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Cora Kaplan
Sea Changes
Essays on Culture and Feminism

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The imprint of New Left Books

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written by men and women, and must attempt to theorize imaginative writing as something more specific, strange and fragmented than a 'reflection' of either patriarchal ideology or real social relations. A socialist cultural criticism may wish to cut loose, finally, from feminism's overemphasis in the last decade on high culture as a leading influence, benign or vicious, on women's subordination or struggle. Millett's radical feminism is quite clear about culture's central place in the sexual revolution. Given the errors in her definition of patriarchy and the function of patriarchal ideology we should, as Marxists and feminists, be wary of placing all of our hopes and fears on the revision of culture. In her postscript, Millett concludes:

The enormous social change involved in a sexual revolution is basically a matter of altered consciousness, the exposure and elimination of social and psychological realities underlining political and cultural structures. We are speaking then, of a cultural revolution, which, while it must necessarily involve the political and economic reorganization traditionally implied by the term revolution, must go far beyond this as well. And here it would seem that the most profound changes implied are ones accomplished by human growth and true re-education, rather than those arrived at through the theatrics of armed struggle — even should the latter become inevitable.²³

Much of this statement is politically impeccable, but its emphasis, written as it was in the midst of the Vietnam war, is a little worrying. The realities of armed struggle are made to seem more distant and fictional than those of altered consciousness and human growth.

23. Millett, pp. 362-3.

2: Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism

... till women are led to exercise their understandings, they should not be satirized for their attachment to rakes; or even for being rakes at heart, when it appears to be the inevitable consequence of their education. They who live to please — must find their enjoyments, their happiness in pleasure!

Mary Wollstonecraft, 1792

Wild Nights — Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

Emily Dickinson 1861

I had been a hopeful radical. Now I am not. Pornography has infected me. Once I was a child and I dreamed of freedom. Now I am an adult and I see what my dreams have come to:

pornography. So, while I cannot help my sleeping nightmares, I have given up many waking dreams.

Andrea Dworkin 1981¹

How difficult it is to uncouple the terms pleasure and sexuality. How much more difficult, once uncoupled, to re-imagine woman as the subject, pleasure as her object, if that object is *not* sexual. Almost two centuries of feminist activity and debate have passed, two hundred years in which women's understandings have been widely exercised, yet most of Mary Wollstonecraft's modest proposals for female emancipation are still demands on a feminist platform. Most distant, most utopian seems her hesitant plea that the social basis for woman's sexual pleasure be 'dignified' after 'some future revolution in time'.² Too near, too familiar, is her temporary expedient, the rejection of woman's pleasure as inextricably bound to her dependent and deferential status. Revolutions have come and gone, and sexuality is once more at the head of feminist agendas in the west, the wild card whose suit and value shifts provocatively with history. As dream or nightmare, or both at once, it reigns in our lives as an anarchic force, refusing to be chastened and tamed by sense or conscience to a sentence in a revolutionary manifesto:

In the 'right to choose' the women's movement has reasserted the tenets of liberal humanism, laying claim to its promise of individual civil rights for women, and acknowledging the difficulty of prescription in the area of sexual politics. Yet female sexuality remains one of the central contradictions within contemporary politics, causing as much anxiety to feminists and their sympathisers as to their opponents. Within feminist debate, radical and revolutionary feminists argue with their liberal and socialist sisters around definitions of a correct or politically acceptable sexual practice. The possible positions on this troubling issue that can be identified as feminist range from a pro-

Wollstonecraft
(reject)
women's
pleasure
as bound to
her dependent
status

Female
sexuality
'(ranked)'
(contradiction
in cont.
politics)

Range
of positions
in the
left
wing

1. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, New York 1975, p. 119. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson ed., London 1977, p. 114. Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, London, 1981, p. 304.
2. Wollstonecraft, p. 119.

pleasure; polymorphously perverse sexual radicalism, through cautious permissiveness, to anti-porn activism and a political lesbianism that de-emphasises genital sexuality. This muddled conflict on the site of feminism itself, suggests, among other things, how profoundly women's subjectivity is constructed through sexual categories.

The negative meanings historically associated with their sexuality have been a major impediment in women's fight for liberation. Historians suggest that the 'ideological division of women into two classes, the virtuous and the fallen, was already well developed' by the mid-eighteenth century. Certainly it received one of its major modern articulations at about this time in Rousseau's *Emile* (1762). In *Emile* the possibility of women's civil, economic and psychological independence is rejected because it would also enable the independent and licentious exercise of her supposedly insatiable sexual appetite. Woman's desire is seen by Rousseau as both regressive and disruptive of the new liberal social order he proposed; women's emancipation would mean a step backward for rational and egalitarian progress. It is important to remember that the notion of woman as politically enabled and independent is fatally linked to the unrestrained and vicious exercise of her sexuality, not just in the propaganda of the new right, but in a central and influential work of the very old left.

When feminists sought to appropriate liberal humanism for their own sex they had to contend with the double standard prominently inscribed within radical tradition, as well as with its suffocating and determining presence in dominant ideologies. Female sexuality is still the suppressed text of those liberal and left programmes that are silent on the issues of women's subordination. This silence has had its negative effect upon feminism itself, which must always speak into other political discourses. Where both right and left sexual ideologies converge, associating women's desire with weakness, unreason and materialism, it has been noticeably hard to insist on positive social and political meanings for female sexuality. Only its supposed disruptive force can be harnessed to revolutionary possibility, and then, perhaps, only for the moment of disruption itself. While most feminisms have recognized that the regulation of female sexuality and the ideological mobilization of its threat to order are part of women's subordination, it is not surprising that they have too often accepted the paradigm that insists that

Rousseau
sex
woman's
desire as
subversive

Left +
Right on
women's
sexuality
Dangerous
Weak!
Irrational!

Fems have
accepted
view that
desire is a
regressive
force in
women's
lives

desire is a regressive force in women's lives, and have called for a sublimation of women's sexual pleasure to meet a passionless and rational ideal. Rousseau's formulation has cast a long shadow that cannot be dispersed by simple inversions of his argument. As long as the idea survives that a reformed libidinal economy for women is the precondition for a successful feminist politics, women can always be seen as unready for emancipation.

