed to engage in the same level of participation in society as men.

Nonetheless, as she tells Mr. Francis, “[t]he mind must have an object” (117). In another letter, she explains the best option open to her as a woman: “I would united myself to a man of worth – I would have our mingled virtues and talents perpetuated in

our offspring” (117). However, Emma’s substantial talents, when applied in this way, devolve into a somewhat crazed pursuit of Augustus Harley, her would-be lover. Unlike Maria’s supposed madness and imprisonment in the madhouse, which presents the way in which society prevents women from fulfilling the responsibilities entailed to their gender, Emma’s seeming insanity in her obsessive letter writing to this “man of worth” is derived from qualities which denote greatness in men but which seem madness when applied within the small sphere allotted to women. She approaches her desire to become Harley’s wife in the same manner in which a man might approach a goal in the public sphere. When Mr. Francis questions her unrelenting approach to her unrequited love, Emma responds: “To be roused and stimulated by obstacles –obstacles admitting hope, because obscurely seen – is no mark of weakness” (146). Her ambition and attitudes toward her goals seem odd only because she is restrained in the private space but has abilities that are better suited for use in the public sphere. In this way, her letters present maternity as a positive outlet for her potential but, at the same time, see it as a kind of consolation prize: a small bit of power in the public space.

The text’s more implicit hints toward a positive potential for motherhood in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, despite the severe limitations Emma explicitly articulates in her letters, have already been explored by critics. Eleanor Ty and Gary Kelly both understand Emma’s ultimate role as a mother to be fulfilling for her. As Ty describes, Emma takes her restricted position in society and turns it into something positive: “As a mother, Emma can fruitfully make use of her intelligence, her experience, and her sensibilities in an avenue acceptable to society” (Ty xxxiv). Kelly similarly understands Emma’s aspirations as seeking to impact society in a ripple effect through her children

(Kelly 101). Indeed, concurring with the analysis of these critics, at the end of the novel, it seems that Emma has, in fact, found a positive outlet for her aspirations to “usefulness” (Hays 119) through becoming a mother. Following Harley’s death and the disastrous end of her marriage with Mr. Montague, Emma declares “I renewed my existence in my children” (194) and “found a sweet relief for my sorrows in these tender, maternal cares” (181). However, this analysis becomes less persuasive when considering the overarching plot of the novel.¹⁰ Though the story at first appears to move toward a more successful relationship between her adoptive son, Augustus, and her daughter, Emma, the reader discovers that little Emma has died. Clearly, the eventual domesticity of Hays’s protagonist is not unproblematic.

Nonetheless, Ty and Kelly have hit on something important in recognizing the significance of the maternal subject position in the text. In some ways, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* does seem to inherit Wollstonecraft’s concept of motherhood as a powerful subject position for women. However, perhaps a stronger argument for the importance of the maternal in this text can be made through examining Emma’s story and its inciting events, rather than analysis more focused on the protagonist’s presentation of her life in which she explicitly problematizes the maternal role as a confining subject position. On the most basic level of plot description, *Maria* and *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* are the stories of motherless girls. Overall, both texts perhaps most powerfully demonstrate the importance of the mother by the problems that occur in her absence.¹¹ *Maria* and *Emma*

¹⁰ Kelly also recognizes the way in which the text problematizes the domesticity reached at the end but discusses this issue in a different way than I understand it in my reading.

¹¹ Mary Jacobus identifies a pattern of motherless female characters throughout writing by women in the Romantic period. Her chapter, “‘The Science of herself’: scenes of female enlightenment,” explores the implications of this theme in depth.

experience the detrimental effects of their motherless situations as adolescents and work to prevent such problems when they become mothers themselves. Ultimately, the stories of both women conversely show the importance of the mother through the detrimental effects caused by a lack of maternal support.

A conceptualization of maternal importance in this way is perhaps most clear in *Maria* because of the way in which the text foregrounds the dangerous consequences of a mother's absence. As stated above, through much of the novel, Maria believes that her husband's abduction of their daughter, which has deprived her of a mother's care, has resulted in her death. Moreover, the reader learns that, as a young woman, Maria herself loses her mother and, in the absence of a mother figure (her malicious stepmother clearly does not fill the gap), Maria is left in a vulnerable position. Her home life, in fact, becomes so unbearable that she marries Venables primarily to escape. In her memoirs, Maria tells that she "thought more of obtaining my freedom, than of my lover" (Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 104) and later laments: "in my haste to escape from temporary dependence . . . I had been caught in a trap, and caged for life" (108).

Wollstonecraft further explores the horrific consequences of maternal absence in the character of Jemima, Maria's warden with whom she develops a friendship and learns the heartbreaking story of this lower-class woman. The reader comes to discover that Jemima has a deep understanding of the potential dangers for motherless girls through her own horrific experience. As a bastard child, left alone when her mother dies in childbirth, Jemima is placed in an extremely marginalized position. Though it might seem that her social situation would be inherently difficult due to the illegitimacy of her birth, reflecting on her life, Jemima sees the presence of a mother figure as the one factor that

may have made a difference: “Now that I look back, I cannot help attributing the greater part of my misery, to the misfortune of having been thrown into the world without the grand support of life – a mother’s affection. I had no one to love me; or to make me respected, to enable me to acquire respect” (82). Here, Jemima’s reflections seem to endow the mother figure with an incredible amount of power.

In fact, it is their shared understanding of the vital importance of a mother in a young girl’s life that creates a point of connection between Maria and Jemina. At the beginning of her desperate situation in the madhouse, Maria uses this commonality to beg Jemima for help: “With your heart, and such dreadful experience, can you lend your aid to deprive my babe of a mother’s tenderness, a mother’s care? In the name of God, assist me to snatch her from destruction!” (92). Moreover, in a sketch of a possible ending for the novel, Jemima saves her friend from a suicide attempt by admonishing Maria with her maternal responsibilities and calling on the horror of her own motherless experience. Presenting Maria with the daughter who was presumed dead, Jemima questions: “would you leave her alone in the world, to endure what I have endured?” (147). The fragment concludes with Maria seeming to have found empowerment and purpose through motherhood, exclaiming: “The conflict is over! I will live for my child!” (148).

In the *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Hays similarly presents the problems experienced by a motherless girl. First losing her biological mother, Emma comes under the care of her aunt, Mrs. Melmoth. However, like Maria, she loses this mother figure at the “critical period of life” (Hays 26) when she is transitioning into adulthood. Emma’s story continues to resemble that of Wollstonecraft’s protagonist when her dependent situation as a woman leads her to seek marriage as a means by which to do any thing

useful, paralleling the way in which Maria's home life causes her to flee into a marriage with Venables. As she states to Mr. Francis, "[t]he mind must have an object."

Furthermore, when Emma becomes a mother herself, she is acutely aware of the problems that could arise for her adopted son, Augustus, in the absence of her maternal guidance. This concern forms the frame story of the text in which Emma seeks to provide this necessary maternal presence through writing.

