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"Parents of the mind": Mary Wollstonecraft and the Aesthetics of Productive Masculinity

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S COMPLICATED, AND AT TIMES SEEMINGLY contradictory attitudes toward sexuality remain one of the most difficult elements of her work. Critics, especially in recent years, have attempted to reconcile Wollstonecraft's critique in the Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1791) of the "Romantic unnatural delicacy of feeling" encouraged by women's education in the discourse of feminine sensibility1 with the passionate disposition attested to by her tumultuous romantic relationships with men such as Gilbert Imlay—a disposition which many critics believe to be represented by the character of Maria in her unfinished final novel The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria (1797). While Wollstonecraft's complex take on women's sexuality continues to provide evidence for increasingly nuanced and sophisticated interpretations of her feminist project, I wish to open up this debate to an examination of her representation of men's sexuality, especially as those representations engage with the specifically gendered and politicized discourse of eighteenth century "sensibility." Although Wollstonecraft's analysis of masculine sexuality and sensibility in the Vindication and Maria mostly concerns the ways in which the oppression of women results in the unnatural encouragement and consequent perversion of male sexual desire, I believe that these two texts also offer a subtle consideration of a positive form of masculine sexuality, one which is vital to her egalitarian sexual politics. While Wollstonecraft's anal-

1. Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria, ed. Anne K. Mellor and Noelle Chao (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006) 51. Subsequent citations from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman are referred to as Vindication and are given parenthetically in the text. Subsequent citations from The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria are referred to as Maria and are given parenthetically in the text.

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ysis of masculine sensibility and sexuality necessarily plays a minor role compared to her analysis of feminine sensibility and sexuality in the *Vindication* and *Maria*, an understanding of her engagement with masculine desire is absolutely crucial for comprehending her vision of a just society founded upon gender equality.

Specifically, many moments in the *Vindication* gesture towards a socially oriented and benevolent type of masculine sensibility that concerns itself with aesthetic production rather than with heterosexual reproduction. Wollstonecraft embodies this type of socially useful masculine sensibility in the character of Maria’s uncle in *Maria*. Although the novel ostensibly represents this character as heterosexual, Maria’s uncle exhibits gender and sexual behaviors that differ both from those associated with eighteenth-century concepts of masculine sentimentality as well as male reproductive sexuality. These behaviors are positively valued in the novel because they allow for the sublimation of reproductive energies into a didactically useful form of masculine sensibility. Furthermore, Maria characterizes her uncle’s benevolent, non-reproductive masculinity as absolutely essential to the maintenance of society, insofar as he becomes the example *par excellence* of a socially useful sensibility that allows sympathy to be directed outward, unselfishly, towards others, as well as producing a new concept of marriage, one liable to divorce. Such a reading of the *Vindication* and *Maria* allows one to recognize in Wollstonecraft’s project a theory of the political importance of non-reproductive sexual identities within an egalitarian society and also, I believe, provides the starting point for an analysis of a particular genealogical branch in the history of sexuality in the figure of the “benevolent uncle.” This literary type continued to be a vital figure both for nineteenth-century literature and within the history of sexuality.2

2. For background information on eighteenth-century sexuality, I am especially indebted to Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution, Volume One: Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 3–22. Trumbach emphasizes the transition from the Restoration figure of the aristocratic bisexual libertine whose sexual license is authorized by his class prerogatives, to the development in the eighteenth century of the figure of effeminate “molly” as the member of a “third sex.” Because the men described in the *Vindication* and *Maria* are neither “mollies” nor “homosexuals” in the modern sense of the term, I hesitatingly use the inelegant term “non-reproductive” to describe men such as Maria’s uncle. While I may be accused of being vague and non-specific in my use of the term, I know of no other accurate term to describe what I take to be a heretofore unnamed transitional figure in the history of sexuality. For resources on late eighteenth and early nineteenth century male sexuality, see Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England, 1500–1800* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993); Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in 19th-Century England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985); Julie Ellison, *Delicate Subjects: Romanticism, Gender, and the Ethics of Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992); Andrew Ellenbom, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1995) and *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999).
1. Wollstonecraft, Sensibility, and Sexuality: An Overview

The literature on sensibility’s long and complex history is quite extensive. As a discourse that is at once both in opposition to and a creation of Enlightenment rationality, both influencing and being influenced by the rapidly shifting race, class, and gender politics of the eighteenth century, one of the common themes of these studies is their emphasis on the extent to which the term “sensibility” and its closely cognate term “sentimentality” remain highly unstable and mutable throughout the period. In their broadest senses, “sensibility” and “sentimentality” operate as an index of changing cultural attitudes towards the relationship between the body’s highly attuned affective responses and various cultural products and social realities located in the exterior world.

Critics have recognized that, for Wollstonecraft writing in the 1790s, her relationship to the discourse of sensibility is an important tool for recognizing the relationship between her sexual and political desires. In one of the earliest articles to specifically address Wollstonecraft on the topic of sexuality, Janet Todd argues that the romantic sensibility expressed by Maria ultimately contributes to her fate as an abandoned woman who has given up her sense of propriety for the indulgence of sensual passions, and thus the plot of Maria supports the Vindication’s warnings about the dangers of feminine sensibility. However, in her later study The Sign of Angellica, Todd seems to change her take on Maria, asserting that this novel, as well as Wollstonecraft’s earlier novel Mary, a fiction and Mary Hays’ Memoirs of Emma Courtney, provide no “exit from the political impasse of sensibility” and create a “strand of self-obsessive female writing which... has been condemned to transforming the world inwards and to valuing feminine feeling even when it marginalizes into madness and makes subjectivity subject.”


Between the publication of Todd’s original article and her book-length study, a number of major studies appeared that examined the relationship between eighteenth-century understandings of feminine sensibility and sexuality, all of which take Wollstonecraft to task for not allowing for the existence of an acceptable sexual desire for women. Mary Poovey claims that *Mania* is a failed effort to theoretically reconcile Wollstonecraft’s feminism and sexual desire, and stems from her decision to both inhabit a discourse of sensibility that supports a repressively bourgeois notion of femininity and attempt a critique of the inequalities of marriage. According to Poovey, Wollstonecraft insists on “the importance of female sexual expression, yet despite her insistence that sexual fulfillment is not only necessary but possible, every sexual relationship she depicts [in *Mania*] is dehumanizing and revolting.” Similarly, Cora Kaplan argues that Wollstonecraft’s otherwise radical feminism remains attached to bourgeois notions of repressed sexuality, and “By tampering with the site of degrading sexuality without challenging the moralizing 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 Gary Kelly’s attempt to recuperate Wollstonecraft’s view of feminine desire, where he asserts that “It is not so much female sexuality that she denies as its distortion by the dominant ideology and culture—a distortion that works to subordinate and oppress women,” leads him to “reading” her life itself, rather than her writings *per se*, in order to find evidence that Wollstonecraft attempted to create a revolution in women’s sexuality.

