

Autonomy and the Figure of the Prostitute in Wollstonecraft

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One of the most notable shifts in Wollstonecraft's writings is her attitude toward women of the lower classes, for which the figure of the prostitute often serves as a synecdoche. As is well known, the admonitions contained in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (VRW) are addressed toward women of the emerging middle class, whom Wollstonecraft positions as the moral superiors of both poor women and the elite. Yet by the time she authors *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* a few short years later, the novel's most interesting – and, arguably, central – character is just such a poor woman and one who has a history of prostitution at that. So how do we account for this change in attitude? What justifies Wollstonecraft in orienting her story around the character of Jemima and why is Jemima depicted as a fully autonomy, morally virtuous individual?

I argue that the figure of the prostitute offers a kind of litmus test to Wollstonecraft's understanding of both autonomy and moral virtue. It is my contention that this contested figure reappears so frequently across Wollstonecraft's works because she troubles Wollstonecraft's beliefs in the origins and strength of moral virtue. This unsettling of moral virtue has consequences for her account of autonomy, with which it is enmeshed, since to be autonomous is to demonstrate moral virtue. In order to illuminate the consequences of this reevaluation for Wollstonecraft's thought, I trace a cluster of concerns – exclusion, virtue, and education – that are the mechanisms by which Jemima is rendered sympathetic in Wollstonecraft's eyes. The first section of the paper outlines Wollstonecraft's complex and often contradictory attitudes toward prostitutes and prostitution in both of the *Vindications* and suggests that the prostitute's exclusion from the domains of autonomy and moral sensibility produces a tautology: her exclusion accounts for her ethical impoverishment and her ethical impoverishment is what produces her exclusion. In the *Vindications*, Wollstonecraft seems content to stop there. The second section of the paper pivots toward the unfinished and posthumously published *Maria* to examine Wollstonecraft's inclusion of Jemima as a central character. Here we see how Jemima, and the figure of the prostitute more broadly, is humanized through an account of her personal and persistent virtue, which ensures for her a degree of autonomy that her compromised social position should ostensibly render null.

The paper's third section argues that while Wollstonecraft cannot praise Jemima *because* of her work as a prostitute, she can praise her *in spite of* it. That is, Jemima's virtue, having survived the worst of circumstances and allowed her to rescue Maria at a crucial moment, remains intact, even though, by her own earlier logic, Wollstonecraft should treat Jemima as incapable of such virtue. It is specifically through the act of mutual education – the telling of their life stories, which takes up much of the book itself – that this change occurs. Ultimately I argue that, by the time of writing *Maria*, Wollstonecraft developed an increasingly sophisticated account of autonomy under conditions of moral degradation that allowed for the persistence of moral virtue across economic classes.