In fact, for both heroines, motherhood becomes an impetus to write. In an approach to this issue unique from other writers I will discuss, Wollstonecraft and Hays present characters who attempt to rectify the problems caused by the absence of the mother through creating written works that serve to fill this gap, seeking to prevent their children from enduring the problems they have experienced as motherless girls. Both mothers, placed in situations in which they cannot interact with their children directly, seek to form a surrogate maternal connection through writing. "Rash young man!" (7) *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* begins, and the direct address continues throughout the novel. The entirety of the text consists of the story Emma creates for Augustus as she seeks to prevent him from falling prey to passions as she once did. Similarly, a portion of *Maria* is also devoted to the heroine's memoirs which are written with the hope of "instructing" her daughter in the future as "only a mother – a mother schooled in misery" (Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 94) could do. In this way, the autobiographical work of both characters is authorized by their subject positions as mothers.

Moreover, becoming a writing mother does not present a conflict between public and private spheres. Instead, influence and agency in all spaces of human life is necessarily what it means to be a mother. For Maria and Emma, their situations as

mothers seem to necessarily make them writers as they seek to create a better future. The approach taken by Wollstonecraft and Hays, in which motherhood inherently allows these women to participate into the public sphere activity of authorship, is unique from the politically conservative writers I will discuss. Perhaps this difference stems from the way in which they understand the interworkings of power dynamics in society and how an individual might gain power, influenced by their involvement with radical politics of the time. However, as discussed above, the content of texts dealing with gender by politically conservative and radical women writers is not as widely divergent as their political leanings. Though not dealing with writing mothers, the idea that a public/private divide is effectively dissolved by maternity is similarly essential to the work of other female novelists.

Chapter 3

Overtly Conservative, Implicitly Radical: The Portrayal of Maternity and the Maternal Body in the Work of Maria Edgeworth

As discussed above, the work of Mary Wollstonecraft demonizes problematic societal ideals of femininity by showing them to be directly at odds with women's responsibilities as mothers. Her *Vindication* directly attacks Edmund Burke's ideal of sickly beauty and presents a positive conception of femininity through the maternal body, which she appears to frame as a direct antithesis to this weak-bodied feminine ideal. The purportedly conservative Maria Edgeworth, whose work, at first glance, might appear to be unambiguously situated on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum regarding her conception of women's place in society, seems to follow an extremely similar train of thought. In her novel, *Belinda* (1801), Edgeworth's depiction of the fashionable Lady Delacour also appears to present the way in which societal expectations inhibit women's maternal responsibilities. Moreover, as the text's seemingly conservative characters, particularly the ideal mother, Lady Anne, echo Wollstonecraft, it becomes less clear that *Belinda's* presentation of motherhood is entirely conservative, demonstrating the breakdown in political distinctions of "radical" and "conservative" for women writing about gender already discussed in relation to Wollstonecraft and Hannah More. Considering the presentation of motherhood in *Belinda* alongside the clearly subversive mother figure of Ellinor, the Irish wet nurse in Edgeworth's *Ennui* (1809), further highlights the less conservative possibilities for mothers in Edgeworth's writing. Like her politically radical contemporaries, Edgeworth does not seem to see the influence inherent in the role of the mother as entirely limited to the private space but, instead, as a kind of

power that intrinsically resists confinement to a public/private divide, taking these implications to a new dimensions through her focus on the maternal body itself.

Edgeworth's interest with the problems and possibilities for the maternal body in contemporary society becomes evident in *Belinda*. Though the text's purported protagonist is Belinda, a young girl coming of age in the world, as critics have pointed out the book really seems to be about the more complicated Lady Delacour (Kowaleski-Wallace 110), to whom Belinda's mercenary aunt entrusts the care of her niece in hopes of securing an advantageous marriage. Lady Delacour, the epitome of a fashionable lady entirely consumed by the superficial values of the world, is clearly not an ideal guardian for a young girl, and her treatment of her own offspring makes her inadequacy in fulfilling a nurturing role even more evident. She attempts to nurse one child herself, but only because "[i]t was the fashion" (Edgeworth, *Belinda* 42). Evidently following the trends of society is incompatible with successful motherhood, since this infant does not survive Lady Delacour's attempt to fashionably nurse it. When she has her next child, Lady Delacour determines that she "would not have barbarity to nurse it myself" (42), giving Helena first to a wet nurse and then to the care of relatives with whom she grows up almost entirely separate from her mother.

The adverse effect of social pressures on a mother is highlighted when Lady Delacour describes the way in which her decision to give up her daughter immediately at birth leads to her disastrous misadventures in fashionable society. She recounts to Belinda: "I had nothing at home, either in the shape of husband or children, to engage my affections. I believe it was this 'aching void' in my heart which made me, after looking abroad some time for a bosom friend, take such a prodigious fancy to Mrs. Freke" (43). It

is through involvement with Mrs. Freke and her “frolics” (335) that Lady Delacour engages another woman in a duel, which wounds her breast and causes an on-going malady. As Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace points out in her discussion of the text, Lady Delacour’s apparent breast cancer presents an “appropriate synecdoche for her failed maternity” (Kowaleski-Wallace 128). The injury turns into a psychologically driven illness that Lady Delacour believes will end in her impending death but which is ultimately cured when she is converted to useful domestic life and finally acts as a mother to Helena.

The embodiment of failed maternity in Lady Delacour’s sick body might be considered alongside the sickly female body idealized in Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Far from epitomizing feminine beauty, Edgeworth presents Lady Delacour’s illness as distinctly horrifying, seen when Lady Delacour decides to trust Belinda and “let fall her mask” (Edgeworth, *Belinda* 30): “She then with a species of fury wiped the paint from her face, and returning to Belinda, held the candle so as to throw the light full upon her livid features. Her eyes were sunk, her cheeks hollow – no trace of youth or beauty remained on her deathlike countenance” (31). Responding to her friend’s reaction, Lady Delacour continues: “‘You are shocked, Belinda,’ said she, ‘but as yet you have seen nothing –look here—’ and baring one half of her bosom, she revealed a hideous spectacle” (32). The devastated body of the beautiful, envied Lady Delacour is distinctly not the loveable beauty Burke imagined to be the product of “weakness” and “sickness” (Burke, *Philosophical Inquiry* 167) in women. Whether or not Edgeworth has Burke specifically in mind in her creation of the character

of Lady Delacour, she seems to be fairly clearly responding to the fetishization of weak, sickly women that pervades literature of the period.¹²

Echoing the ideas of Wollstonecraft, Lady Delacour's sick body, injured in the ridiculous pursuit of fashionable society, inhibits her ability to interact with her child. When Belinda attempts a reunion between mother and daughter, Helena, in her joy, enthusiastically embraces her mother: "she pressed close to her mother's bosom, clasping her with all her force" (Edgeworth, *Belinda* 173). Here, the injured breast very literally prevents Lady Delacour from acting as a mother: "Lady Delacour screamed and pushed her daughter away" (173). The dynamic presented in this reunion scene has an intriguing resonance with Wollstonecraft's summary of her argument in the final chapter of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

I wish especially to prove, that the weakness of mind and body, which men have endeavoured, impelled by various motives, to perpetuate, prevents their discharging the peculiar duty of their sex: for when weakness of body will not permit them to suckle their children, and weakness of mind makes them spoil their tempers –is woman in a natural state? (266)

Lady Delacour's experience further parallels the argument Wollstonecraft presents in this passage when she asserts that the damage done though her attempts to maintain popularity in fashionable society is also "of mind and body." After revealing to Belinda the horror of her mutilated body, Lady Delacour states: "Yes, pity me for what you have seen; and a thousand times more, for that which you cannot see –my mind is eaten away

¹² Other examples of the sickly-bodied, beautiful woman might be seen in Mary Wollstonecraft's parody of this trope through the protagonist's mother in *Mary* (1787) and the character of Jane Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) who furthers the love of Mr. Bingley while she is an invalid at his house.

like my body, by incurable disease” (Edgeworth, *Belinda* 32). On both physical and mental levels, Lady Delacour has been injured by attempting to fulfill societal expectations and maintain popularity.