More recent accounts of the relationship between Wollstonecraft and sexuality have broadened their scope by putting Wollstonecraft’s feminist project in dialogue with the eighteenth-century discourse of masculine sensibility and sentimentality. According to Janet Todd’s [*Sensibility: An Introduction*], the latter half of the eighteenth century saw the development of an alternative masculine ideal that “stressed those qualities considered feminine in the sexual psychology of the time: intuitive sympathy, susceptibil-

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ity, emotionalism, and passivity” in the service of socially beneficent and charitable behavior, an ideal which reached its apogee with the publication of Henry Mackenzie’s novel *The Man of Feeling* in 1771. Continuing Todd’s argument, Dror Wahrman asserts, “the gender-flexing man of feeling was . . . valued as a possible model for emulation,” one which presented the “potential for imaginative gender play.”

However, according to Claudia Johnson, the post-Revolutionary moment in which Wollstonecraft wrote the *Vindication* and *Maria* marked once and for all the end of the man of feeling’s potential as a subversive figure with the ability to upset the strict binaries of existing gender codes. Johnson asserts that the watershed moment in the transformation of the gender politics of sensibility occurred when Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* inaugurated a new style of conservative masculine subjectivity, which associated the concept of “sensibility” with an affectively based deference to “traditional” (i.e. hierarchical and patriarchal) forms of political authority. Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* therefore launches a critique of this reactionary political ideology on the grounds that it creates an intellectual shift leading directly to the cultivating of artificial feelings in both genders, and consequently to political and personal degradation. In Wollstonecraft’s words, Burkean sensibility represents “a deluge of false sentiments and overstretched feelings, stifling the natural emotions of the heart” which consequently “render[s] the domestic affections insipid, that ought to sweeten the exercise of those severe duties, which educate a rational and immortal being for a nobler field of action” (*Vindication* 26).

Johnson’s analysis (which owes a manifest debt to the Todd/Poovey/Kaplan strand of criticism) posits that this rebellion against Burke’s political ideology led Wollstonecraft to support a gender ideology that ultimately represented a repressive concept of sexuality. The *Vindication* reflects Wollstonecraft’s anxiety regarding Burke’s “fundamental disruption” of gender codes, which resulted in the reconfiguration of the traditionally “feminine” qualities of sensibility as essentially masculine and conservative in orientation, as opposed to the potentially subversive gender attitudes of the “man of feeling.” Accordingly, this meant the unmooring of women from any distinct gender ideology in the wake of a usurping masculine form of sensibility, an evacuation of meaning that Wollstonecraft considered absolutely devastating for her attempt to conceptualize a society founded upon gender equality. The *Vindication* therefore expresses her attempt to place women firmly within a rationalist framework traditionally gendered male by insist-


ing upon the moral superiority of a rationally considered reproducti
heterosexuality.12

Fear, then, would explain the intense “homophobia” expressed in Woll
stoncraft’s famous condemnation of men who seek “something more soft
than woman . . . till, in Italy and Portugal, men attend the levees of equiv
ocal beings, to sigh for more than female languor” (Vindication 170). John
son sees this as evidence of Wollstonecraft’s belief that “under the senti
mental disposition . . . gender codes have not simply been reversed. They
have been fundamentally disrupted” such that “under sentimentality, all
women risk becoming equivocal beings” (Johnson 11). However, I take is
sue with Johnson’s condemnation of Wollstonecraft’s use of the phrase
“equivocal beings” as evidence of Wollstonecraft’s essential homophobia.
First, Johnson’s use of the phrase “equivocal beings” is non-specific—she
uses this phrase through the rest of her book (not to mention in the title it
self) to refer exclusively to the disrupted gender codes for women, when
her own analysis of the passage reads the phrase to refer to male homosex
ual relations. Second, the concept of “homophobia,” associated with feel
ings of disgust, horror, and prejudice against both the physical and emo
tional expression of same-sex desire, is a concept that is too monolithic,
over-determined, and anachronistic to apply to Wollstonecraft’s thinking
within a historical period that did not have a clearly defined concept of the
homosexual as an essentially distinct psychosexual identity. On the con
trary, as Andrew Elfenbein states, “one of the most compelling aspects of
[Wollstonecraft’s] career is its power to unsettle the homosexual/hetero
sexual split that the twentieth century made so rigid. This unsettling occurs
partly because Wollstonecraft, like all eighteenth-century writers, had no
words like ‘homosexual’ or ‘heterosexual’ in her vocabulary. Sexuality had
no language of its own in the eighteenth century.”13

Accordingly, rather than simply make a study of what side of the pro
sexuality/anti-sexuality or homophobic/non-homophobic divide Woll
stonecraft’s thinking falls within, I believe that it is more productive to
think of Wollstonecraft as what Tim Fulford calls “a theorist of Romantic
masculinity,” insofar as her emphatic redefinition of women as rational be
ings necessarily entails a rethinking of masculinity and the language used to
represent it.14 Although Wollstonecraft in the Vindication and Maria is pri

12. Claudia L. Johnson, Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s


14. Tim Fulford, Romanticism and Masculinity: Gender, Politics, and Poetics in the Writings of Burke, Coleridge, Cobbett, Wordsworth, De Quincey and Hazlitt (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999).
marily concerned with an analysis of women, femininity, and female desire, one can also understand her as a theorist of masculinity along the lines of Fulford's analysis of Romantic era authors writing in the wake of Burke. These individuals, in their bid to articulate a literary language outside of Burke's association of literary affectivity with political conservatism, "contest[ed] a vital issue with Burke and with each other, in terms derived from Burke and from each other," and were therefore compelled "to borrow and/or develop an authority stable enough to resist the criticism or indifference of an unknown reading public that was perceived as at best remote, at worst hostile and predatory," that "produced not a consistent empowerment but unstable redefinitions of masculine power" (Fulford 15). Similarly, particular moments in the *Vindication* have Wollstonecraft gesturing towards a type of non-authoritarian and socially benevolent type of masculine sensibility, thereby allowing for a wider range of morally acceptable masculine behaviors than Johnson allows for in her analysis of Wollstonecraft's "homophobia." On the contrary, Wollstonecraft's rethinking of gender identity in the wake of Burkean sensibility, by forcing her to write at the very limits of what could be articulated within her culture's discourse on masculinity, allows her to form a vision of benevolent masculinity that is aesthetically productive rather than sexually reproductive.

2. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Aesthetic Masculinity

Chapter four of the *Vindication*, entitled "Observations of the State of Degradation to Which Woman is Reduced by Various Causes," contains Wollstonecraft's most negative critique of female sexuality and romantic "passion" between men and women. As she states, "Love, considered as an animal appetite, cannot long feed on itself without expiring. And this extinction in its own flame, may be termed the violent death of love. But the wife who has been thus rendered licentious, will probably endeavour to fill the void left by her husband's attentions . . ." (*Vindication* 96). This condemnation of romantic passion extends into her discussion of masculine behavior as it operates within the codes of sensibility. It is in this chapter that Wollstonecraft most emphatically declares that sentimentality, insofar as it encourages behaviors typically associated with women, is detrimental to the characters of both genders, emphasizing emotionality for its own sake at the expense of rationality. As a result, both men and women lose the ability to develop socially useful (i.e. "masculine") virtues.

She provides evidence of this by making a comparison between the character traits of the wealthy of both genders and of all women generally, providing a quote from Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: "'To be observed, to be attended, and to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which they see.' True! my male readers will probably exclaim; but let them, before they draw any
conclusions, recollect that this was not written originally as descriptive of women, but of the rich" (Vindication 79). On the surface, Wollstonecraft makes a rhetorical move common to eighteenth-century social commentary, criticizing upper-class men by ascribing to them traditionally feminine character traits, hearkening back to the parody of upper-class masculinity that could be found earlier in the century in the figure of the “fop.” However, she makes this point by deliberately misleading the interpretive abilities of her readers. By quoting a passage from Adam Smith out of context in order to show there is no distinguishable difference between the characters of the rich and the characters of women in either their behaviors or in the verbal description of those behaviors, she demonstrates that one can no longer be assured that a particular behavior or that a particular phrase can be unequivocally associated with a particular sex. In effect, Wollstonecraft exposes multiple intertwined ideological operations: she shows that rich men display character qualities traditionally associated with women, and that those negative qualities associated with femininity are not essentially determined by the biological sex of women per se. She also shows that the culture no longer has a language adequate to differentiate between the genders when “sentimentality” becomes a universal ideal, no language rigorous enough to articulate an essential difference between masculine and feminine sensibilities.

Taking into account contemporary theorizations of gender, one could use Judith Butler’s well-known concept of the “performativity” of gender in order to suggest that Wollstonecraft’s argument predicts Butler’s insight that gender characteristics are themselves no more than an effect of social practices such as language itself. The passage quoted above could be marshaled as evidence for Wollstonecraft’s position that there are no innate gender differences because, as Butler argues, gender is the “performance” of an ideological script rather than the manifestation of some biologically determined, “essential” quality of the subject. However, I hesitate to ascribe to Wollstonecraft a theory that, given the intellectual climate of the day, would have been unthinkable or unsayable. As the rest of this essay demonstrates, Wollstonecraft believed that if language could not clearly and definitively express the differences between the genders, there was something fundamentally wrong with gender behaviors themselves that must be corrected. Here, Wollstonecraft gestures towards the double bind of her own project as she attempts to argue against current ideologies of

15. For a discussion of the sexual history of the “fop” as an early and mid-century figure whose effeminacy is not necessarily associated with sexual irregularity, see George E. Haggerty, Men In Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Columbia UP, 1999).

gender without having recourse to a descriptive language that can express a reliable distinction between masculine and feminine behaviors.

Wollstonecraft associates this lack of linguistic rigor with the social preconditions that cause noblemen and women to engage in similar behaviors. She argues that since “excepting warriors, no great men of any denomination have ever appeared amongst the nobility, may it not be fairly inferred that their local situation swallowed up the man, and produced a character similar to that of women, who are localized—if I may be allowed the word—by the rank they are placed in by courtesy?” (Vindication 79–80). Wollstonecraft shows the extent to which upper-class individuals, whatever their innate potential for being morally, ethically, or politically “great” might be, have that potential stifled and destroyed by the excessive deference shown to them in a society that values rank above merit. Similarly, the extent to which society encourages women to be emotional, irrational, and full of “sensibility” effects how much their capacity to achieve moral excellence and virtue is destroyed. However, the origin of this negative behavior ultimately lies outside of the subject, located in the operations of society’s “courtesy” towards the individual, quite apart from any innate or inborn quality residing in the subject. Deference and gallantry, as it is impressed upon the subject by forces located outside of the individual, effectually dictate the ways in which both the rich and women can express themselves in society. To describe this operation, Wollstonecraft feels compelled to resort to the uncommon word “localized” in order to express how the individual loses his or her ability to act morally as the result of his or her entrapment by behaviors that seem, on the surface, to be mere social “courtesy.” Her self-awareness that she is operating at the limits of language compels her to coin neologisms in order to write against the dense and complex apparatus of social control embedded in the language of gallantry in such words as “courtesy.” Part of Wollstonecraft’s project is a struggle to expand the discourse of gender in order to find a language adequate to describe the social and political operations of gender apart from the preexisting rhetoric of sentimentality and chivalry.

As Wollstonecraft attempts to create a new rhetoric to describe the formation of individual character through the intertwined operations of social practice and gender behavior, the descriptive terminology she uses to describe the detrimental effects of sensibility on the characters of both sexes effectually inaugurates a new way of talking and thinking about masculinity:

In short, women in general, as well as the rich of both sexes, have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the usual fruit. It is not necessary for me always to premise, that I speak of the condition of the whole sex, leaving exceptions out of the question.
Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling. (*Indication* 82–83)

Though the analysis in this passage appears particularly concerned with women (as implied by “the condition of the whole sex”), Wollstonecraft reminds her readers at the beginning of the paragraph that she addresses herself to all women and to aristocratic men, insofar as their behavior has made it possible for both those groups to be described and addressed with the same descriptive terminology. Significantly, this passage uses vividly sensual language to describe the effect sensibility has on the human body. She speaks of “inflamed senses,” and individuals who become “prey” to their emotions, thereby invoking an innate animalistic and bodily sexuality. She focuses on sensibility’s ability to make one feel “blown about by every momentary gust of feeling,” without self-control, one’s movements completely directed by outside forces. This language invokes the image of the vulnerable and violated physical body as a metaphor for the individual held under the thrall of sentimentality and, by extension, serves as a model for the way sensibility works to maintain political tyranny.

