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In 'Her Father's House'¹: Women as Property in Wollstonecraft's *Mary* (1788)

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NEAR to her father's house was a range of mountains; ... [and] an old castle, a haunted one, as the story went; it was situated on the brow of one of the mountains, and commanded a view of the sea. This castle had been inhabited by some of her ancestors; and many tales had the old house-keeper told her of the worthies who had resided there.

When her mother frowned, and her friend looked cool, she would steal to this retirement, where human foot seldom trod – gaze on the sea, observe the grey clouds, or listen to the wind which struggled to free itself from the only thing that impeded its course. When more cheerful, she admired the various dispositions of light and shade, the beautiful tints the gleams of sunshine gave to the distant hills; then she rejoiced in existence, and darted into futurity.

One way home was through the cavity of a rock covered with a thin layer of earth, just sufficient to afford nourishment to a few stunted shrubs and wild plants, which grew on its sides, and nodded over the summit In this retreat she read Thomson's Seasons, Young's Night-Thoughts, and Paradise Lost.²

Mary, the autobiographical protagonist of Mary Wollstonecraft's first novella, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), is homeless. Both Chapters III and IV begin with the almost identical phrase, 'Near ... her father's house' (86),³ a somewhat awkward construction that reminds us that Mary does not live in her own house. Rather, she lives in 'her father's house.' This distinction, though minute, is far from nugatory; it represents the major source of Mary's grief and main driver of the

novella's plot, as I will show. What might at first appear to be an editorial slip emphasizes a hitherto unrecognized theme of *Mary*: that of the relationship between women and the patriarchal laws and customs surrounding property and ownership in Romantic-era England.

Wollstonecraft's repeated phrase 'her father's house' draws attention to the fact that the autobiographical protagonist, Mary, does not own property – does not own *a* property, such as a house, and, in broader terms, she does not have *any property* of any kind, for whatever wealth exists for the taking in this patriarchal society is available only to men. The description of the 'castle [that] had been inhabited by some of her ancestors' raises the issues of inheritance and property, and reminds us that, in the Romantic period, the eldest sons inherited all of the family wealth under the laws of primogeniture. The patriarchal attitudes upon which such laws were based were also reflected in English custom, which dictated that upper-class women were not permitted to hold jobs in order to gain their own money and property. As a result of such misogynistic laws and customs, women were forced into what Wollstonecraft would label 'legal prostitution' in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), marriages based on economic concerns rather than love. Moreover, daughters were essentially owned by their fathers until they were 'given away', to use the still-common term, in marriage. The husbands would thereafter own this female chattel, a legal fact enshrined in the wife's adoption of her husband's surname. As historian Carol Blum argues in 'Of Women and the Land: Legitimizing Husbandry', the historical development of the term 'husbandry' demonstrates the links between the ownership of land and women. Blum notes that

In the eighteenth century and up to our own time, defining property generates major questions ... : who could be a legitimate person, what justified ownership, and whether women were things, a form of property, or persons, proprietors in their own right? (161)

As an inmate in 'her father's house', Mary is no proprietor, but mere property – a 'thing to be possessed' – and would remain so to her husband through what Wollstonecraft terms her 'forced' marriage (95).

All of these issues regarding women and property plague the heroine of Wollstonecraft's novella and become the driving forces of the plot. Mary only becomes an 'heiress' when her older brother – to whom her mother had shown marked 'partiality' – dies suddenly, but Mary's new-found power lasts for only two sentences before her father decides to marry her off to settle a property dispute between the two families, since 'part of the estate she was to inherit had been litigated' (84, 92). Mary recognizes her identity as property to be traded: 'Her