Even when Edgeworth presents herself in clear opposition to the work of Wollstonecraft, caricaturing her radical predecessor in the character of Harriet Freke, their ideas might not be so completely different. In fact, it seems possible to read Freke as an embodiment of fashionable society rather than a radical outsider. When Lady Delacour recounts the story of her friendship with Freke to Belinda, she describes Freke as “just then coming into fashion” (43). Freke’s immense popularity at a time when Wollstonecraft and her ideas were generally viewed in a negative light¹³ would appear to complicate a seemingly easy comparison between the two.¹⁴ By instead understanding Freke and her “frolics” as representative of ridiculous fashionable fads, her implication in the wounding of Lady Delacour’s maternal body actually fits with Wollstonecraft’s critic that the expectations of contemporary society inhibit successful mothering.

Moreover, in the chapter most obviously attacking Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, entitled “Rights of Woman,” not all of Wollstonecraft’s ideas come through the mouth of this caricature. In fact, Mr. Percival, Freke’s opponent and the character the text clearly supports, makes a statement that appears very close to an idea in the *Vindication*. In her lengthy discussion of modesty, Wollstonecraft critiques society’s association of feminine

¹³ Anne K. Mellor provides context for how Wollstonecraft’s work came to be viewed in the backlash against radicals in the wake of the Terror in France and the way in which this negative response caused other women writers to distance themselves from her ideas in “Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and the Women Writers of Her Day.”

¹⁴ Deborah Weiss in fact argues that Freke is a “caricature of a caricature” (446), which may be taking Edgeworth’s potential support of Wollstonecraft’s ideas too far, but clearly her interaction with the work of radical women is far from simplistic.

virtue with ignorance, arguing that true modesty is gained through knowledge: “those women who have most improved their reason must have the most modesty” (*Vindication* 200). She asserts that knowledge is not incommensurable with innocence but, instead, “the possession of virtue, of any denomination, is incompatible with ignorance” (208-9). Agreeing with the *Vindication*’s argument, in a retort to Freke, Mr. Percival states: “for nothing can be more different than innocence and ignorance” (Edgeworth, *Belinda* 229). Whatever Edgeworth’s views on Wollstonecraft may have been, it is clear that her work does not contradict many of the main arguments of the *Vindication*.

Though not directly related to the novel’s depiction of maternity, Percival’s comment is significant because it is later defended by his wife, Lady Anne, whom the text clearly situates as the ideal mother. Following Mr. Percival’s argument with Freke, *Belinda* seems to present a second rendition the “Rights of Woman” which further interrogates Percival’s statement regarding innocence and ignorance. Lady Anne questions Mr. Vincent, Belinda’s suitor, about his attitudes toward women, asking if he would “confine our sex to the bliss of ignorance” (233). Their conversation, in which Belinda also takes part, supporting the position of Lady Anne, leads Mr. Vincent to become ashamed of his original opinion. In this way, while Freke is associated with established fashionable society, it is the exemplary Lady Anne who questions societal ideas about women, necessitating a reconsideration of seemingly obvious divisions between radical and conservative women in the text.

Similarly, the family model of the Percivals, which is held up as an example for Belinda’s future life and the reform of lady Delacour into a successful mother, is less obviously conservative than it appears at first. A cursory reading of the Percivals presents

Anne as the quintessential domestic woman, seen in Belinda's first impression of the Percival family upon entering their house: "She found herself in the midst of a large and cheerful family, with whose domestic happiness she could not forebear to sympathize" (215). The narrator even feels the need to clarify that such domestic relations are possible, not merely "visionary and romantic" (216). However, there is more going on in this ideal family portrait:

Lady Anne Percival had, without any pedantry or ostentation, much accurate knowledge, and a taste for literature, which made her the chosen companion of her husband's understanding as well as his heart. He was not obliged to reserve his conversation for friends of his own sex, nor was he forced to seclude himself in the pursuit of any branch of knowledge; the partner of his warmest affections was also the partner of his most serious occupations. (216)

Here, Anne is portrayed as highly intelligent, and the passage even seems to imply she is her husband's equal or at least equal to any man with which he might discuss his ideas, since he must go no further than his wife for intellectual stimulation. Even further, the way in which Anne employs her intelligence in the household through the education of her children seems to indicate she has a very powerful role. As a mother she can use her intellect for the benefit of society through the positive education of its future members and the effect of such domestic harmony on her husband: "the daily sense of her success in the education of their children inspired him with a degree of happy social energy" (216). Just as Mary Hays presents the social importance of motherhood in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Edgeworth uses the character of Anne to depict the way in which a

mother's influence extends into society; however, in *Belinda*, this possibility is clearly positive, uncomplicated by tragedy.

Though Anne's power might still seem conservative because it is in the domestic space, as the above quote demonstrates, the actions of a mother in the private sphere have an effect on the public sphere, particularly through her close connection to children who will become members of society. This maternal power relates to Rousseau's concerns regarding the mother's influence over future citizens, which exemplifies a widespread anxiety in the period regarding the possibility that the power of the mother might not be clearly restricted to its purportedly private confines. In "An Introduction to Maria Edgeworth," Kowaleski-Wallace argues that this aspect of contemporary discourse about women is particularly relevant to the writing of Edgeworth, specifically discussing the problem of applying a stereotype of feminine irrationality to the maternal body. Building on previous arguments made by Valerie Walkerdine, Kowaleski-Wallace states: "The result of the 'hystericization' and 'medicalization' of women's bodies was a paradox; women's bodies became the 'place where the production of reasoning beings as children was assured and yet a constant source of danger'" (105). Though Kowaleski-Wallace does not specifically attach this analysis to Rousseau, her argument clearly relates to the concerns in *Emilius* regarding women's reproductive capacities and the power mothers have over developing individuals. In fact, Lady Anne's responsibilities for creating a positive home environment and conducting the education of her children embodies Rousseau's anxious observations that "[o]n the good constitution of mothers depends originally that of their children; on the care of the women depends our earliest education" (19). As Rousseau fears, Anne's maternal care is clearly a site for the development of

future society; however, for Edgeworth, this intimacy is not a dangerous power in need of restriction but, instead, a necessary and positive influence.