Boon

This view, explicitly expressed in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* emerges in a different form in Adrienne Rich's radical feminist polemic, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980). This article explores *A Vindication* at some length, and 'Compulsory Heterosexuality' very briefly, as part of a longer project to understand how the sexual politics of feminism has been shaped.

The Rights of Woman and Feminine Sexuality: Mary Wollstonecraft

The reputation of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the founding text of Anglo-American feminism, generally precedes and in part constructs our reading of it. We are likely to look for, and privilege, its demands for educational, legal and political equality; these are, after all, the demands that link Wollstonecraft's feminism to our own. If we give ourselves up to *A Vindication's* eloquent but somewhat rambling prose, we will also discover *passim* an unforgettable early account of the making of a lady, an acute, detailed analysis of the social construction of femininity, which appropriates the developmental psychology of enlightenment and romantic thought. It is certainly possible to engage with *A Vindication* so far and no farther, to let most of its troubling historical meanings and contradictions drop away, so that we may take away from it an unproblematic feminist inheritance. How much use can we make of this legacy without a sense of the history that produced it? Read *A Vindication* for its historical meanings and another text

Wollstonecraft's construction of femininity
Wollstonecraft's feminist inheritance is unproblematic

3. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, London 1981, p. 30.
4. Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in *Signs; Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1980, pp. 631-60.

emerges, one that is arguably as interested in developing a class sexuality for a radical, reformed bourgeoisie as in producing an analysis of women's subordination and a manifesto of her rights.

W's 'other text'

This part of Wollstonecraft's project deserves our attention too, for only by understanding why Wollstonecraft wanted women to become full, independent members of the middle-class, can we make sense of the negative and prescriptive assault on female sexuality that is the leitmotif of *A Vindication* where it is not the overt subject of the text.

negative + prescriptive assault

It is usual to see the French Revolution as the intellectual and political backdrop to *A Vindication*; it would be more useful to see it as the most important condition of its production. As Margaret Walters has pointed out, *A Vindication* sums up and rearticulates a century of feminist ideas,⁵ but its immediate stake was in the political advance of a revolutionary vanguard — the middle-class itself, as Wollstonecraft and others imagined it. Every opinion in the text is written in the glare of this politically charged and convulsive moment, and the area of Wollstonecraft's thought most altered and illuminated by that glare is sexuality. In her two attempts at fiction, *Mary, a Fiction* and *Maria or The Wrongs of Woman*, one produced a few years before *A Vindication* and the other incomplete at her death in 1797, women's feelings and desires, as well as the importance of expressing them, are valorized. But in *A Vindication* Wollstonecraft turned against feeling, which is seen as reactionary and regressive, almost counter-revolutionary. Sexuality and pleasure are narcotic inducements to a life of lubricious slavery. Reason is the only human attribute appropriate to the revolutionary character, and women are impeded by their early and corrupt initiation in the sensual from using theirs.

on female sexuality

bourgeois sexuality

W turns against feeling

Why is *A Vindication* so suffused with the sexual, and so severe about it? This is the question that I will explore at some length below. Wollstonecraft's feminism and her positions on sexuality were, at this point in her life, directly bound up with her radical politics — they can only be understood through each other. In untangling the knotted meanings of the sexual in our own history, our own politics, it is useful to understand the

5. Margaret Walters, 'The Rights and Wrongs of Women: Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Simone de Beauvoir', in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley eds., *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, Harmondsworth, 1979, pp. 304-378.

different but recurring anxieties it has stirred for other feminisms, other times.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman offers the reader a puritan sexual ethic with such passionate conviction that self-denial seems a libidized activity. And so it was, in the sense that a reform of sexual behaviour was Wollstonecraft's precondition for radical change in the condition of women; permitting the development of their reason and independence. The democratic imperatives — equality and liberty for all classes of persons — have been, for so long now, the well worn staples of liberal and left rhetoric that it is hard to remember that they were being invoked in new ways and with unprecedented exuberance in the 1790s: When we try to puzzle out the meanings of *A Vindication* it is the negative construction of the sexual in the midst of a positive and progressive construction of the social and political we must question. In that contradiction — if indeed it is a contradiction — our present conflict over sexual politics is still partly embedded.

Written in six weeks at the height of British left optimism about events in France, *A Vindication* came out early in 1792, the same year as the second part of Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*, a year before William Godwin's *Political Justice*. Each was, equally, a response to the political moment. All three were crucial statements about the social and political possibilities of a transformed Britain. An almost millennial fervour moved British radicals in these years. Their political and philosophical ideas were being put into practice only a few hundred miles away; there were signs of reasoned and purposeful unrest at home among ordinary working people. The end of aristocratic privilege and autocratic rule in France was to be taken as a sign of universal change. The downfall of the Bastille, Thomas Paine exulted, included the idea of the downfall of despotism.

A Vindication engages with radical romantic politics at a moment when the practical realization of such a politics seemed as near as France itself. Wollstonecraft had already written one short pamphlet, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), in support of the revolution, and was still to write a long piece on its behalf.⁶ In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, her most

6. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, 1794.

important work, she took advantage of an open moment of political debate to intervene on behalf of women from inside the British left intelligentsia. Its message is urgent precisely because social and political reform seemed not just possible, but inevitable. The status of women as moral and political beings had become one fairly muted instance of the unresolved contradictions within the republican and democratic tendencies of the time. The overlapping tendencies of enlightenment and romantic thought emphasized the natural virtue rather than innate depravity of human beings, their equality before God, and the evils brought about by unequal laws and hereditary privilege. Arguments initially directed at a corrupt ruling class on behalf of a virtuous bourgeoisie inevitably opened up questions of intra-class power relations. With *A Vindication* Wollstonecraft challenged her own political camp, insisting that women's rights be put higher on the radical agenda. Addressed to Talleyrand, taking issue with Rousseau, speaking the political jargon of her English contemporaries, *A Vindication* invited the enlightenment heritage, the dead and the living, to extend the new humanism to the other half of the race. With a thriving revolution under way, the political and intellectual credit of republican sympathisers was as high as their morale. It seemed like the right moment to ask them to pay their debt to women.