The wind-blown body of sensibility has no control over itself due to an excess of passions which Wollstonecraft locates outside of the body, indicating her belief that the root cause of this emotional excess lies in the encouragement given it by social pressures channeled through the concept of “courtesy.” Wollstonecraft’s rhetoric in this passage, through its prosopopoetic description of the “senses” that “prey” and the “sensibility” that “blows,” bears a strong resemblance to the description of the passions by other eighteenth century writers, such as David Hume and Charlotte Smith. According to Adela Pinch, Hume describes the “passions” as having their origins in the “sympathy” that directs itself either toward another person or the representation of another person:

Sympathy is most forthcoming when the object in question seems most oblivious, when the feelings in question are the imaginary feelings that we—or a narrator—attribute to the object. . . . This speculation . . . consists of sympathetically attributing feeling to a figure to whom we have special access, a figure who is unaware of our sympathy. The lesson about the relationship between persons and passions in the *Treatise* is that feeling may always be vicarious, something we generate in attributing to another figure.17

Similarly, the poetry of Charlotte Smith (Wollstonecraft’s contemporary) calls into question the concept of “authentic emotions” that derive from personal experience and precede the act of writing. Smith, who characteristically cites “conventional” phrases from other poets in order to express her “personal” emotions, calls into question the late eighteenth-century assumption that “sentimental verse is naturally or inevitably a women’s genre” by demonstrating that “it is so only by making the feelings she expresses not her own” (Pinch 64). Similarly, Wollstonecraft’s description of the “senses” and “sensibility” as forces located outside of the self that nevertheless double back upon the “wind blown” body of sensibility allows her to call into question the connection between sensibility and the female body. By putting women and aristocratic men together in the same category, Wollstonecraft inaugurates a language that inserts into the radical political discourse around “negative” sensibility the image of both the violated female body and, equally importantly, the violated male body that is emotionally and politically at the mercy of outside forces.

This image of the passive and violable male body occurs again when Wollstonecraft explicitly calls attention to the specifically political implications of emphasizing sensibility at the expense of consistently rational behavior. She states,

Men and women, should not have their sensations heightened in the hot bed of luxurious indolence, at the expense of their understanding; for, unless there be a ballast of understanding, they will never become either virtuous or free: an aristocracy, founded on property or sterling talents, will ever sweep before it the alternately timid and ferocious slaves of feeling. (Vindication 91–92)

Directing attention to the connection between sensibility and sexual excess (“the hot bed of luxurious indolence”), and the necessary political implications of sensibility (turning men and women into “slaves of feeling” at the mercy of an “aristocracy” of either propertied or monetary wealth), Wollstonecraft calls attention to the anti-democratic implications of sensibility’s uniting of the physical body with the political body. Individuals can never guarantee their own liberty against the powerful forces of a genealogical or intellectual ruling class as long as their subjectivity is fundamentally tied to the inconstant and inconsistent affectivity of bodily sensations. While Wollstonecraft implies that the rational, disembodied intellect provides a strong and stable basis for the assertion of one’s political liberties, the emotional equivocation of those who are “alternately timid or ferocious” leads to political ineffectuality as one is “swept up,” unresisting, by “an aristocracy, founded on either property or sterling talents.” Wollstonecraft emphasizes the importance for women and, more significantly given the rhet-
oric of contemporary political discourse, for men to place rational limits upon the demands of their bodies in a bid to guarantee political liberty.

One could argue that Wollstonecraft’s association of the concepts of political tyranny and the inconstancy of sensibility simply provides further evidence of an excessive and pervasive abhorrence of the material body in favor of disembodied rationality. As Claudia Johnson states, “Because Wollstonecraft is confessedly ill at ease with the body, she transforms it from a source of revolting brutishness to the foundation of heroic excellence of which men and women can both partake in kind, if not in degree. In Rights of Woman Wollstonecraft offers only one way of disemburting the bodies of men and women: subjecting both to the disciplinary regime of domestic, specifically parental heterosexuality” (42). However, the very fact that Wollstonecraft chooses to introduce the body into her discourse suggests that, whatever her personal feelings might be, she understands the importance of offering an image of the politically progressive male body in order to provide an alternative to Burke’s invocation of “the defects of our naked shivering nature” (Reflections 171). Though Johnson maintains that the only alternative Wollstonecraft offers is the (male and female) body contained within the limits of monogamous heterosexual reproduction, Wollstonecraft’s text also indirectly references another socially acceptable type of masculine body: that of the aesthetically productive and creative man of artistic sensibilities.

While it is true that Wollstonecraft focuses her attention on extolling the political and social virtues of the family, she also recognizes that certain men do not or cannot direct their energies towards heterosexual reproduction. She hints at this when she describes how men encourage the development of the detrimental type of sensibility in women:

“The power of the woman,” says some author, “is her sensibility”; and men, not aware of the consequence, do all they can to make this power swallow up every other. Those who constantly employ their sensibility will have most; for example, poets, painters, and composers. Yet, when the sensibility is thus increased at the expense of reason, and even the imagination, why do philosophical men complain of their fickleness? The sexual attention of man particularly acts on female sensibility, and this sympathy has been exercised from youth up. (Vindication 87)

In this somewhat convoluted paragraph, Wollstonecraft describes the schematics of the relationship between untamed heterosexual desire and sensibility as operating in this way: men direct their “sexual attention” towards women who have been trained from birth to direct nearly (if not all) of their energies to arousing and maintaining the carnal interests of men. Be-
cause women’s desire to arouse has not been tempered by “rationality,” the sexual attentions of men will let loose the full force of women’s irrational sexual/bodily desires, which consequently makes them inconstant and “fickle.” Wollstonecraft’s use of the phrase “swallow up” to describe the effect of unleashed sexuality on women is not only sexually suggestive, but also subtly accesses the concepts provided by theories of the “sublime” in the contemporary eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse.