A reading of the more radical potential of *Belinda* might be strengthened by considering the text alongside *Ennui*, another work in which Edgeworth creates an intriguing maternal figure in the character of Ellinor, the native Irish wet nurse. Situating Ellinor as the mother figure for both a native Irish son and an Anglo-Irish foster son has a destabilizing effect on cultural identity, presenting another version of the subversive potential for the maternal body. Similar to Kowaleski-Wallace, Julie Kipp also examines Romantic period anxiety about the potential power of mothers and nurses to affect society through an inherently close relationship to their children and control over the development of these future members of society. Discussing a general conception of Irish wet nurses, who commonly cared for Anglo-Irish infants, Kipp describes the danger these women were thought to present to the “cultural integrity” of English children (99). In the context of tensions regarding the potentially permeable nature of cultural divides through the body of the wet nurse, Kipp describes the possibilities for Ellinor: while the unique connection she can create “suggests a sympathetic model of intercultural relations,” at the same time “the wet nurse becomes an uncomfortable reminder of the tenuousness between outside and inside, self and other” (107).

Under the maternal care of Ellinor, the two foster brothers are brought so close they reach the point of interchangeability. During the tumult of the Irish Rebellion of 1798 (Kipp 99), the protagonist, and supposed Earl of Glenthorn, discovers and eliminates a rebellious plot against him. However, the reader learns that a kind of revolution has already occurred. In order to save another son implicated in the plot

against the Earl, Ellinor reveals a secret she meant to have left obscured forever. “I am your lawful mother” (Edgeworth, *Ennui* 177), she declares and proceeds to present undeniable evidence that the protagonist is indeed her biological son while Christy, the seemingly native Irish blacksmith, “he who has the face and the hands so disguised with the smoke and the black . . . he it is who should live in this castle, and sleep on that soft bed, and be lord of all here” (177). The way in which the two men have completely fulfilled their reversed roles of native Irish blacksmith and Anglo-Irish lord seems to indicate that Ellinor’s situation has endowed her with the power to determine identity. Through this fosterage system there appears to be such a complete dissolution of distinct identities that Ellinor’s word becomes the only determining factor.

Even the reader attempting to follow the evidently allegorical nature of the plot, in which native Irish and Anglo-Irish foster brothers are cared for by a single mother in Ireland, can trace equally compelling arguments for either brother to be figured as either cultural group, demonstrating the nature of the Irish wet nurse to unfix assumedly distinct identities. The protagonist might seem representative of the native Irish by virtue of his original cultural identity along with his initial failure to properly manage his estate in Ireland, becoming successful only through his experiences over the course of the novel. In fact, when the illegitimate Earl of Glenthorn gives up the estate, he describes his sensations in distinctly positive terms: “my mind seemed suddenly relieved from an oppressive weight” (183). Alternatively, the text also presents a possible reading of the protagonist as representative of the Anglo-Irish, with whom he is initially associated. Despite the faults of the illegitimate Earl of Glenthorn, his foster brother still does far worse when the estate comes under his control, very nearly destroying it entirely. Indeed,

the protagonist eventually even becomes the legitimate earl through his marriage to Cecilia Delamere, the next successor to the property.

Similarly, Christy might seem obviously situated to represent the Anglo-Irish as the real Earl of Glenthorn. However, despite his original cultural identity, he seems very much a member of the native Irish. Christy's characterization as part of this cultural group might be seen in the strong accent with which Edgeworth depicts him. His distinctly Irish speech is in no way altered by his sudden change in fortune, exemplified in the beginning of a letter he sends the protagonist: "My dear and honourable foster brother, I am sorry to hear from Mr. M'Leod that you are thinking of studdening . . ." (205). In addition, despite knowing his real identity, Christy still sees himself as best left in his lower class place: "I'd rather be at the forge by a great dale . . . I that have been always used to work, what should I do all the day without it?" (184).

In this way, Ellinor's choice seems to have fundamentally determined the cultural identities of both men, radically demonstrating the possibility for mothers to control the future of individuals in society. This is not to suggest that Edgeworth's text advocates social upheaval. In fact, biographical information suggests quite the opposite since she was part of the Anglo-Irish class and invested in maintaining the current social order (Butler ix), though she clearly problematizes aspects of the current state of Ireland. Instead, through this complicated representation of motherhood, Edgeworth seems to play with the social implications of the maternal body by placing it in a situation in which its possibilities can be taken to their furthest extent. Though not every woman is positioned to blur cultural and class identity like Ellinor, every maternal body is the site for the creation of an individual and the beginning of their identity in society. Read in this way,

Ellinor, like Lady Anne, embodies Rousseau's anxiety regarding the potential power of the maternal and the way in which the future of society "depends" on her important influence. However, while Edgeworth demonstrates the disruptive social implications Rousseau fears, the presentation of Ellinor overall is distinctly positive. After all, though Ellinor's switch of the two boys is highly questionable, in light of *Ennui*'s conclusion it seems to present an almost clairvoyant insight. It indeed seems that Ellinor made the right choice, since her Christopher is ultimately the legitimate Earl of Glenthorn by the end of the novel.

By basing maternal power in the female body itself, *Ennui* takes the permeability of a public/private divide, implied in the influential domesticity of Lady Anne, to an explicit and more radical degree. As Kipp demonstrates, the way in which Ellinor as a mother figure blurs cultural and class distinctions clearly presents a subversive breakdown in what might appear to be stable distinctions. However, her very profession as a wet nurse dissolves assumed barriers in another important way. The fact that motherly care can exist as a profession would seem to undo a possible assumption that the role of mother is entirely contained within the domestic space. Ellinor's maternal body presents mothering very much outside of the private sphere and involved in the public sphere: it is work resulting in financial gain to support herself and her family.¹⁵ In this way, her character overtly presents the potential for motherhood to break an assumed

¹⁵ Kipp seems to gesture toward this idea but does not take it further when she comments: "while maternal value was grounded during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the mother's supposed separateness from the public world of exchange and competition, the wet nurse testified to the fact that a woman 'has value only in that she can be exchanged'" (107).

public/private boundary, hinted at in the seemingly conservative role model of Lady Anne as well as the protagonists of Wollstonecraft and Hays's novels discussed above.

Ellinor's position earning money through an accepted job in the public space, as a man might do as a physician, lawyer, shopkeeper, etc., makes it valid to term her work as a wet nurse a profession and the way in which this work is predicated on the female body makes this profession a threatening position. Like male professions from which women are barred, as Wollstonecraft laments, by virtue of their gender, conversely, no man could fill Ellinor's role because only women can be mothers. The immense control over identity possessed by Ellinor and other women is an exclusively feminine power. Moreover, as discussed above, though Wollstonecraft and Hays develop conceptions of motherhood which similarly single out the significance of the mother in a child's life as a uniquely important position, the way in which Edgeworth grounds this in the body serves to further extend the implications of this power. While the heroines of *Maria* and *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* demonstrate the importance of the mother through the way in which it informs their writing, instructional writing is certainly not a domain exclusive to women. By, instead, placing the emphasis on the female body, seen in both Lady Delacour's maternal failure and Ellinor's success, Edgeworth situates this power as something uniquely feminine. Ellinor's profession as a mother, as well as Lady Anne's less obviously radical motherhood, is a social position not open to men, demonstrating that this vast influence over the future of society is delegated specifically to women.