The opening pages of *A Vindication* share the aggressive, confident mood and tone that had developed under the threat and promise of the revolutionary moment. Ridiculing the 'turgid bombast' and 'flowery diction' of aristocratic discourse, Wollstonecraft offers the reader instead, 'sincerity' and 'unaffected' prose, the style and standards of the class of men and women to whom she was speaking — 'I pay particular attention to those in the middle class, because they appear to be in the most natural [i.e. least corrupted] state.' Her unapologetic class bias was shared with her radical contemporaries — it is hardly surprising that idealized humanity as it appears in her text is a rational, plain speaking, bourgeois man. Denying any innate inequality between the sexes except physical strength, she promises to first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties', and addresses her sisters boldly as 'rational creatures' whose 'first object of laudable ambition' should be 'to obtain a character as a human-being, regardless of

sexuality
&
democracy

middle
class
bias

the distinctions of sex...⁷

How to attain this character? In Paine's *Rights of Man* the reader was told that inequality and oppression were the effects of culture rather than nature. The text itself is a politicizing event, first constructing and then working on an uncorrupted rational subject. Paine hoped, and his enemies feared, that some sort of direct political action to unseat despotic power would follow from a sympathetic reading of his pamphlet. The message and intention of *A Vindication* are very different. Nowhere does Wollstonecraft pose women, in their present 'degraded' condition, as either vanguard or revolutionary mass. Like the corrupt aristocracy, to whom they are frequently compared, they are, instead, a lumpen group who must undergo strenuous re-education in order that they might renounce the sensual, rid themselves of 'soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste'—libertine notions of beauty and the single-minded 'desire of establishing themselves — the only way women can rise in the world — by marriage.'⁸ Before the middle-class woman can join the middle-class man in advocating and advancing human progress she must be persuaded to become 'more masculine and respectable', by giving up her role both as 'insignificant objects of desire' and as desiring subject.⁹

Even in its own day *A Vindication* must have been a sharp shock for women readers. Men might be able to mobilize reason and passion, in them equitably combined, to change the world immediately; women, crippled and stunted by an education for dependence, must liberate themselves from a slavish addiction to the sensual before their 'understandings' could liberate anyone else. At later moments of political crisis feminists could, and would, portray women as vanguard figures, subordinated members of the propertied class who understood more about oppression, as a result, than their bourgeois male comrades. Not here. Read intertextually, heard against the polyphonic lyricism of Paine, Godwin and the dozens of ephemeral pamphleteers who were celebrating the fact and prospect of the revolution, *A Vindication* was a sobering read. Wollstonecraft sets out on an heroic mission to rescue women from a fate worse than

7. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, pp. 9-10.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

death, which was, as she saw it, the malicious and simultaneous inscription of their sexuality and inferiority as innate, natural difference. This was how her political mentor and gender adversary Rousseau had placed them, too weak by nature to reach or be reached by sweet reason. Rousseau's influence was great, not least on Wollstonecraft herself. She accepts Rousseau's ascription of female inferiority and locates it even more firmly than he does in an excess of sensibility. Since lust and narcissism were evil they must belong to social relations rather than human nature; this was Rousseau's own position in relation to men. Accordingly, female sexuality insofar as it is vicious is inscribed in *A Vindication* as the effect of culture on an essentially ungendered nature. By tampering with the site of degrading sexuality without challenging the moralising description of sexuality itself, Wollstonecraft sets up heartbreaking conditions for women's liberation — a little death, the death of desire, the death of female pleasure.

Even if *A Vindication* is preoccupied with the sexual as the site and source of women's oppression, why is woman's love of pleasure so deeply stigmatized as the sign of her degradation? In refusing to interpret women's unbounded desire as a natural mark of sexual difference or the appropriate preoccupation of her mediated place in the social, Wollstonecraft is resisting a whole range of bourgeois positions around gender sexuality, positions rapidly hardening into the forms of bourgeois morality that would dominate nineteenth century ruling class gender relations. Her debate with Rousseau is central, because, like her, Rousseau wished to harness his gender ideologies to radical social and political theories. Rousseau's *Emile* is the place where he spells out the theoretical and socially expedient premises that excluded women from equal participation in the enlightenment projects for human liberation and individual transcendence. Arguing for the sexual asymmetry of natural endowment, Rousseau insisted that women's 'first propensities' revealed an excess of sensibility, easily 'corrupted or perverted by too much indulgence.' In civil society women's amoral weakness must not be given its natural scope lest it lead, as it inevitably must, to adultery and its criminal consequence, the foisting of illegitimate heirs on bourgeois husbands. The remedy is borrowed back from the techniques of aristocratic despotism, elsewhere in Rousseau so violently condemned: women '... must be subject all their lives,

where
✓
✓
✓
✓
✓
Rousseau

W sets up
"heart
breaking
conditions"
for women's
liberation

to the most constant and severe restraint, which is that of decorum; it is therefore, necessary to accustom them early to such confinement that it may not afterwards cost them too dear... We should teach them above all things to lay a due restraint on themselves.¹⁰

Acknowledging, with crocodile tears, the artificiality of the social, while insisting on its necessity, Rousseau invokes a traditionally unregenerate Eve partnered to an Adam who has been given back his pre-lapsarian status. 'The life of a modest woman is reduced, by our absurd institutions, to a perpetual conflict with herself: but it is just that this sex should partake of the sufferings which arise from those evils it hath caused us.'¹¹ *Emile* lays out, in fascinating detail, the radical project for the education and adult gender relations of an enlightened bourgeoisie, a project that depended for its success on the location of affection and sexuality in the family, as well as the construction of the bourgeois individual as the agent of free will. The struggle between reason and passion has an internal and external expression in Rousseau, and the triumph of reason is ensured by the social nature of passion. Since male desire needs an object, and women are that infinitely provocative object, the social subordination of women to the will of men ensures the containment of passion. In this way Rousseau links the potential and freedom of the new middle class to the simultaneous suppression and exploitation of women's nature.