Many critics have identified the concept of “the sublime,” described by Burke, as a species of “terror” rendered “delightful” through a process of aestheticization that nullifies its actual potential danger\(^{18}\) as providing a rhetoric to express repressed female sexuality by displacing it onto a dramatic landscape that “swallows up” rationality and individual subjectivity.\(^{19}\) Wollstonecraft reinforces this connection between female sexuality and aesthetics by making an explicit comparison between women and “poets, painters, and composers” (all of whom, the footnote clarifies, are men), who take their own “sensibility” and channel it through the “imagination” to create works of art. Rather than possessing the “rationality” associated with “philosophical men” and implicitly allied with monogamous parental heterosexuality, or the personally detrimental irrationality associated with women, these artistic men harness their “sensibility,” their highly attuned bodily affectivity and sexuality (a sexuality, the passage implies, that could even be aroused by male sexual attention) in the service of creating art—thus providing evidence of a more than contingent relationship between “the sublime” and “sublimation.” In terms of her literary and artistic contemporaries, Wollstonecraft would have found real-life models for this type of masculinity in her publisher and patron, Joseph Johnson,\(^{20}\) the bachelor-poet William Cowper,\(^{21}\) and notably “queer” Gothic novelists such as Horace Walpole and William Beckford, who famously rely on concepts of


\(^{20}\) Although there is no concrete evidence that Joseph Johnson had romantic or sexual feelings towards other men, he remained a lifelong bachelor and was never known to have had romantic or sexual relationships with women. See Gerald P. Tyson, *Joseph Johnson: A Liberal Publisher* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1979), and Helen Braithwaite, *Romanticism, Publishing and Dissent: Joseph Johnson and the Cause of Liberty* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Additionally, Frances Sherwood’s representation of Johnson as unabashedly homosexual in her novelization of Wollstonecraft’s life is, perhaps, telling. See Frances Sherwood, *Vindication* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004).

\(^{21}\) See Elfenbein’s chapter on Cowper in *Romantic Genius*. 

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masculine sublimity in their representations of female subjectivity in their works.\textsuperscript{22}

Wollstonecraft’s footnote to the above quoted passage, providing evidence of her fixation on the position of the artistically creative man within her conceptual framework of sexuality, focuses on the way aesthetic production can replace heterosexual reproduction as a means of disciplining the irrational demands of the body. Coming right after Wollstonecraft’s reference to “poets, painters, and composers,” the footnote reads: “Men of these descriptions pour sensibility into their compositions, to amalgamate the gross materials; and, molding them with passion, give to the inert body a soul; but, in woman’s imagination, love alone concentrates these ethereal beams” (\textit{Vindication} 87). The sensual language Wollstonecraft ascribes to these men, the “passion” with which they use their body to “mold” the “gross materials” of the physical world, implies a redirection of the mental and physical energies of sexualities towards the creation of art. These men, instead of uniting with women to create a child, “amalgamate” elements (paint, sound, or language) in order to “give the inert body a soul.” The “sensibility” these men “pour” into their work is a type of non-material seminal fluid, possessing the ability to give a “soul” to otherwise inanimate objects and abstract concepts. Aesthetically productive males, through the use of their aesthetically directed “imagination,” temper the potentially destructive irrationality of their sensibility towards producing works of art. Though Wollstonecraft aligns these artistic men with women in terms of their excessive, non-rational emotional responsiveness to the phenomenal world and implicitly opposes them to the non-artistic rational men who use reason to channel their energies towards the heterosexual family and direct action in the field of politics, they offer a socially viable third way for men to actualize their sensual energies outside of the matrix of reproductive heterosexuality.

3. \textit{Maria} and the “Parent of the Mind”

Wollstonecraft’s notion of a masculinity that exists outside a heterosexual framework is definitely beside the main thrust of her argument in \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, the discussion confined mostly to margins, digressions, and asides in the main text. As Andrew Elfenbein states, in his study of Wollstonecraft’s changing attitude towards the eighteenth century discourse of the “genius” and its ability to “unsettle . . . obviously gendered language” and notions of sexuality, the \textit{Vindication} had “to be about ordinary women and ordinary love. Much as she admires the genius’s gender-

\textsuperscript{22} For a discussion of the “queerness” of Walpole and Beckford, see Haggerty’s \textit{Men in Love}, as well as his more recent \textit{Queer Gothic} (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2006).
bending status and sexual freedom, she insists on clearly marked gender roles for men and women . . . because she hopes that doing so will prevent the wrong kinds of gender-crossing and sexuality that supposedly come from moral corruption" ("Sexuality of Genius" 240). However, in Maria, Elfenbein finds Maria's marked displays of "sensibility" evidence of the fact that in this novel Wollstonecraft found a "liberation from constrained heterosexual relations," by finding "a utopian sexual possibility, an eroticism that is genuine but not implicated in the impossible tangles of human relations," one that focuses upon an "erotically fulfilling fantasy of a transfigured relationship to nature" channeled through the concept of "genius" (241–43). While Elfenbein focuses on the character of Maria herself in order to discuss the way the concept of "genius" influences her views of women's sexuality, I want to focus on the extent to which the text also brings to the foreground Wollstonecraft's complex consideration of alternative masculine identities.

Maria, which in many ways dramatizes the conclusions of the Vindication by representing the various violations brought upon the middle-class Maria and her working class attendant and ally Jemima by a society that systematically produces and encourages the oppression of women, also presents a positive male character in the form of Maria's uncle. This character represents the paragon of what Wollstonecraft sees as a "positive" sensibility, useful because it directs one's sympathetic impulses out towards the social world. As such, my reading of Maria takes part in the revision of Foucault's famous account of "the history of sexuality" suggested by Paul Kelleher in his recent article "The Glorious Lust of Doing Good: Tom Jones and the Virtues of Sexuality." Kelleher argues that "Fielding's novel not only accommodates the seemingly unruly forces of lust, but also rearticulates this passion as constitutive of moral feeling and social order," and places this argument in dialogue with the work of political economist Albert O.

23. For a reading of Maria that focuses on the relationship between Maria and Jemima as representing a new type of solidarity between women heretofore unseen in English literature, see Anne K. Mellor, "Righting the Wrongs of Woman: Mary Wollstonecraft's Maria," Nineteenth-Century Contexts 19 (1996): 413–24.