cheeks flushed with indignation, so strongly did she feel an emotion of contempt at having been thrown away – given in with an estate' (113). Mary considers such a marriage to be 'slave[ry]', for it positions her as the property of her husband (131). The remedy for slavery is freedom, including the liberty to find paid work, which Mary attempts to obtain. She boldly defies her interlocutors, who wonder 'how [she] will ... live' apart from her husband: 'I will work, she cried, do any thing rather than be a slave' by allowing her husband to support her (131). The notion of human beings as property was challenged in the period's abolition debates, to which John Locke's statements about human freedom from the late seventeenth century were essential. In *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), Locke writes, 'it is evident, that ... man ... [is] master of himself, and proprietor of his own person, and the actions or labour of it' (225). In this context, the patriarchal system that treats women as property and denies their ability to gain their own property through paid work casts them as slaves. As I will show, connected to the notion of women as property is that they are not independent persons in English law, nor are they subjects, philosophically speaking. The selected passage explores these implications of the patriarchal system through references to Mary's genius and (frustrated) desire to develop it through a Rousseauvian education.

This passage contains several elements that address how Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy acts as both the inspiration and foil for Wollstonecraft's broad message in *Mary*. The period's debates about slavery and democracy responded to and helped to form the celebration of the autonomous individual that we recognize as part of the Romantic *zeitgeist*, and Rousseau was one of the most influential definers of these topics in the eighteenth century. His works on education emphasize fostering one's unique character, type of intelligence and inclinations – called 'genius' in the period – through education in nature and the development of sensibility. As I note in the Broadview edition of *Mary*, the novella's epigraph in French – from the Genevan philosophe's *Julie, ou, La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) – indicates Wollstonecraft's most obvious concerns in the novella: the development of female natural genius through education and the 'sublime virtue[]' that is true sensibility (73). Roughly translated as 'The exercise of the most sublime virtues raises and nourishes genius', the epigraph also prepares the reader to recognize the significance of several additional aspects of the selected passage. For example, Mary's genius is nourished through her solitary and self-guided education: 'she would steal to this retirement, where human foot seldom trod' to read poetry by James Thomson, Edward Young and John Milton – works that would refine her sensibility, build her sense of the sublime and confirm her quintessentially Romantic genius. As if these qualities

were not enough to authenticate her genius in Rousseauvian terms, she learns from nature itself: she would 'gaze on the sea, observe the grey clouds, or listen to the wind'. Nature also develops Mary's aesthetic appreciation: 'she admired the various dispositions of light and shade, the beautiful tints the gleams of sunshine gave to the distant hills'. What solitary walker could do more? This passage suggests that Mary's highly individual genius is nourished through Rousseauvian principles of education – at least those he outlines for male education.

However, Rousseau's theory of *female* education fell far short of developing women's minds to the extent that he denied their very claim to being autonomous selves. Wollstonecraft was acutely aware of this failing. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), Wollstonecraft quotes Rousseau in a way that summarizes his patriarchal views on women succinctly: 'As they are not in a capacity to judge for themselves, they ought to abide by the decision of their fathers and husbands' (210). According to Rousseau, women's intelligence is essentially different from that of men – deficient to the degree that women must submit their opinions to those of their male family members. Rousseau's theory of male education is the pattern for the development of Romantic genius, and, significantly, he denies the possibility of *female* genius. Rousseau's directive that a female should acquiesce to the authority of her patriarchal masters expresses the English laws of coverture in the language of education, genius and Romantic individualism. As outlined in the eighteenth century by the great English legal commentator William Blackstone, the laws of coverture state, 'By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband'.⁴ The laws of England confirmed that married women were not individual persons under English law, and Rousseau, the most influential educational philosopher in eighteenth-century Europe, agreed that women are devoid of the intellect needed to establish them as legal subjects – as anything but the property of men.