Rousseau plays on the already constructed sexual categorization of women into two groups — the virtuous and depraved. By insisting that these divisions are social rather than natural constructs — women are not depraved by nature — Rousseau can argue for social and civil restraints on women. Michel Foucault points out that the process of constructing women first and foremost as a sexual subject was in itself a class bound project: '... it was in the "bourgeois" or aristocratic family that the sexuality of children and adolescents was first problematized... the first figure to be invested by the deployment of sexuality, one of the first to be "sexualized" was the "idle"

10. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, Barbara Foxley, tr., London, 1974, p. 332. Passages from *Emile* can all be found in Book V of this edition. However I have cited Rousseau as quoted by Wollstonecraft who comments on large chunks of Book V in *A Vindication*.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 332-3.

woman. She inhabited the outer edge of the "world", in which she always had to appear as value, and of the family, where she was assigned a new identity charged with conjugal and parental obligation.¹²

Mary Wollstonecraft stood waist-deep in these already established and emergent sexual ideologies. At the time she was writing *A Vindication* she was neither willing nor able to mount a wholesale critique either of bourgeois sexual mores or the wider areas of gender relations. Her life was shortly to go through some very rapid changes, which would, ironically, mark her as one of the 'degraded' women so remorselessly pilloried in her text. A year and a half after her essay was published she was living with a young American, Gilbert Imlay, in France; two years later she was an unmarried mother. *A Vindication* is a watershed in her life and thought, but this crisis is marked in a curiously wilful way. The text expresses a violent antagonism to the sexual; it exaggerates the importance of the sensual in the everyday life of women, and betrays the most profound anxiety about the rupturing force of female sexuality. Both *Emile* and *A Vindication* share a deep ambivalence about sexuality. Images of dirt, disease, decay and anarchic power run as a symbolic undertext in both works, too frequently located in women's sexual being rather than in any heterosexual practice. This distaste is pervasively articulated in *A Vindication*, adumbrated on the first page with an arresting description of French gender relations as 'the very essence of sensuality' dominated by 'a kind of sentimental lust' which is set against the ideal of 'personal reserve, and sacred respect for cleanliness and delicacy in domestic life.'¹³ The images of sexuality throughout are so gripping and compulsive that it is hard to tear oneself away to the less vivid analysis that insists, with commendable vigour, that these filthy habits are a social construction, foisted on each generation of women by male-dominated and male-orientated society.

The place of female sexuality in *A Vindication* is overdetermined by political as well as social history. Like many of the progressive voices of the late eighteenth century, Wollstonecraft had built her dreams of a new society on the foundation of

12. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, London, 1979, p. 121.

13. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication*, pp. 3-4.

Foucault

Rousseau's *Social Contract* and *Essay on Inequality*. Rousseau's writings, insofar as they spoke about human beings rather than men, offered cold reason warmed with feeling in a mixture that was very attractive to the excitable radical temperaments of Wollstonecraft's generation. Rousseau, Paine wrote in 1791, expressed 'a loveliness of sentiment in favor of liberty, that excites respect and elevates the human faculties' — a judgement widely shared. How unlovely then, for Wollstonecraft to consider that in *Emile* Rousseau deliberately withholds from women because of the 'difference of sex' all that is promised to men. Rousseau's general prejudices and recommendations for women — functional, domestic education, nun-like socialization, restricted activity and virtual incarceration in the home — colluded with the gender bias and advice of more reactionary bourgeois authors, as well as society at large. The sense in which Rousseau's prescriptions were becoming the dominant view can be heard in the different imaginary readers addressed by the texts. In the section on women *Emile* slips in and out of a defensive posture, arguing, if only tactically, with an anonymous feminist opponent for the imposition of a stricter regime on women. Wollstonecraft too is on the defensive but her composite reader-antagonist was a society that believed in and followed Rousseau's novel advice to the letter. *Emile* offered its ideas as a reform of and reaction to liberal ideas on female education and behaviour. Thirty years on, *A Vindication* suggested that female sexual morality had become laxer, operating under just such a regime of restraint and coercion as Rousseau had laid out.

The project of *Emile* was to outline the social and sexual relations of an idealized bourgeois society by giving an account of the education and courtship of its youth. *A Vindication* appropriates part of this project, the elaborate set of distinctions between the manners and morals of the aristocracy and those of the new middle class. The anti-aristocratic critique is foregrounded and set in focus by the French Revolution: its early progress exposed the corruption of the ruling classes to a very wide and receptive audience. When Wollstonecraft suggests that vain, idle and sensuous middle-class women are to be compared with the whole of the hereditary aristocracy who live only for pleasure she strikes at two popular targets. When she identifies the aestheticized and artificial language of the ruling class — 'a deluge of false sentiments and overstretched feelings', 'dropping

glibly from the tongue' as the language of novels and letters, she implies that it is also the language of women, or of the society adultress. At one level she is simply producing a gendered and eroticized version of Paine's famous attack on Burke's prose style and sentiments, in *Rights of Man, part 1*. At another, the massing of these metaphors of debased and disgusting female sexuality, even when they are ostensibly directed at the behaviour of a discredited class has the effect of doubling the sexual reference. Paine's comment — 'He pities the plumage and forgets the dying bird' — already carries sexual and gendered meanings. Because a naturally whorish and disrupting female sexuality was so profoundly a part of traditional symbol and reference, used to tarnish whatever object it was applied to, it became extremely difficult for Wollstonecraft to keep her use of such images tied to a social and environmental analysis. She herself is affected by the traditional association.

In *A Vindication* women's excessive interest in themselves as objects and subjects of desire is theorized as an effect of the ideological inscription of male desire on female subjects who, as a result, bear a doubled libidinal burden. But the language of that sober analysis is more innovatory, less secure, and less connotative than the metaphorical matrix used to point and illustrate it. As a consequence, there is a constant slippage back into a more naturalized and reactionary view of women, and a collapse of the two parts of the metaphors into each other. Thus, Wollstonecraft tries to argue against restraint and dependence by comparing the situation of women to slaves and lap-dogs — '... for servitude not only debases the individual, but its effects seem to be transmitted to posterity. Considering the length of time that women have been dependent, is it surprising that some of them hug their chains, and fawn like the spaniel.'¹⁴

But it is the metonymic association of 'slave,' 'women,' 'spaniel' that tends to linger, rather than the intended metaphorical distance, the likeness and unlikeness between them.