24. For a reading of Maria that sees Maria's uncle as a perversive figure that corrupts Maria by teaching her the "degrading" form of sensibility that directly causes her downfall, see Daniel O'Quinn, "Trembling: Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and the Resistance to Literature," English Literary History 64 (1997): 761–88. O'Quinn's reading, which focuses on the novel's intertextual rejection of contemporary sentimental novels, is indebted to Tilottama Rajan's reading of Maria as a radically ironic rereading of the work of William Godwin (Tilottama Rajan, "Wollstonecraft and Godwin: Reading the Secrets of the Political Novel," SIR 27 [Summer 1988]: 221–51). Both O'Quinn and Rajan's readings depend upon an interpretation of Maria as pervasively ironic—a notion which I do not believe to be supportable within the context of the rest of Wollstonecraft's notably unironic venire.
Hirschman in order to suggest that there might be a way to think beyond Michel Foucault's famous "repressive hypothesis." Using the vocabulary provided by Hirschman, Kelleher argues that it might be possible that modernity's rationalization of sexuality, as suggested by Foucault, was not only accomplished by various discourses that attempted to regulate or "discipline" sexual behaviors, but also by discourses that attempted to positively "harness" the energies of sexuality for socially useful purposes.25 As Kelleher argues, Tom Jones harnesses male heterosexual desire for the purpose of social benevolence at the expense of equating virtue itself with female sexual chastity, which results in the repression of women's sexual desires. So too Wollstonecraft's Maria attempts to dislodge this association between virtue and male heterosexual passion. Because Wollstonecraft views heteroerotic passion as always already implicated in the reproduction of sexual inequality for women, her envisioning of a version of masculine behavior focused on socially-oriented benevolence necessarily relocates the foundation of that "glorious lust of doing good" someplace other than in male heterosexual passion.

This is why Maria's uncle, the man who serves as Maria's role model for virtue and moral excellence, does not exhibit traditional masculine heterosexual behaviors. Maria, writing a letter to her newborn daughter from the insane asylum where her oppressive and domineering husband has imprisoned her, tells the story of his traumatic attempt at heterosexual courtship and marriage with "a young lady of great beauty and large fortune" that he had neither the wealth nor social connections to marry, and his consequently taking up the "offer of a nobleman to accompany him to India, as his confidential secretary" in order to secure enough money to marry his beloved (Maria 295). Already, without necessarily having to enquire into what the duties of a "confidential secretary" might specifically entail, one sees that the alternative Maria's uncle is forced to seek after being prevented from acquiring his initial heterosexual object choice is to place himself under the control of a socially and financially superior male. The exigencies of a social structure that values wealth and rank more than character has forced Maria's uncle into a position where he must prostitute himself (mentally if not necessarily sexually) to a man who serves as the social, cultural, and political agent for the demands of empire. He occupies an implicitly feminized role as "personal secretary" and passive supporter of a British colonial project that is gendered male, effectively occupying an

“equivocal” place in British society left unaccounted for by existing gender codes.

Additionally, the novel represents the “femininity” of Maria’s uncle not only as an effect of his equivocal social position but also as manifesting itself through the particular makeup of his psychological and sexual identity. Maria’s uncle begins his romantic life as one under the sway of the irrational, negative, unproductive type of “romantic” sensibility. Maria narrates, “A correspondence was regularly kept up with the object of his affection; and the intricacies of business, peculiarly wearisome to a man of a romantic turn of mind, contributed, with a forced absence, to increase his attachment. Every other passion was lost in this master-one, and served only to swell the torrent” (Maria 295). This passage, ascribing to Maria’s uncle a “romantic turn of mind,” describes him in a way similar to the representation of feminine sensibility in the Vindication. Not sufficiently mentally disciplined to invest himself in the “intricacies of business,” Maria’s uncle lacks the strict rationality that is the domain of the domesticated, socially and sexually productive heterosexual male. He is instead ruled by his “master passion” at the expense of all other mental activities, one which “swells the torrent” of his desire in the same way that sexual attention causes women to be “swallowed up” by their excessive sensibility. However, this excess of sentimentality cannot be entirely associated with Wollstonecraft’s concept of feminine sensibility, since Maria’s uncle’s “passion” is not encouraged by the sexual attention of another, but rather by the “absence” of the heterosexual love object. His “passion” is increased by the act of writing letters to his absent beloved, as he displaces his sexual energy away from the actual person and onto the process of writing itself, insofar as it enables the creation of an idealized mental construction of the love object. Similar to those creative men who “pour” their sensibilities into “compositions,” Maria’s uncle creates and sustains his sexual passion through the written composition of letters.26

That Maria’s uncle’s sexual “passion” primarily manifests itself through his written communication complicates Maria’s presentation of him as uncomplicatedly heterosexual, in virtue of the fact that his letters are not directly sent to his female beloved. Maria explains: “While he basked in the warm sunshine of love, friendship also promised to shed its dewy freshness; for a friend, whom he loved next to his mistress, was the confidant,

26. Maria’s uncle’s use of the act of writing to create an ideal love-object is similar to the development of Maria’s passion for Darnford, which is sparked by their writing of marginal comments in books that circulate between them while they are imprisoned in the mental asylum. Maria’s failure to realize the dangers of forming romantic attachments through the distorting medium of writing suggests that, contrary to Daniel O’Quinn’s claim, Maria’s troubles result from not taking her uncle’s instructive example sufficiently to heart.
who forwarded the letters from one to the other, to elude the observation of prying relations" (Maria 295). The image of the "dewy freshness" of "friendship," serving as the natural complement to the "warm sunshine" of love, suggests that Maria's uncle's sexual feelings are not entirely concerned with the heterosexual love object. Maria's uncle shows this "friend, whom he loved next to his mistress," an affection that appears different in degree rather than kind from the love directed toward his mistress. As a conduit who receives the love letters before the ostensible heterosexual love object, the letters of Maria's uncle could be as much meant for him as they are for her, especially insofar as they are really addressed to an abstract mental ideal that can mentally amalgamate the characteristics of the two recipients into the single metaphorical image of a warm, dewy day. The suggestiveness of this description is further underlined in the description of the traumatic event that effectually excluded her uncle from heterosexuality: "My uncle realized, by good luck, rather than management, a handsome fortune; and returning on the wings of love, lost in the most enchanting reveries, to England, to share it with his mistress and his friend, he found them— united" (Maria 295). Continuing to emphasize his lack of masculine rational business skills by calling attention to the "luck" rather than "management" that got him his fortune, in addition to the irrational exuberance of his "reveries" on the "wings of love," Maria's uncle returns to England more "feminine" than ever as he attempts to enter into marital heterosexuality. However, he learns that his love letters have actually succeeded in bringing their two recipients together into a heterosexual union. Not only have they taken his abstract ideal and turned it into concrete reality, they have effected his fantasy combination of the lover and the friend into a single unit from which he is definitively excluded, bringing about the collapse of what has been called the homosocial "erotic triangle." This structure of desire, famously proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and derived from René Girard's theory of "mimetic desire," describes the circuit of erotic energy that exists where two men vie for the same woman, thereby allowing the men to channel their potentially homoerotic desires through the woman, who is forced to be the mediator of the desire that exists "between men."