Chapter 4

“I cannot possibly do without Anne”; “Usefulness” and Jane Austen’s Mother-like Heroines

Though generally considered a conservative writer, the work of Jane Austen presents a web of connection with the authors discussed above, from the evidently radical work of Mary Wollstonecraft to the seemingly conservative (but potentially more complicated) writing of Maria Edgeworth.¹⁶ Like the earlier work of these women, Austen problematizes societal idealization of a weak, sickly female body. Though without the overt social commentary of Wollstonecraft or the horror Edgeworth develops in the mutilated maternal body of Lady Delacour, Austen, in her own comic, and sometimes biting, style also critiques this ideal through caricatures of fashionable women. These ridiculous characters ultimately fail as mothers and, like the novels of Wollstonecraft and Hays, the problems stemming from this maternal gap conversely demonstrate the importance of successful motherhood. Though not biological mothers, Austen creates positive maternal figures in her nurturing heroines, Fanny (*Mansfield Park*) and Anne (*Persuasion*) through their “useful” (Austen, *Persuasion* 145) qualities, which sharply contrast with the uselessness of the texts’ caricatured fashionable women. Again paralleling the novelists discussed above, in *Persuasion*, Austen appears to imagine traditional feminine roles in radical ways, presenting marital relationships which do not seem to recognize any assumed public/private divide. In fact, *Persuasion* may be the most radical text of all the novels I have discussed. In her last novel, Austen not only

¹⁶ Tamara S. Wagner provides a brief overview of criticism on Austen, discussing the way in which recent work, like that of Claudia Johnson, complicates Austen’s “supposed ‘Tory conservatism’” and opens up the possibility for questioning previous assumptions that her work presents a clearly conservative perspective (Wagner 90).

demonstrates the importance of mothers to society but also gestures toward a “usefulness” (122) superior to what even a respected masculine role, such as a naval officer, can offer.

The utility of Austen’s heroines might be understood as a quality that links the significance of the maternal body, presented in the writing of Maria Edgeworth, with the more intellectual maternity of writing mothers in novels by Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays. Though, at points, Edgeworth moves toward this mind/body connection, seen in the intellectual capacities of Lady Anne and the tragic story of Lady Delacour who tells, “my mind is eaten away like my body, by incurable disease” (Edgeworth, *Belinda* 32), the most radical possibilities for maternal power, presented in *Ennui*’s Ellinor, ultimately focus distinctly on the body. Similarly, the “usefulness” of both Fanny and Anne is often an attribute of their active bodies, contrasting with the useless bodies of the texts’ comic fashionable women. Fanny is continually running errands for her Aunt Bertram and Anne’s helpful efforts at in her sister’s household even involve wrangling with her unruly little boys. However, their physical “usefulness” is mirrored by its intellectual equivalent in significant ways, evident in Fanny’s education of her sister and Anne’s reasoning capabilities during crisis. For these reasons, Austen’s heroines might present the closest fictional articulation of Wollstonecraft’s argument from the conclusion of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which she relates successful mothering to both “mind and body” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 266).

Austen seems to begin these ideas, which she develops even further in her last novel, through representations of failed and successful parenting in *Mansfield Park* (1814). The main problems that arise in this text consistently stem from problematic or

absent parents,¹⁷ which is perhaps most obvious in the young people's scheme for a producing the questionable play, *Lovers' Vows*, in the absence of Sir Thomas, the father of the house who has left to look after his property in the West Indies. The production leads to physical disruption of the house (the actors turn the billiard room into a theater) and allows for questionable interactions between the engaged Maria Bertram and Mr. Crawford, leading to yet worse scandal at the end of the novel. In the events surrounding the play, the text most obviously attaches the lack of parental restraint, which permits such impropriety, to the absence of the father. Edmund originally objects to the plan on the ground that he is "convinced that my father would totally disapprove it" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 103). Moreover, the play is only possible in the absence of Sir Thomas. His return results in an immediate dissolution of the dangerous scheme.

However, the text presents a maternal as well as paternal component of parental authority. The play is allowed to progress not only because of Sir Thomas's absence but also because of his wife's indolence. Described as having "been a beauty, and a prosperous beauty, all her life" (268), Lady Bertram might be read as a comic rendition of the weak-bodied feminine beauty epitomized in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry*. Austen's description of this humorous individual both follows Wollstonecraft's critique of a societal ideal of weak beauty, which confines women in the "gilt cage" (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 112) of a useless body and parallels the problematic maternal body depicted in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*. For most of the novel, Lady

¹⁷ *Mansfield Park* is, in fact, the text with which Mary Jacobus chooses to open her chapter, "The Science of Herself: Scenes of Female Enlightenment," exploring the pattern of motherless girls in Romantic period novels by women; however, her analysis explores the problem of absent mothers in a different way than I wish to develop my discussion.

Bertram's weak, fashionable body is pictured lolling uselessly on the sofa, with most of her devotion and concern, like Wollstonecraft's "fine lady who took her lap-dog to her bosom instead of her child" (259), misplaced on her dog, Pug. Paralleling Wollstonecraft and Edgeworth's critiques of such a feminine ideal, Austen depicts how these aspects of Lady Bertram's character conflict with her maternal responsibilities: "To the education of her daughters, Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa . . . thinking more of her pug than her children" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 15).

When her son, Edmund, looks to his mother for support in his objections to the scandalous play, Lady Bertram is less than a pillar of strength: "He was determined to prevent it, if possible, through his mother, who equally heard the conversation which passed at table, did not evince the least disapprobation" (102). Later in the scene, when each brother, Tom and Edmund, looks to their mother to defend or condemn the argument for the play, the text describes her as completely detached from any concern regarding the havoc which is about to ensue, despite her presumed responsibility as the mother for occurrences in the domestic space. She, in fact, seems incapable of any action at all: "Lady Bertram, sunk back in one corner of the sofa, the picture of health, wealth, ease, and tranquility, was just falling into a gentle doze, while Fanny was getting through the few difficulties of her work for her" (103). Clearly, this depiction, typical of Austen's presentation of Lady Bertram throughout the novel, demonstrates a useless maternal body, which has been engendered by her situation as a beautiful, fashionable lady and which prevents her from regulating the detrimental actions of her children. In this way, despite Lady Bertram's literal presence she might be interpreted as a figuratively absent

mother, conversely highlighting the importance of a good mother by the problems engendered by this gap in parental authority.