The same effect occurs when Wollstonecraft borrows a chunk of contemporary radical analysis of the mob to support her position that women need the same freedom and liberal education as men. In enlightenment theory a libidinal economy is brought to bear on subordinated groups: mass social violence is seen as the

14. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

direct result of severe repression, which does not allow for the development of self-control or self governance. The mob's motive may be a quasi-rational vengeance against oppressors, but the trigger of that violence is the uncontrolled and irrational effect of sudden de-repression. Sexual symbolism is already prefigured in this analysis, so that when Wollstonecraft draws on it as a metaphor for women's uncontrolled sexual behaviour she reinforces the identification of loose women and mob violence. 'The bent bow recoils with violence, when the hand is suddenly relaxed that forcibly held it' — the sexual metaphor here, as elsewhere, is top-heavy, tumbling, out of control, like the imaginary force of female sexuality itself. Here, and at many other points in the text, *A Vindication* enhances rather than reduces the power of female sexuality, constructing it, unintentionally, as an intimate and immediate threat to social stability, nearer than the already uncomfortably near Parisian mob. It is no wonder that many nineteenth-century feminists, for whom the mob and the French Revolution were still potent symbols of disorder, found the book, for all its overt sexual puritanism, disturbing and dangerous.

The blurring of sexual and political metaphor so that sexuality is effectively smeared all over the social relations under discussion emphasises Wollstonecraft's deliberate privileging of sensibility and pleasure as the ideological weapons of patriarchy. Picking up on the negative vibes about female sexuality in *Emile*, she beats Rousseau with his own stick (as it seems) by making the sensual both viler and more pervasive in women's lives as a result of his philosophy of education put into practice. Wollstonecraft too wishes bourgeois women to be modest and respectable, honest wives and good mothers, though she wishes them to be other things as well. Yet only by imagining them all, or almost all, crippled and twisted into sexual monsters by society as it is can she hope to persuade her readers to abandon a gender specific and deforming education for femininity.

Yet the most incisive and innovative elements of *A Vindication* are deeply bound into its analysis of the construction of gender in childhood. The book gives us a complex and detailed account of the social and psychic processes by which gender ideologies become internalized adult subjectivity. This account is spread across the two-hundred-odd pages of the book and is extraordinary both as observation and as theory. Here is the childhood of little girls brought up, à la Rousseau, to be women only:

'Every thing they see or hear serves to fix impressions, call forth emotions, and associate ideas, that give a sexual character to the mind. False notions of beauty and delicacy stop the growth of their limbs and produce a sickly soreness, rather than delicacy of organs ... This cruel association of ideas, which every thing conspires to twist into all their habits of thinking, or, to speak with more precision, of feeling, receives new force when they begin to act a little for themselves; for they then perceive that it is only through their address to excite emotions in men that pleasure and power are to be obtained.'¹⁵

It is exaggerated; it is even fantasy up to a point. Yet reading this passage, I was both shaken by its eloquence and pricked by its accuracy.

Only an unusual 'native vigour' of mind can overturn such a vicious social construction, for: 'So ductile is the understanding, and yet so stubborn, that the associations which depend on adventitious circumstances, during the period that the body takes to arrive at maturity, can seldom be disentangled by reason. One idea calls up another, its old associate, and memory faithful to first impressions ... retraces them with mechanical exactness.'¹⁶

Here, in part, is the romantic theory of the unconscious, its operations laid bare to draw a particularly bleak conclusion about the fate of women.

The need to exaggerate the effects of a gender biased rearing and education led Wollstonecraft to overemphasize the importance of sexuality in women's lives. *A Vindication* is hardly a realistic reconstruction of the day to day activities and preoccupations of bourgeois women, the author herself not excepted. Rather it is an abstract formulation of the sort of social and psychic tendencies that a one-sided reactionary socialization could produce. It is unfortunate that Wollstonecraft chose to fight Rousseau in his own terms, accepting his paradigm of a debased, eroticized femininity as fact rather than ideological fiction. Woman's reason may be the psychic heroine of *A Vindication*, but its gothic villain, a polymorphous perverse sexuality, creeping out of every paragraph and worming its way into every

15. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

warm corner of the text, seems in the end to win out. It is again too easy to forget that this suffusing desire is a permanent male conspiracy to keep women panting and dependent as well as house-bound and pregnant. What the argument moves towards, but never quite arrives at, is the conclusion that it is male desire that must be controlled and contained if women are to be free and rational. This conclusion cannot be reached because an idealized bourgeois male is the standard towards which women are groping, as well as the reason they are on their knees. Male desire may be destructive to women, but it remains a part of positive male identity. A wider education and eros-blunting forays into the public world of work and politics keeps the rational in control of the sensual in men, and is the recommended remedy for women too. Wollstonecraft thought gender difference socially constructed but she found practically nothing to like in socially constructed femininity. With masculinity it was quite different — 'masculine' women are fine as long as they don't hunt and kill. Yet there could be nothing good about feminized men, since the definitions of the feminine available in *A Vindication* are shot through with dehumanizing and immoral sensuality. It's not surprising that women together — girls in boarding schools and women in the home — can only get up to unsavory personal familiarities, 'nasty, or immodest habits'. This description backs up an argument, possibly forceful in its own time, for mixed education and a freer association of adult men and women; it rounds off the denigration of women's world in *A Vindication*.

Ironically, it is the revolutionary moment, with its euphoric faith in total social transformation that permits Wollstonecraft to obliterate women and femininity in their unreformed state. Although *A Vindication* outlines a liberal and unsegregated programme for female education and a wider scope for women's newly developed reason in the public and private world, it has nothing complimentary to say about women as they are. Their overheated sensibility is never seen as potentially creative. One can see how the moral analysis and the social description in *A Vindication* could be appropriated for a more conservative social theory, which might advocate a degree of exercise for women's adolescent bodies and minds, but would confine them to a desexualized domestic sphere as wives and mothers.

The novels of Jane Austen, Wollstonecraft's contemporary,

are the most obvious immediate example of a conservative recuperation of Wollstonecraft. *Northanger Abbey* paraphrases Wollstonecraft on the dangers to the young female reader of the gothic and sentimental novel, and *Mansfield Park* reads in many places like a fictional reworking of *A Vindication*. Possibly influence, partly mere convergence, the voices of the two women whose politics were deeply opposed, echo each other. It is Wollstonecraft who writes that 'while women live, as it were by their personal charms, how can we expect them to discharge those ennobling duties which equally require exertion and self-denial', but it might as easily be Austen on Mary Crawford. In the same sentence, and in much the same terms, Wollstonecraft denounces hereditary aristocracy. The appropriation of much of Wollstonecraft's writing for conservative social and political ideologies went unacknowledged because of her outcast social status and her revolutionary sympathies.