As a result of the destruction of the precarious structure of this erotic triangle, the heterosexual union between "the mistress" and "the friend" destroys the precarious structure of Maria's uncle's sexuality, consequently leading him to reject heterosexuality before it rejects him again: "Declaring

an intention never to marry, his relations were ever clustering about him, paying the grossest adulation to a man, who, disgusted with mankind, received them with scorn, or bitter sarcasms" (Maria 296). Because the psychological structure of affection that allowed him to maintain an ostensibly heterosexual orientation in the face of his social feminization is no longer tenable, Maria’s uncle develops “disgust” towards the society of “mankind” whose promotion of heterosexual marriage excludes him from the actualization of his sexuality.

Maria’s uncle’s abjuration of the social demand for heterosexual marriage brings out his latent aesthetic productivity, hinted at by the “passion” created and maintained through his writing of letters to his beloved, yet transformed into an impulse for creating for himself a unique personal identity. Borrowing from the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Elfenbein argues in his study Romantic Genius that the growth of the middle class in the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries saw the development of the “‘cult and culture of the person’” which represented “a transformation of the language of genius so that it applies less to creators of artistic works than to creators of a personal lifestyle. . . . Bourgeois society places on every individual who desires distinction the responsibility to arrange his or her life so as to achieve an ‘exclusive, unique, and original . . . personal opinion’” which, for Elfenbein, represents the transformation of “the eighteenth-century demand for originality in art” into the “nineteenth-century demand for originality in living” (67).28

Thus, as the “sensibility” that Maria’s uncle “poured” into his epistolary compositions was ostensibly directed towards a heterosexual love object rather than in the service of “giving the inert body a soul” through the creation of art, so Maria’s uncle’s rejection of marriage encourages him to redirect his latent aesthetic energies towards the self-dramatization of an eccentric personality for the sake of educating Maria:

He had a forcible manner of speaking, rendered more so by a certain impressive wildness of look and gesture, calculated to engage the attention of a young and ardent mind. It is not then surprising that I quickly adopted his opinions in preference, and reverenced him as one of a superior order of beings. He inculcated, with great warmth, self-respect, and a lofty consciousness of acting right, independent of the censure or applause of the world; nay, he almost taught me to be brave, and even despise its censure, when convinced of the rectitude of my own intentions. (Maria 296)

The character of Maria’s uncle, his “forcible manner of speaking,” and “wildness of look and gesture,” are not simply organic manifestations of personality but are rather a “calculated” self-fashioning for Maria’s benefit as he turns his personality and his body into a didactic tool. This causes Maria to think of him as “one of a superior order of beings,” existing in a realm above gender and the social demands for gender-appropriate behavior. This is why, despite being a man, he can serve as a role model for Maria by exhibiting character traits such as “warmth,” “self-respect,” “a lofty consciousness of acting right,” and “bravery,” that are not specifically associated with the gender codes of either heterosexual masculinity or femininity as such. Maria’s uncle transforms his body into an effectively genderless didactic tool by redirecting his sexual energy into a dramatic self-presentation that Maria describes in specifically aesthetic terms: “Endeavoring to prove to me that nothing which deserved the name of love or friendship, existed in the world, he drew such animated pictures of his own feelings, rendered permanent by disappointment, as imprinted the sentiments strongly on my heart, and animated my imagination” (Maria 296). Maria’s uncle channels the bitterness of his unrealizable sexual desire into an aesthetically instructive self presentation consisting of “drawing animated pictures of his own feelings” with such force as to “imprint sentiments strong on [the] heart” and “animate [the] imagination” of his intended audience in a way similar to the “composers” in the Vindication who “amalgamate the gross materials” in order to “give the inert body a soul.”

According to Elfenbein, late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century British society believed that this sort of self-dramatizing personal originality properly manifested itself in the privacy of the domestic sphere, in distinction to a public sphere where the demands of capitalism and commercial exchange required an essential uniformity of behavior among men. For middle-class men, this need for the individual to be “original” in the private sphere always carried with it the suspicion of possessing the “wrong kind of specialness”—that is, having a secret, sexually “deviant,” non-heterosexual private life (Romantic Genius 64). However, because Maria’s uncle channels his energies into creating an original persona that will teach Maria to manifest a socially-oriented type of virtue, he emerges not only an example of non-heterosexual masculinity that nevertheless serves a socially-useful function, but becomes entirely essential to the maintenance of society, insofar as he personifies the example par excellence of a necessary and positively-valued sensibility that directs sympathy outward, selfishly, towards other people. Maria, giving advice to her daughter in what could be seen as the ultimate “thesis” of her letter, writes:

“Your improvement, my dearest girl, being ever present to me while I write, I note these feelings, because women, more accustomed to ob-
serve manners than actions, are too much alive to ridicule. So much so, that their boasted sensibility is often stifled by false delicacy. True sensibility, the sensibility which is the auxiliary of virtue, and the soul of genius, is in society so occupied with the feelings of others, as scarcely to regard its own sensations. With what reverence have I looked up at my uncle, the dear parent of my mind! when I have seen the sense of his own sufferings, of mind and body, absorbed in a desire to comfort those, whose misfortunes were comparatively trivial. He would have been ashamed of being as indulgent to himself, as he was to others.” *(Maria 336)*

When one shifts one’s attention away from “manners” and “false delicacy” and towards “the feelings of others,” sensibility becomes “the auxiliary of virtue” as it allows one to be sympathetic towards the flaws and misfortunes of others while maintaining rigorously high standards of conduct for oneself. As such, “sensibility” in this case functions as a method for applying the rigors of rationally based “virtue” to a social world that requires the exercise of interpersonal “sympathy” in order to continue functioning. Significantly, this type of “sensibility” is neither associated with literature nor the aesthetic as such, and also is not gendered, as Maria sees her uncle as the exemplar of positive sensibility. However, this type of “sensibility” is only displayed by Maria’s uncle after he is excluded from heterosexual reproduction—he can only be an effective “parent of the mind” when he no longer has the potential to be an actual parent—only when he has acceded to the role that Maria calls her “more than father” *(Maria 319)*.