The selected passage describes Mary's innate attraction to self-education and, notably, to texts that promise to develop her intellect, sensibility and sense of the sublime. With respect to Rousseau's texts on education, then, she has everything she needs to be an ideal Romantic genius, except for a penis. Wollstonecraft foreshadows that Mary's innate genius will be stifled in the ensuing narrative by developing two natural metaphors in the selected passage. She describes the 'retreat' where Mary reads as containing a 'few stunted shrubs and wild plants' that are 'afford[ed] nourishment' 'just sufficient' to survive. Similarly, Mary has only enough support to begin to nurture her genius, and not nearly enough to

thrive. She is also very like 'the wind which struggled to free itself from the only thing that impeded its course'; for this child of nature, misogynistic social rules 'impede' her 'course' of education and independence. The selected passage confirms that, when in nature, Mary 'rejoiced in existence, and darted into futurity'. Left to develop her innate abilities, this Romantic flower would bloom. However, her development is halted by the perverse laws and customs of her society that cast women as devoid of legal and philosophical subjecthood – as unthinking property to be traded among members of the patriarchy.

The vehicle of Wollstonecraft's natural metaphors draws attention to the *unnatural* character of patriarchal laws. Like those of slaves, women's natural rights as autonomous human beings are crushed by a legal system and the attendant customs and attitudes that deny basic human liberty. In a response to Edmund Burke's defence of the patriarchal system, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Thomas Paine would call the period's inheritance laws, which favour the eldest son, a predatory and cannibalistic relationship 'against every law of nature', and he assures his reader that 'Nature herself calls for its destruction'.⁵ Six years previous to Paine's publication, Wollstonecraft similarly represents the world ruled by such patriarchal laws as an unnatural, hostile environment that kills some creatures doomed to it.⁶ The final sentences of *Mary* reveal that, fully cognizant of her role as patriarchal property, the protagonist no longer 'rejoice[s] ... in existence, and dart[s] ... into futurity', as she does in the selected passage. By the tale's end, she can only hope for death:

Her delicate state of health did not promise long life. In moments of solitary sadness, a gleam of joy would dart across her mind – She thought she was hastening to that world where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage. (148)

Having been betrayed by this world, Mary dreams of an unnatural space, a genderless realm of spiritual being, where the body with which she was born will not identify her as property to be traded in marriage.

Indeed, given the focus on nature and naturalness in the period, perhaps just as significant as the phrase 'her father's house' in the selected passage is the great attention it devotes to nature. Notably, Wollstonecraft does not describe the physical appearance of Mary's 'father's house' at all; nor does she provide a glimpse of our heroine in it. Rather, she immediately moves to a meticulous delineation of the natural environment *around* the house: it is 'near' 'a range of mountains', 'cloud-capt' and with 'sides [featuring] ... little bubbling cascades', as well as 'straggling trees and bushes [through which]

the wind whistled'. Nature is Mary's proper home, it seems, since she flees to this 'retreat' '[w]hen her mother frown[s]' – or, in short, when her family fails to provide the support she needs to thrive. By establishing Mary's link with nature in the selected passage from the novella's first pages, Wollstonecraft shields her heroine from the accusations of perversity that Mary's later refashioning of the patriarchal family structure may invite.

The novella's main theme of genius – that is, natural intelligence and innate ability – also helps to defend Mary against the charge of unnaturalness. Arguably, Mary's native intelligence necessitates that she rebel against the social conventions that identify her as the property of familial patriarchs. Given her innate genius, it follows that Mary should defend her independence by reforming the traditional family structure. Mary does not respect the males to whom she belongs; she does not recognize the authority of her father, whom she considers immoral (98), and her husband inspires no feelings but abhorrence in her: 'her marriage appeared a dreadful misfortune.... An extreme dislike took root in her mind; the sound of his name made her turn sick' (97). Precisely because of her genius, which is synonymous with her intelligence and independence, Mary comprehends well her humiliating situation as the property of such males. She, therefore, tries to change it by casting *herself* as a husband and property owner. When that plan fails, she chooses a new father/brother/husband – one who is devoid of patriarchal power.