Nevertheless, mid-century women writers and feminists, looking for ways to legitimize their feminism and their sexuality, as well as their desire to write them both out together, found small comfort in *A Vindication*, where the creative and the affective self are split up and separated. In fiction and poetry, that discursive space open to women but sheltered from the harshest judgements of Victorian morality, late romantic women writers, as sick of Wollstonecraft's regime, if they knew it, as she had been sick of Rousseau's, tentatively began to construct the idea of a libidinalized female imagination and, through it, women's right to reason and desire. Authority for such an unmediated and eroticized relation to art and life had to be sought in and stolen from male romantic manifestos. Nothing suggests more unequivocally how deep the effects of separate gender sexualities went, than a quick look at the 1802 introduction to *Lyrical Ballads* after a long look at *A Vindication*. The bourgeois poet was the romantic radical incarnated. Here is Wordsworth, like Mary Wollstonecraft a supporter of the revolution, telling the reader, as she never could, that the poet is a man 'endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness' than other men, 'a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him.'¹⁷ The

17. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, London, 1976, pp. 255-56.

male desire
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appropriate, democratic subjects for his art were 'moral sentiments and animal-sensations' as they existed in everyday-life.¹⁸

W addresses the middle class
 We must remember to read *A Vindication* as its author has instructed us, as a discourse addressed mainly to women of the middle class. Most deeply class-bound is its emphasis on sexuality in its ideological expression, as a mental formation, as the source of woman's oppression. The enchiliding of women — their relegation to the home, to domestic tasks and concerns, while men's productive labour was located elsewhere — was a developing phenomenon of middle-class life in the eighteenth century. The separation of home and work in an industrial culture affected the working class too, but it was not the men only who worked outside the home: nor was the sexual division of labour along these lines a working-class ideal until well on in the nineteenth century. The romantic conception of childhood, already naturalized in *A Vindication*, had no place in working-class life. Nor did female narcissism and a passion for clothes have the same meanings for, or about, working-class women, who, as Wollstonecraft observes in *Maria*, were worked too hard at 'severe manual labour' to have much time or thought for such things. The ideal of education, opening up wider fields for the exercise of the mind, was part of a bourgeois agenda for social improvement that would 'lift' the poor as well as women. Sequential pregnancies, exhausting child care in the grimmest conditions, the double yoke of waged and unpaid domestic labour, none of these are cited in *A Vindication* as the cause of women's degradation. *Maria* includes an honorable if genteel attempt to describe the realities of life for working class women. *A Vindication* is more class bound and more obsessive; a brief, though not unsympathetic passage on the horrors of prostitution, and a few references to the dirty backstairs habits that female servants pass on to ladies is the selective and sexualized attention that working class women get in *A Vindication*.

Most of Wollstonecraft's difficulties are with the obviously binding power of the binary categories of class sexuality. Rather than challenge them, she shifts her abstract women around inside them or tries to reverse their symbolism. The middle-class married adultress is magically transformed by liberty and educa-

18. Ibid., p. 261.

tion into the modest rational wife. If women in public and in promiscuous gatherings, whether schoolroom or workplace, were considered sexually endangered, Wollstonecraft would eroticize the safe home and the all-girls establishment, so that these harems and not the outside world are the places where modesty is at risk. It doesn't work, but it's a good try. It doesn't work because Wollstonecraft herself wishes to construct class differentiation through existing sexual categories. The negative effects of the text fell on the middle-class women which it is so eager to construct and instruct.

J. M. W. Wollstonecraft
 In *Sex, Politics and Society, The regulation of sexuality since 1800*, Jeffrey Weeks, summarizing and extending Foucault, reminds us that: '... the sexual apparatus and the nuclear family were produced by the bourgeoisie as an aspect of its own self-affirmation, not as a means of controlling the working class: ... there are class sexualities (and different gender sexualities) not a single uniform sexuality. Sexuality is not a given that has to be controlled. It is an historical construct that has historical conditions of existence.'¹⁹

If we apply these comments, we can see that the negative gender sexuality Wollstonecraft constructs was one of several competing gender sexualities of the late eighteenth century. As Margaret Walters indicates, contemporary femininity grips Wollstonecraft even as she argues against it: a sexually purified femininity was equally a precondition for any optimistic, liberal re-ordering of intra-class gender relations, or female aspiration. But Walters is wrong in seeing this struggle as one between feminism and femininity. There is no feminism that can stand wholly outside femininity as it is posed in a given historical moment. All feminisms give some ideological hostage to femininities and are constructed through the gender sexuality of their day as well as standing in opposition to them. Wollstonecraft saw her middle class, for a few years at least, as a potentially revolutionary force. The men and women in it would exercise their understandings on behalf of all mankind. It was important to her that the whole of this class had access to reason, and that women's liberation was posed within a framework that was minimally acceptable to popular prejudices. That is why, perhaps, she finds herself

19. Weeks, p. 10.

promising the reader that the freedom of women was the key to their chastity. Within the enlightenment and romantic problematics, reason was always the responsible eldest son and sensibility — emotion, imagination, sensuality — the irresponsible rake, catalyst of change. Class differentiation through the redefinition of sexual mores was a process so deeply entrenched, in Wollstonecraft's time, that the moral positions around sexual behaviour seemed almost untouchable. Feminists of her generation did not dare to challenge them head on, although Wollstonecraft was beginning to work over this dangerous terrain, in her life and in her fiction at the time of her death. The combination of equal rights and self-abnegating sexuality in *A Vindication* has had special attractions for feminists who led very public lives, and found it terrifying and tactically difficult to challenge too many prejudices at once. As a liveable formula for independent female subjectivity though, it never had much going for it — not because an immanent and irrepressible sexuality broke through levels of female self-denial, but rather because the anti-erotic ethic itself foregrounded and constructed a sexualized subject.