Moreover, Lady Bertram is just one in a trend of failed mother figures which appear throughout the text and similarly demonstrate maternal significance through the detrimental effect on young girls when this role is not adequately filled. If Lady Bertram is an absent mother, then her sister, Fanny's Aunt Norris, might be termed an anti-mother, often taking an active role in the household but, through her actions, becoming the exact opposite of a positive maternal figure. As a childless widow, prior to Fanny's introduction at Mansfield Park it is assumed that Mrs. Norris will take a motherly responsibility for her niece. However, Aunt Norris distinctly chooses not to be a mother: "Sir Thomas heard, with some surprise, that it would be totally out of Mrs. Norris's power to take any share in the personal charge of [Fanny]" despite his assumption that she would be "a desirable companion to an aunt who had no children of her own" (6). In fact, Aunt Norris, in her concern with maintaining the social status of her relations, the Bertrams, (higher than her own as a minister's widow) acts in direct opposition to the maternal protection she is initially expected to provide as surrogate mother for the adopted Fanny. It is Aunt Norris who originally suggests the second-class status for Fanny at Mansfield Park and enforces this hierarchy throughout the novel. Speaking to her sister, Lady Bertram, regarding arrangements for Fanny's arrival, Aunt Norris first insinuates the disparaging distinction:

I suppose, sister, you will put the child in the little white attic, near the old nurseries. It will be much the best place for her . . . close by the housemaids, who could either of them help dress her you know, and take care of her clothes, for I

suppose you would not think it fair to expect Ellis to wait on her as well as [her cousins]. Indeed, I do not see that you could possibly place her any where else. (7)

This conversation leads Sir Thomas to concur that Fanny must “remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*” (7) and that ultimately she and her cousins “cannot be equals” (7).

In some ways, it might seem that Mrs. Norris’s prejudice against Fanny stems from a mother-like bias toward Maria, the eldest Miss Bertram, who is described as her “favourite” (365). However, her interest in Maria often seems to be self-serving rather than maternal. She prides herself on having helped to make an advantageous connection with another noble family through Maria’s marriage to Mr. Rushworth, boasting, “she had made the match –she had done everything” (163). Yet, she is clearly more invested in what she can get out of the connection than her niece’s happiness. On an excursion to the Rushworths’ home, Mrs. Norris is focused more on developing an acquaintance with the wealthy Mrs. Rushworth and a “cream cheese” (86) she is able to acquire during the trip than the fact that Maria seems much more interested in spending time alone with Mr. Crawford than her future husband. As her “favourite” niece points out during the carriage ride back from the visit, “I think *you* have done pretty well yourself, ma’am” (86). In this way, Aunt Norris presents a false “usefulness.” In contrast with her indolent sister, Mrs. Norris is clearly an active individual, but her actions become negative through her intentions which focus on her own interests instead of actually caring for others. Clearly, an active maternal figure is only positive if this activity is intended to be useful to others.

However, the text further qualifies ideas about activity and usefulness, demonstrating that even a maternal figure who intends to be useful can be still problematic due to her own character flaws, demonstrated through the story of Mary

Crawford. After the death of their mother, Miss Crawford and her brother come under the care of their uncle, Admiral Crawford, and his wife. This couple, though taking a keen interest in the two children, present bad role models that detrimentally affect the development of their characters. In the case of Miss Crawford, her aunt's unguarded discussion of marital problems with her uncle, leads her to make improper comments about him in front of Edmund and Fanny. Reflecting on the preceding conversation, Fanny identifies the problems demonstrated in Miss Crawford's character as the result of her aunt's failure to act as a proper mother. Speaking to Edmund, who has been discomposed by Miss Crawford's inappropriate comments, Fanny suggests, "this impropriety is a reflection itself upon Mrs. Crawford, as her niece has been entirely brought up by her" (51). Edmund concurs with his cousin's discerning judgment regarding their mutual friend, "Yes, we must suppose the faults of the niece to have been those of the aunt" (51). He later states explicitly that Miss Crawford's faults are not those of a naturally bad disposition, but the result of a mismanaged education: "'There goes good humor I am sure . . . There goes a temper which would never give pain! . . . What a pity,' he added, after an instant's reflection, 'that she should have been in such hands!'" (92). Though Mrs. Crawford genuinely cared for her niece, her problematic character leads her to be a problematic mother.

In this way, the characters in *Mansfield Park* serve to develop ideas about the causes and consequences of failed mothering. Lady Bertram's indolence clearly does not have a positive effect on her family (in fact, the problem is that she has no effect whatsoever); however, activity, if not directed toward the good of others, can also be detrimental in a mother figure. Even further, mother figures with good intentions can still

fail because of problems within their own characters. Nonetheless, the maternal role is a distinctly powerful position, for good or for bad, which is seen in the detrimental effects of these problematic mothers on the young women in the novel: Maria ends up ruined through an adulterous affair with Mr. Crawford and, for most of the novel, the Bertram family treats Fanny more like a servant than a relative. Austen further develops these themes through similar representations of problematic maternal figures in her last novel, *Persuasion* (1817). In fact, considering the two texts alongside one another, it seems possible to trace characters developed in the earlier novel to their subsequent formulations. Ultimately, the representations of bad mothers in both *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* help to define the contrastingly good mother and to foreground the positive, mother-like qualities of their heroines.

Like Fanny, *Persuasion*'s heroine, Anne Elliot, is another motherless girl who suffers when the maternal gap is not adequately filled by a surrogate mother. Lady Russell, a close friend of Anne's deceased mother, seems positioned to fill this vital, motherly role. However, her interest in the social status of her close connections, the Elliots, and her concern with maintaining this status often clouds her judgment, which the narrator foregrounds in the introduction of her character: "She had a cultivated mind, and was, generally speaking, rational and consistent; but she had prejudices on the side of ancestry . . . Herself the widow of only a knight, she gave the dignity of a baronet all its due" (Austen, *Persuasion* 53). Nowhere is this flaw more apparent than when Lady Russell sways her young friend to reject the marriage proposal of the man she ardently loves: Captain Wentworth. In fact, the narrator describes Lady Russell's influence over Anne and the force of her opinion as stemming from her situation as a surrogate mother

figure: “It must not be, if by any fair interference of friendship, any representations from one who had almost a *mother’s love* and *mother’s rights*, it would be prevented” (66 emphasis mine). The fact that Anne is indeed swayed by her advice demonstrates the power of the maternal position in determining the future of a young girl, whether it be in a positive or negative way. Here, Lady Russell seems to continue a depiction of problematic maternal activity begun in *Mansfield Park*. Acting somewhat like Aunt Norris, she is swayed by misplaced values; however, her character also resonates with Mrs. Crawford, since she means to do well by her young friend but fails to become a successful mother because of her own character flaws.