Wollstonecraft's protagonist marries not to be united to Charles, her groom, but to be united to Ann, her best friend and true beloved. In a passage of free indirect discourse that is typical of *Mary* (although it is more often associated with Jane Austen's later works), the narrator informs the reader,

She loved Ann better than any one in the world – to snatch her from the very jaws of destruction – she would have encountered a lion. To have this friend constantly with her ... would it not be superlative bliss? (95)

If her desire to save the proverbial 'damsel in distress' does not demonstrate clearly enough Mary's thirst for masculine power, then her wish to support Ann and have her 'constantly with her' confirms Mary's attempt to adopt the role of husband.⁷ Mary's patriarchal desires are partially the result of her 'extreme horror at taking – at being forced to take, such a hasty step' as marrying to settle her father's litigation suit (95). To survive the 'horror' of patriarchy, Mary attempts to infiltrate it.

Unfortunately for Mary, her patriarchal reign does not last long. Fulfilling the duties of good husbandry, she takes her infirm charge to Lisbon in the

hope that the warmer climate will heal Ann, but the latter dies, nevertheless. While Mary is there, however, she meets the gentle and infirm Henry and devises a novel plan for a reformed family relationship with him that, like her relationship with Ann, will position Mary as the one who is in control. Mary's initial attraction to Henry is bound up with the pleasure she takes in his fragility: 'Henry's illness was not alarming, it was rather pleasing, as it gave Mary an excuse to herself for shewing him how much she was interested about him' (113). Mary's love for Henry is intimately bound up with her perception of his weakness and, given her relative health and strength, her ability to care for him – a task usually reserved for the more powerful male, such as a husband, in a traditional romantic relationship.

The familial resonances of their relationship become even more bizarre as the novella continues. In several passages, Wollstonecraft presents Henry as the father-figure: he calls her his 'child' (121) and asks, 'If she would rely on him as if he was her father; and [says] that the tenderest father could not more anxiously interest himself in the fate of a darling child, than he did in her's' [sic] (117). Nor is Mary ignorant of the familial relationship his words signify. She thinks,

My child! His child, what an association of ideas! If I had had a father, such a father! – She could not dwell on the thoughts, the wishes which obtruded themselves. Her mind was unhinged, and passion unperceived filled her whole soul. (117)

Mary is at once enchanted with the notion of Henry's fatherly relation to her and overwhelmed with 'passion' at the mere thought of it. Mary and Henry's amorous relationship is incestuous in another way, too: they are, Wollstonecraft suggests, like brother and sister. Thinking of Henry's impending death, his mother asks Mary to confirm her acceptance of this new familial structure, which has been suggested by Henry: 'If I am to lose the support of my age, and be again a widow – may I call her Child whom my Henry wishes me to adopt?' (144)⁸ Wollstonecraft provides several instances of familial reimagining in this novella. In the context of the theme of Mary's patriarchal power-struggle, these apparently odd references to Mary as a husband/wife/sister/daughter to Henry accrue great significance. He is her dream-man: a husband/father/brother without power and without proprietary rights over her.

Initially, the selected passage from *Mary* may seem to be a relatively insignificant description of setting in a novella about education and female genius, as these main themes are identified in the Advertisement: Wollstonecraft

claims *Mary* 'artless[ly]' displays 'the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers' (76). However, alerted to the patriarchal implications of the repeated phrase 'her father's house' in the first sentence of two consecutive chapters early in the novella, the reader becomes aware of a connected theme here: that of the relationship between women, property and patriarchy. In this light, the apparently haphazard plot of the novella appears, rather, to illustrate aptly the trials experienced by an intelligent, critical woman – a female genius – in the early Romantic era. The major points of the plot and both of her romantic relationships illustrate her role as the property of various patriarchal figures, her rebellious responses to this situation and her attempts to rewrite her identity through the invention of novel familial structures. Yet, all of Mary's attempts to assert her independence fail. The protagonist we find so full of promise in the selected passage hopes, by the end of the novel, only for escape – into her Divine father's house (136).