As long as the double standard survives gender sexualities will be torn by these contradictions. When Wollstonecraft's ideas for mixed education and wider public participation for women began to be put into practice, women started to query and resist the gender ideologies in which they had been raised. With some help from a popularized psychoanalytic theory, pleasure and sexuality were written into a reworked version of female romantic individualism. Both individualism and these new gender sexualities are, quite properly, heavily contested areas within feminism. Wollstonecraft's project, with its contradictory implications, suggests some of the problems involved in the moralization of sexuality on behalf of any political programme, even a feminist one.

Feminism and Compulsory Heterosexuality: Adrienne Rich

Between the two texts I have chosen to discuss lie nearly two centuries in which successive feminisms have engaged with recalcitrant issues of women's sexuality. Yet while the specific issues have changed, many of the terms in which they are

debated would be familiar to Mary Wollstonecraft. In the 1980s the independent sexuality that seems most threatening to the dominant culture as fact and symbol of women's escape from patriarchal control is lesbianism. Lesbian feminists, in the various political tendencies in the women's movement have for many years now been insisting that the cultural constraints on their sexual expression are central to women's subordination as a whole. Sexuality has never been a hidden issue in modern feminism, but its theorization has produced many painful if necessary disagreements, none more so than the place of lesbianism as a political stance within feminist practice. Adrienne Rich, the American poet and feminist theorist has developed a range of arguments about the meaning of female sexuality in our culture. Her position on the sexual politics of feminism is powerfully stated in an article first published in the feminist journal *Signs* in the summer of 1980, and widely available soon afterwards in pamphlet form. 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' challenges the normative heterosexist values and repressive liberal tolerance of a large section of the women's movement, arguing that an acceptance of the virtue and centrality of historical and contemporary forms of lesbian experience is the base line for a feminist politics. Like Wollstonecraft, if a trifle more tentatively, Rich also poses a reformed libidinal economy for women as the precondition for the successful liberation of women. It is the common element in their thinking about women's sexuality that I wish briefly to examine in this last section.

The foregrounding of sexuality as the source of women's subordination is the element that most obviously links Wollstonecraft's analysis with radical and revolutionary feminism in the distinct but linked tendencies that have developed in Britain, France and the United States over the last fourteen years. These strands in feminism have taken the lead in privileging sexuality as the central fact and universal symbol of women's oppression. Radical feminism has built its theory and rhetoric around the ideological and actual violence done to women's bodies, while liberal and socialist feminism has been rather nervous of the sexual, working instead to define the specific forms taken by women's subordination in different class, cultural and racial groups, at discrete historical moments. These projects and strategies frequently overlap, but it is roughly fair to say that radical

Rich is
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Rich's
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Rich +
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Radical
Feminism

feminism emphasises the identity of gender oppression across history and culture. Revolutionary feminism pushes this analysis farther, posing a monolithic patriarchal tyranny, with sexuality as its weapon. Both tendencies have located the universal truth of gender oppression in a sadistic and insatiable male sexuality, which is empowered to humiliate and punish. Any pleasure that accrues to women who take part in heterosexual acts is therefore necessarily tainted, at the extreme end of this position, women who 'go with men' are considered collaborators — every man a fascist at heart. While Wollstonecraft acknowledged that a depraved sexual pleasure for both men and women was the effect of unequal power relations between them, radical feminism underlines the unpleasure of these relations for women. Where women have no choice over the aim and object of their sexuality, heterosexuality, in the words of Adrienne Rich, is 'compulsory' — an institution more comprehensive and sinister than the different relations and practices it constructs. Worse, compulsory heterosexuality is part of a chain of gender — specific tortures, both medical and conjugal: hysterectomy, cliterodectomy, battering, rape and imprisonment are all elaborations of the sadistic act of penetration itself, penetration the socially valorized symbol of violence against women. Men use these torments to shore up their own subjectivity. Their pleasure in them is a confirmation of male power. Pornography, in this analysis, is emblematic of all male sexuality, the violent fantasy behind the tenderest act of intercourse.

Rich defines heterosexuality as an institution 'forcibly and subliminally imposed on women' who have 'everywhere ... resisted it.' Although she admits that there are 'qualitative differences of experience' within heterosexuality, these differences cannot alter the corrupt nature of the institution, since a good partner is rather like a good master in slavery, a matter of luck not choice. While Wollstonecraft believed, cynically, that all women took pleasure in their slavery, Rich backs off from admitting that coercion, however subliminal, can produce pleasure. Binary categories, historically differentiated, are operating here. Bad women in 1792 experienced bad pleasure; good women in 1980 experience no pleasure. In both cases the effect is punitive.

Rich's abstract women — they are no nearer to real, historical women than the incredibly lascivious ladies of *A Vindication* —

All women's pleasure is tainted -
Men's from collaborators

are neither masochists nor nymphomaniacs, they are simply women whose natural sexuality has been artificially diverted, from their real object, other women. Women's long struggle against heterosexuality took, according to Rich, a wide variety of forms along what she calls the 'lesbian continuum', as distinct from 'lesbian existence' — the natural sexuality of women. Rich has shifted the terms in the nature/culture debate without really altering the paradigm of women's sexuality. In her scenario female heterosexuality is socially constructed and female homosexuality is natural. As in Wollstonecraft, what is bad goes on the outside, what inheres is neutral or good. In Rich's formula, women's libidinal drive is made central, transhistorical and immanent where dominant sexual ideology had constructed it as accidental and/or pathological. Political lesbianism becomes more than a strategic position for feminism, it is a return to nature. In this new interpretation of sexuality a fairly crude libidinal economy is asserted:

Woman identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, violently curtailed and wasted under the institution of heterosexuality. The denial of reality and visibility to women's passion for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community; the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation, their disintegration under intense pressure, have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women to *change the social relations of the sexes*, to liberate ourselves and each other. The lie of compulsory female heterosexuality today afflicts not just feminist scholarship, but every profession, every reference work, every curriculum, every organizing attempt, every relationship or conversation over which it hovers. It creates, specifically, a profound falseness, hypocrisy and hysteria in the heterosexual dialogue, for every heterosexual relationship is lived in the queasy strobelight of that lie. However we choose to identify ourselves, however we find ourselves labelled, it flickers across and distorts our lives.²⁰