In a dynamic similar to the various mothers presented in *Mansfield Park*, which serve to qualify failed maternity, *Persuasion* also depicts an indolent mother, demonstrating the opposite extreme to accompany its negative, active maternal figure. Anne’s sister, Mary Musgrove, perhaps the most obviously inadequate mother in the text, seems to inherit a critique of a weak-bodied ideal of femininity developed in the character of Lady Bertram. Beyond the weakness and indolence of Austen’s earlier rendition, Mary constantly imagines herself to be incapacitated by sickness, making it impossible for her to fulfill her domestic duties. The reader is first introduced to this aspect of her character when it impacts Anne’s ability to travel with the rest of her family to Bath, dictating that she stay behind at Uppercross: “Mary, often a little unwell, and always thinking a great deal of her own complaints, and always in the habit of claiming Anne when anything was the matter, was indisposed . . . ‘I cannot possibly do without Anne,’ was Mary’s reasoning” (71-2). When the reader finally encounters Anne’s difficult sister, it becomes clear that her hypochondria affects the domestic space, presenting another articulation of

the idea that a weak-bodied, fashionable woman is a failed maternal figure. In an echo of Lady Bertram, upon arriving at her sister's house, Anne encounters Mary "lying on the faded sofa of the pretty little drawing-room" (75). Their ensuing discourse glances on the effect of Mary's imagined illnesses on her actions as a mother and her inefficacy in parental authority overall. Anne asks, "You have had your little boys with you?", to which her sister responds, "Yes, as long as I could bear their noise; but they are so unmanageable that they do me more harm than good. Little Charles does not mind a word I say, and Walter is growing quite as bad" (75). In this way, Mary's comic hypochondria converts Burke's ideal femininity, in which women instinctively learn to "counterfeit weakness, and even sickness" (*Philosophical Enquiry* 167), into a ridiculous caricature and follows Wollstonecraft's critique that such a woman could not possibly be a successful mother.

In contrast with the useless, weak, and sick maternal bodies of Lady Bertram and Mary Musgrove, the heroines, Fanny and Anne, though not biological mothers, seem to become the positive maternal figures of each text through their aptitude for helping those around them. "Useful" becomes the key word in descriptions of both heroines, and the usefulness of their active bodies is equaled by their mental capacities. In fact, nearly every description of Fanny's character seems to in some way foreground her "useful" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 27) nature.¹⁸ Often, Fanny's usefulness seems to be simply her ability to assist everyone around her in whatever way she may be wanted. However, a distinctly maternal potential for her "useful" qualities appears in her interaction with her

¹⁸ Attempting to catalog every instance in which Fanny is referred to as "useful" would be a lengthy, time-consuming exercise, so I will leave this observation as a general statement instead of providing the many similar, and sometimes identical, examples involving this adjective.

younger sister, Susan. Fanny's visit to her family in Portsmouth presents another problematic mother figure in the character of Mrs. Price and her inability to manage her brood of children. Like her sister, Lady Bertram, Fanny's mother demonstrates a literally present but figuratively absent mother figure.¹⁹ In the case of Susan, Fanny steps in to fill the gap and becomes successful in making a significant difference in her sister's life: "Susan she found looked up to her and wished for her good opinion; and new as anything like an office of authority was to Fanny, new as it was to imagine herself capable of guiding or informing any one, she did resolve to give occasional hints to Susan" (322). Fanny comes "to entertain the hope of being useful to a mind so much in need of help, and so much deserving it" (323). In this way, Fanny takes charge of her sister's education, conducting her learning in a beneficial way that situates Fanny in the same endeavor as other mother figures, such as Mrs. Crawford, but with contrastingly successful results.

Anne, who might be read as a subsequent rendition of Fanny is similarly "useful" and is explicitly associated with the maternal when she manages her sister's children during her time at Uppercross. When Mary is discomposed about being left out of a dinner party on account of her sick son, little Charles, Anne finds a solution by filling the place of the mother herself. Further demonstrating the way in which Mary's interests in fashionable life conflict with her responsibilities as a mother, she complains, "I hope I am as fond of my child as any mother, but I do not know that I am of any more use in the

¹⁹ The text even describes her as another version of Lady Bertram, simply placed in a different context: "Her disposition was naturally easy and indolent, like Lady Bertram's; and a situation of similar affluence and do-nothing-ness would have been much more suited to her capacity, than the exertions and self-denials of the one, which her imprudent marriage had placed her in" (317).

sick-room than Charles” (Austen, *Persuasion* 91). Anne, taking up the slack created by her sister’s maternal irresponsibility, suggests, “Well, if you do not think it too late to give notice for yourself, suppose you were to go, as well as your husband. Leave little Charles to my care” (92). Here and elsewhere, the text’s depictions of Anne’s care for her sister’s children as well as other injured characters, such as Louisa Musgrove and Captain Benwick, make her possibly the most maternal figure in the text.

Ultimately, the character of Anne moves beyond its inheritance from *Mansfield Park* through the possibilities presented for Anne’s future relationship with Wentworth. Unlike Austen’s earlier novel, which presents the reader with no examples of positive marital relationships, the possibilities for Anne and Wentworth seem prefigured throughout *Persuasion*. Importantly, these hints do not appear to trend toward a relegation of the woman, as wife and mother, to the private sphere. Instead, *Persuasion* looks toward a complementary marital relationship in which both husband and wife work together in a way that eludes such a public/private divide.

Though the text never actually depicts the eventual marriage between Anne and Wentworth, the nature of their future relationship might be inferred from examining the positive examples of naval couples throughout the novel. Monica C. Cohen suggests that the unique qualities of these naval marriages in *Persuasion* reflect Sir John Jervis’s innovations in specializing the navy during the Napoleonic wars, in which groups with different areas of expertise fit together into a whole, more efficient unit (Cohen 350). This naval specialization might be seen in the radically equal marriage of Admiral and Mrs. Croft, in which Mrs. Croft participates in the public sphere alongside her husband. She has seemingly spent just as much time aboard naval ships as Admiral Croft and

convincingly argues against her brother, Captain Wentworth, when he deems naval ships to be a space inappropriate for women: “I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures” (Austen, *Persuasion* 103). Reflecting the couple’s complementary relationship, in which Mrs. Croft works with her husband as opposed to operating in a separate feminine, private sphere, the text metaphorically presents the dynamics of the Crofts’ marriage in their mutual carriage driving. In danger of a near accident, Mrs. Croft exclaims, “My dear admiral, that post! –we shall certainly take that post” (121). However, the crisis is averted when Mrs. Croft “by giving the reins a better direction herself, they happily passed the danger,” leaving Anne to imagine “their style of driving” to be “no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs” (121). Clearly, Mrs. Croft is a participant in the public space, acting with Admiral Croft in an equal and complementary role as they maneuver through life as a couple.

However, Cohen and Charles J. Rzepka problematize a possible reading of the Crofts as an example for Anne and Wentworth’s future marriage because the couple is childless. Rzepka notes that Austen was concerned “with cultural propagation” and valued “marriage as ‘the origin of social change’” (104). This framework necessitates that her heroine’s future marriage be one in which Anne can be a mother. For this reason, Cohen and Rzepka suggest that the Harvilles, another navel couple whom Anne meets in Lyme, may be the more appropriate model for a union between Anne and Wentworth (Cohen 352-3, Rzepka 104-5). Unlike the Crofts, the Harvilles have a family and are depicted entirely within the space of the home. In this way, understanding the Harvilles as *Persuasion*’s exemplary couple might seem to gesture toward a very conservative

reading of the text, since their example presents a successful mother only within the private sphere. In fact, Rzepka reaches the conclusion that *Persuasion*'s depiction of gender roles "anticipates . . . the ever-increasing separation of the public and private, the business and domestic arenas, as predominantly male and female 'spheres,' an ideological construction that was to dominate relations between the sexes for most of the ensuing century" (107).