This interpersonal sympathy also underlies what is perhaps Maria’s uncle’s most radical position in the novel—his advocacy of divorce. Maria’s uncle states that a woman need not conceive of marriage as “indissoluble . . . in case her husband merits neither her love, nor esteem” *(Maria 320)*. Calling marriage without love or esteem an “abjectness of condition, the enduring of which no concurrence of circumstance can ever make a duty in the sight of God or just men,” Maria’s uncle’s advocacy of divorce ultimately rests upon his belief that the dissolution of marriage is valid when that marriage harms the dignity of women by infringing upon their intellectual freedom. As he says, speaking of the laws of separation, men maintain their honor by merely financially supporting their estranged wives, while a woman “is despised and shunned, for asserting the independence of mind distinctive to a rational being, and spurning at slavery” *(Maria 320)*. It is ultimately Maria’s uncle’s own feelings of rational benevolence for the dignity of women that prompts him to advocate for divorce as a legal means to dissolve women from the “slavery” entailed by an affectionless marriage. Additionally, Maria’s uncle’s advocacy for the reformation of divorce laws carries with it the implication that men will be freed from soci-
ety’s demand for “compulsory heterosexuality,” giving them an honorable way of extricating themselves from marriage and thereby granting them the potential freedom to pursue relationships which fall outside the domain of monogamous, reproductive heterosexuality.29

This figure of the “benevolent uncle,” who serves as an exemplar of benevolence through his abjuration of marriage and heterosexual reproduction, not only appears in the writings of Wollstonecraft, but also in the work of her contemporary, Elizabeth Inchbald. One of the most popular women writers of the late eighteenth century, Inchbald was part of Wollstonecraft’s social circle, and close friends with William Godwin who, after unsuccessfully proposing marriage to Inchbald, eventually became the husband of Mary Wollstonecraft.30 Although the uncle-figure in her plays does not stand as the paradigmatic example of moral virtue to the extent he does in Wollstonecraft’s novel, plays such as I’ll Tell You What (1786), The Child of Nature (1788), and To Marry or Not to Marry (1804) make use of the unmarried uncle as a minor figure who kindly manipulates and controls the machinations of the courtships of his nieces and nephews in order to bring the play to its properly comedic conclusion.31 The existence of the benevolent bachelor uncle in Inchbald’s work not only suggests that this figure was a character type familiar to members of Wollstonecraft’s social set, but also that the figure was not unique to Wollstonecraft’s particular political vision alone. Although no other writer analyzes the specific political importance of non-heterosexual masculinity to the extent Wollstonecraft does in Maria, his appearance in Inchbald’s plays indicates that the kindly, unmarried uncle was becoming crystallized as a general character type at the end of the eighteenth century, one which would continue throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century.

The figure of the benevolent unmarried uncle lives on in the figure of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has termed “the avunculate.”32 In her analysis


of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Sedgwick discusses the ways in which aunts and uncles, whose “intimate access to children needn’t depend on their own pairings or procreation” have the potential to occupy an important role in the cultural politics of the family, providing children with “the possibility of alternate life trajectories” including “nonconforming or nonreproductive sexualities” (“Avunculate” 63). Yet while Sedgwick historicizes her account of the figure of the uncle in Wilde’s late-Victorian writing by turning to anthropological accounts of kinship networks in pre-capitalist societies, this study has contended that the origin of the figure of the “avunculate” lies much closer to home, within the gender and sexual politics of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Britain. Indeed, as Richard Sha has argued, advances made in the biological sciences and aesthetic philosophy made the Romantic period in Britain a time when art and sexuality, by sharing a common “distrust of function,” became sites where radically egalitarian national and familial relationships could be imagined. The avunculate, therefore, can be interpreted not so much as a throwback to a pre-modern model of kinship that complicates modern notions of the nuclear family, but as a marker of Romantic-era feminism’s at times ambivalent legacy within nineteenth-century literature, a figure for the subject’s education and initiation into the cultural politics of gender.

Perhaps the most notable nineteenth century example is that of John Jarndyce in Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1852–53). Mr. Jarndyce, although not literally the uncle of first-person narrator Esther Summerson, is her older cousin and benefactor. Esther continually refers to him as her “guardian” (with all of that term’s financial, emotional, and religious implications intended) and as an exemplar of benevolent behavior directed outward from the domestic sphere towards the larger social world, in contrast to the socially malevolent force of the High Court of Chancery. Although he reliably manifests irritation whenever he encounters selfish behavior in others (an excess of sensibility which he always ascribes to the “east wind” and which he confines to a room he calls “the Grownery”), he serves as Esther’s model for virtuous behavior throughout the *Bildung* that is her portion of *Bleak House’s* narrative. Roughly halfway through the novel, Jarndyce proposes marriage to Esther after she is physically deformed by smallpox; she gratefully (if somewhat equivocally) accepts the proposal. However, by the end of the novel Jarndyce has released her from that engagement so that she may marry her true love, Allan Woodcourt. As a

wedding present, Jarndyce builds the couple an exact replica of Bleak House for her to manage because, as he states, he "would not have my Esther's bright example lost; I would not have a jot of my dear girl's virtues unobserved and unhonoured" (Dickens 914). In effect, Jarndyce releases Esther from her engagement when he realizes that she would have married him out of a sense of duty, regardless of her own personal preferences—thus, that she has fully learned the virtues of selflessness from his own example. The novel's supreme moment of selflessness, the moment when Esther finally becomes a model of virtue in her own right, comes explicitly as the result of Jarndyce's abjuration of marriage. Bleak House, following Maria, imagines an exemplar of masculine behavior who constructs himself as one who gains virtue through his rejection of heterosexual reproduction, casting himself as a moral "parent of the mind" rather than the sexually reproductice parent of the body.

Although this particular representation of avuncular non-normative masculinity in the figure of the benevolent uncle is decidedly ambivalent in its gender politics—one could easily interpret Esther's plot as the disciplinary narrative of her initiation into the self-abjuring ideal of Victorian femininity—I do not believe it is accurate to call such a representation "homophobic." On the contrary, rather than representing heterosexual reproduction as the only morally acceptable behavior in an egalitarian society, authors such as Wollstonecraft and Dickens emphasize the supreme importance of an aesthetically and/or didactically productive masculinity closely associated with the creative recuperation of stereotypically feminine behaviors for purposes that could be interpreted as socially beneficial, while remaining outside the matrix of reproductive marital heterosexuality. Indeed, an examination of the literary history of the benevolent uncle reveals an especially malleable figure that, rather than being allied to a specifically radical political program, had the potential to be used for a variety of cultural ends. Far from being monolithically opposed to non-heterosexually reproductive behaviors, therefore, Wollstonecraft can be seen to occupy a significant place within a literary genealogy that attempts to recognize, represent, and theorize the political and ethical importance of non-heterosexual identities.

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