The saturating power of this socially enforced — as opposed to naturally lived — sexuality represses, in Rich's view, all creative expression and all radical and revolutionary process. It is eerily like Wollstonecraft's totalizing view of sexuality. Both Rich and Wollstonecraft believe that heterosexuality as it is and has been

Robin's sacred circle

20. Rich, p. 657.

lived by women is an ideological distortion of the possibilities of female sexuality. At one level *A Vindication* is highly prescriptive: it asks women, at the very least, to resist the appeal of a pleasure that will put them at the sexual and emotional mercy of men. Wollstonecraft stopped short of defining an innate form of female sexuality — she understood after her encounter with *Emile* that arguing difference from nature was ultimately reactionary. Rich, on the other hand, has no qualms about constructing female sexuality as naturally different. She uses her analysis, in the passage cited above, to interpret conflicts within feminism today. The result is that these crucial differences, on whose working through the future of feminism depends, are collapsed into the denial of some women of the universal sexuality of all women. Any failure of energy or strategy can be reduced to the frustration and anxiety associated with a denied or feared sexuality. Difficulties between women are no longer about age, class, race or culture. All the legitimate problems inherent to an emergent politics are whittled down to a repressed but supracultural sexuality. In *Compulsory Heterosexuality* the solution for a better politics is contained in the appeal from bad culture back to good nature.

The theme of Rich's revision of female sexuality is the possible construction of a specifically feminist humanism. Benign nature is female — affectionate and sensual as well as creative, revolutionary and transcendent. In its political inflection it opposes an innately vicious male nature whose ascendancy has produced the bad dream of phallographic culture. According to Rich, '... heterosexuality as an institution has been organized and maintained through the female wage scale, the enforcement of middle-class women's leisure, the glamorization of so-called sexual liberation, the withholding of education from women, the image of "high art" and popular culture, the mystification of the "personal" sphere and much else.'²¹ These rather heterogeneous, class-specific and ethnocentric devices support heterosexuality rather than capitalism or patriarchal relations. Take away these and other cultural supports and heterosexuality would presumably wither away. Destroy heterosexist culture at any historical moment and lesbian/feminism would emerge triumphant

21. Rich, p. 659.

from its ashes. Rich's simple belief in the all-embracing political possibilities of lesbian existence, her rejection of the political integrity of heterosexual feminism constitutes a denial both of the specificity and variety of female sexuality and the specificity and variety of feminism.

The identification of the sources of social good or evil in the sexual drive of either sex, or in any socially specific sexual practice is a way of foreclosing our still imperfect understanding of the histories of sexuality. The moralization of desire that inevitably follows from such an analysis colludes with those dominant practices that construct human sexuality through categories of class, race and gender in order to divide and rule. The sexuality constructed by a feminist revolution will be a new social relation, with new contradictions and constraints. The dream of an autonomous sexuality, not constructed through the desire of the other, male or female, is a transcendental fantasy of bourgeois individualism. It poses a subject who can stand outside the social. Perhaps, considering its political difficulties in the past, feminism should resist appropriating such a subject, or at least refuse to hang our hopes for sexual pleasure round its neck.

The walls and doors of the women's toilets at the University of Sussex library were, and are, covered with women's writing. From this lowest seat of high learning a polylogic testament to women's entry into discourse can be read in the round. There is, inevitably, a euphoric temptation to read too much out of these expressive inscriptions. For if young women can shit and write, not for some patriarchal pedant, but for each other's eyes only, what vestiges of Victorian constraints remain? It is true, of course, that the vast majority of contributors to this particular public/private debate are young, white and middle-class, but not all women's loos so decorated are quite so class and race bound. In the smallest rooms of this academy politics and intellectual matters are informally debated, but sex as the preferred topic wins hands down.

'How do I get an orgasm?' prompted a booth-full of replies and commentary in the early mid-seventies, showing off the range and ingenuity of women's sexual practices and theories. Advice included detailed instructions to be relayed to a male partner as well as the succinct, laconic recommendation to 'Try Women'. There was an address for suppliers of vibrators and an

Rich's
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illustration, definitely not erotic, to help one find the elusive clitoris. In the wide variety of responses one was noticeably absent — no contributor contested the importance of the question. No one queried the centrality of orgasm for women's sexual practice or the importance of sexual pleasure itself. No anachronistic bluestocking suggested that intellectual and sensual pursuits were incompatible. No devout Christian was moved to tell her sisters to wait until marriage. Only now, from a different time and place in the feminist debate over sexuality does that apparently unanimous agreement among young educated women that sexual pleasure, however achieved, was an unproblematic desire seem curious. About the means of arriving at pleasure there was plenty of disagreement; if anything that cubicle was a telling reminder that there has never been a single femininity, and that within feminism sexuality and the meaning of pleasure have most frequently been the site of anger, contradiction and confusion, too often illuminating class, cultural and racial division between women. Now, when female sexuality is indisputably centre-stage in feminist debates but pleasure is too rarely its subject and eros rampant is more likely to conjure up a snuff movie than multiple orgasm, that loo wall remains with me as an important event in the history of feminism, a moment whose appearance and significance we must work to understand.

3.

The Feminist Politics of Literary Theory

About ten years ago, during the high point of feminist activism in Britain you could find a new-minted piece of folk wisdom inscribed on the walls of women's loos throughout the country, and quoted endlessly in the literature of the movement: 'A Woman Without a Man is Like a Fish Without a Bicycle.' As a defiant slogan of independence and autonomy it has always irritated me, not only for its 'separatist' implications or its disturbing, Dali-esque juxtaposition of selves and things but also for its complacent essentialism and the false (in-)congruities of its metaphor. Women aren't like fish, supplied with a natural element and equipped for easy passage through it. The 'revolutionary' choice for them will never be for a streamlined new identity in harmony with an environment in which rust-prone, male-designed transport technology is redundant. At many points in the Institute of Contemporary Arts weekend 'Crossing the Channel'¹ writers and critics proudly maintained the uselessness of 'theory' for their practices, and as several of them disavowed both the present and historical connection between literature and politics I found my least favorite feminist epigram swimming into view suitably revamped for the occasion — 'A critic without a theory of representation is like ... a writer without a politics is like ...'

The aesthetic, as either art practice or as commentary was

1. A weekend conference in December 1984 in which French and English writers and critics considered the uses of critical theory.