Alternatively, Captain Harville's extensive participation in the domestic space, which Cohen examines as part of the novel's adaptation of contemporary navel specialization (Cohen 352), might suggest that the Harvilles are not actually so different from the Crofts. The text describes: "a mind of usefulness and ingenuity seemed to furnish [Harville] with constant employment . . . He drew, he varnished, he carpentered, he glued; he made toys for the children, he fashioned new netting-needles and pins with improvements" (Austen, *Persuasion* 128). As this passage demonstrates, Captain Harville, similar to Mrs. Croft, crosses an assumed gender divide between public and private spaces, participating in the supposedly feminine space of the home. In this way, like Lady Anne of Edgeworth's *Belinda*, the seemingly conservative ideal mother figure, Mrs. Harville, might not actually be so entirely conservative. Her relationship with Captain Harville actually creates a radical breakdown of a public/private divide. Ultimately, the Crofts and the Harvilles can be understood as more similar than different, both couples representing future examples for Anne and Wentworth.

In fact, Anne's nurturing qualities, which situate her in a mothering role for other characters, are successful both within the home and outside of it. Moreover, instances that present Anne in the role of a mother follow the examples of *Persuasion*'s other naval

couples by occurring when Anne acts in a complementary relationship with Wentworth. During Anne's time at Uppercross, when she has taken responsibility for the care of sick little Charles, the text presents a moment in which Wentworth enters the domestic space and the two become momentarily figured as mother and father. When young Walter climbs on Anne's back in an attempt to bring her attention away from his sick brother, it is not long before Anne "found herself in the state of being released from him; some one was taking him from her" (111). Of course, it is Wentworth, who has provided this timely assistance, acting, similar to Captain Harville, as a helpful counterpart in the domestic space. However, Anne is clearly no damsel in distress but, instead, equally provides assistance to Wentworth outside the home during the disastrous trip to Lyme. When Louisa Musgrove, the young woman whom Wentworth has been pursuing, has a dangerous fall, he cries in terror, "Is there no one to help me?" (138). It is Anne who answers his desperate plea by stepping in and deftly handling the situation, directing all members of their party in a logical manner and successfully bringing help to Louisa. In this significant moment in the novel, it is striking that the text's female, maternal figure has the presence of mind to handle a crisis situation that a seasoned naval officer does not. Here, Anne's usefulness goes beyond acting as a complementary counterpart to her future husband. Her mother-like qualities actually seem to make her more "useful" in dealing with this crisis, which occurs outside the domestic space, than any other character.

In this way, *Persuasion*'s treatment of gender appears to be the exact opposite of Rzepka's assertion that the text presents a conservative division of spheres. In fact, the Crofts, Harvilles, and future Wentworths who work together in the private and public

spheres seem to question whether such a distinction exists at all. Moreover, Austen's configuration of marital relationships and, therefore, the place of the mother (according to Austen's framework that marriage is inherently related to having children), follows with the works of other women writers described above: Women's situation in traditional roles as wives and mothers means that no such public/private divide can actually exist. Anne is just as mothering in the home as out of it. Moreover, Austen seems to push this idea even further than other writers, presenting Anne's nurturing qualities as even more "useful" in a life-or-death situation than masculine military training. As stated above, Edgeworth moves toward an idea of uniquely feminine social power in her focus on the maternal body; however, Austen's merging of Anne's reasoning abilities with her nurturing, mother-like qualities takes the possibilities for women beyond the reproductive body used by writers like Edmund Burke and Rousseau to restrain such influence. Ultimately, the text's climatic moment of crisis undercuts a gendered sense of where power lies, situating social importance with the maternal. In *Persuasion*, it is the nurturing, mother-like woman who has the abilities necessary to save the day.

Epilogue

Making the Personal Political for the Romantic Period

The mighty business of female life is to please, and restrained from entering into more important concerns by political and civil oppression, sentiments become events, and reflection deepens what it should, and would have effaced, if the understanding had been allowed to take a wider range.

-Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

We certainly do not forget you so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions.

-Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

Placing the above quotes from the concluding chapter of the *Vindication* and the climax of *Persuasion* alongside each other highlights the continuity between various Romantic Period women writers I have sought to trace. In these passages, Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen present strikingly similar commentary on the situation of women in society, even using almost identical language. Wollstonecraft tells how women are “restrained from entering more important concerns” (*Vindication* 272 emphasis mine) of public life, while Austen’s Anne Elliot explains, “[w]e live at home, quiet, *confined*”

(*Persuasion* 241 emphasis mine). Moreover, they both contrast this female confinement and restraint with allowed male activity. As Anne tells Captain Harville, with whom she converses in this scene, “You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other” (241) or, as Wollstonecraft phrases it, “important concerns.” Their descriptions conversely demonstrate the need for female social activity, breaking a supposed divide between spheres that would relegate women to the domestic space.

For both writers, being forced to remain only in the private sphere traps women with their feelings, causing an intensified emotional response (essentially, the stereotypical hysterical woman). As Wollstonecraft states, “restrained” from public life “sentiments become events” (*Vindication* 272) in the narrow lives of women. Similarly, Anne tells how, when women are “confined” to the home, “our feelings prey upon us” (Austen, *Persuasion* 241). Moreover, in their complaints regarding a lack of female “political” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 272) involvement and the restriction of “professions” (Austen, *Persuasion* 241) to men only, Wollstonecraft explicitly and Austen implicitly demonstrate the need for female involvement in public life. Significantly, they justify their assertions based on the detrimental effect such restrictions have on women personally, which effectively argues that women’s personal feelings are relevant to social issues.

This fusion of private and social is not so different from the rallying cry of late twentieth century feminism, calling on women to “make the personal political.”²⁰

²⁰ I found myself thinking back to this slogan repeatedly when I was taking a class on gender and Romantic period literature. At first, I thought I was being incredibly anachronistic. However, when I reached the final exam and one of the essay prompts asked us to think about how “make the personal political” might relate to women writers of the period, I realized I was not at all off track in making this comparison.

Teasing apart the language of the above quotes helps demonstrate the way in which the logic of both writers sees the private and the public as interconnected, which serves to highlight my argument that the work of Romantic period women writers questions whether a divide between public and private life can actually exist, particularly in their depictions of the maternal. As these women find empowering (and Rousseau finds concerning), motherhood inherently means that women have immense power over developing individuals and, therefore, the future of society.

This social importance means that the role of the mother is necessarily a political role. Making motherhood political allows for Wollstonecraft's Maria to radically question marriage laws, which "force women, when they claim protectorship as mothers, to sign a contract which renders them dependent on the caprice of the tyrant" (Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 143). Similarly, the political implications of the maternal are at the root of Ellinor's power to determine who is the Earl of Glenthorn and who is Christy the blacksmith in Maria Edgeworth's *Ennui*. Even further, a fusion of political and personal underlies the "usefulness" (Austen, *Persuasion* 122) of Austen's nurturing heroines and the way in which other characters "cannot possibly do without Anne" (72), not even a seemingly capable naval officer. In this way, what I have described as a breakdown of an assumed public/private divide, repeatedly demonstrated in these texts, might be rephrased as a breakdown between categories of personal and political, to use the words of more recent feminism. Ultimately, these women argue that motherhood inherently makes the personal political.

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