

**The Feminism/Femininity Tension: Mary Wollstonecraft's "Feminist Misogyny"**

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These numerous and essential articles [of dress] are advertised in so ridiculous a style,  
that the rapid sale of them is a very severe reflection on the understanding of those  
females who encourage it.

—Mary Wollstonecraft (1990c: 32)

It is an act of misogyny to try and disassociate oneself from things that are “female”  
simply because you don’t like what that “femaleness” means to you and others.

—Allyson Mitchell (2002: 105)

## Introduction

Femininity has been understood as a problem for Western feminism in general and many feminists in particular. As such, there has been a great deal written on the femininity question. One of the earliest articulations of this question can be found in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797).<sup>1</sup> In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1786), *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft is harsh in her critique of femininity as an artificial construct that prevents women from exercising their reason. She is contemptuous of all or most of the women from her social class for embracing femininity (which she associates with irrationality, weakness, excessive emotions, foolishness, frivolity and child-like behaviour). She sets up a tension between feminism and femininity, using arguments that are at times misogynistic. Wollstonecraft’s legacy of “feminist misogyny”<sup>2</sup> has been influential in the subsequent development of Western feminism<sup>3</sup> (both feminist theory and popular feminism).

The basic definition of misogyny is “woman hating.” However, feminists have used the term to refer to behaviours, practices and social contexts that are deeply hostile to women (Card, 2002). Indeed, in this paper I understand Wollstonecraft’s misogyny as not necessarily a hatred of women per se, but a deep hostility towards almost everything

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that Wollstonecraft is author of the first Western feminist text. Barbara Taylor notes that since the seventeenth century, “liberal advocates of constitutional government [were arguing] that the power of men within families, like that of kings within nations, should be exercised only with the consent of the ruled” (1993: 3). Moreover, Wollstonecraft was hardly the lone feminist voice of her time. In the late eighteenth century, “there was a steady stream of writing on women’s position” by teachers, parliamentary reformers, novelists, journalists and poets. These “dissident intellectuals” formed communities in most large towns across Britain (1993). Yet this does not take away from the point that Wollstonecraft, in the canon of feminist theory, is understood to have written the founding text of modern feminism with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. As such, her influence (both generally and with specific reference to her understanding of femininity) has been considerable.

<sup>2</sup> This term “feminist misogyny” was originally coined by Susan Gubar in 1994. Gubar uses the term to suggest there is dialectical relationship between feminism and misogyny. Although I am indebted to Gubar for coining the term, my understanding of the term and focus both differ. I do not understand feminism and misogyny to be in a dialectical relationship; indeed, even Gubar acknowledges that although “there can be (need be) no feminism without misogyny,” at the same time “feminism historically has not been the condition for misogyny’s existence” (1994: 462). Like Gubar, I do focus on Wollstonecraft’s use of misogynistic language in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. However, I expand beyond Gubar’s focus to include discussion of other Wollstonecraft texts as well as consider the relationship between femininity, commodities and capitalism in Wollstonecraft’s work as well as subsequent feminist texts.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, if not indicated as such, references to “feminism,” “feminist theory” and “feminist thought” will concern *Western* feminism, theory and thought. I use these terms for reasons of brevity and do not wish to universalize Western feminism.

associated with women.<sup>4</sup> This includes the behaviour, gendered roles, bodily aesthetics, secondary sex characteristics, consumption and commodities associated with women. My understanding of misogyny modifies Allyson Mitchell's view from the epigraph to this paper. Mitchell's view—that rejecting femininity simply because of the ways it has been constructed is an act of misogyny—requires some restriction. Feminist critiques of femininity can and sometimes do contain an underlying Wollstonecraftian feminist misogyny; however, such critiques can also serve an important function and are not always misogynistic.

Wollstonecraft's critique of femininity (and larger project of women's emancipation) is informed by her belief in the Cartesian subject: that is, a conception of the subject that stems from René Descartes' idea that humans are defined by rational thought. The Cartesian subject is dualistic in that the body is separated from the mind, or as Wollstonecraft articulates it, "there is no sex in souls" (Jaggar, 1983; Brown, 2006). A clear danger of adopting the Cartesian subject is masculinism (given that disembodied, abstract subjects have tended to allow men to stand in for people in the history of Western thought). Yet Wollstonecraft's Cartesianism underpins not merely masculinism but her feminist misogyny: she is feminist in the way she fights for women to be included in the category of the rights-bearing (abstract disembodied Cartesian) subject, but misogynist in her assessment of women who (almost inevitably) remain gendered subjects. In addition to this argument, I will suggest that Wollstonecraft's understanding of femininity has been influential, particularly in twentieth-century liberal feminist literature including Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Susan Brownmiller's *Femininity* (1984). I will conclude with a few comments on distinguishing between misogynistic and non-misogynistic feminist critiques of femininity.

### **Wollstonecraft's Liberal "Feminist Misogyny"**

Before making this argument, it is important to first provide an overview of Wollstonecraft's politics. Wollstonecraft should be characterized as an Enlightenment thinker and liberal feminist with occasional radical tendencies to nonconformity. This is due to her adoption of the Cartesian subject of the Enlightenment, and because of the liberal politics that follow from that subject. On the former, Wollstonecraft's view that there is no sex in souls is similar to other Enlightenment thinkers, such as Poullain de la Barre. Following Descartes, de la Barre declared in 1673 that the "mind has no sex." The unsexed nature of the mind and the soul means women and men share the same moral nature; as such, they ought to share the same moral status and rights (Brown, 2006). Wollstonecraft's liberal politics are evident in her arguments for women's education, for the ability of women to reason given a proper education, and for the inclusion of women in public life (Brown, 2006; Ferguson, 1999). She can also be characterized as a liberal feminist, at least in part based on her engagement with male political theorists. In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, she takes up the theories of John Locke on children as individuals. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, she critiques the conservatism of Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. And finally in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, her most famous text, she lambastes

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<sup>4</sup> By "women," I mean the women of Wollstonecraft's class. These are the women with whom Wollstonecraft is almost entirely preoccupied.

the proposals of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Émile* for a gender-segregated education in which boys would be taught to reason and girls taught to please. Therefore, in taking up Locke's individualism, in critiquing Burke's conservatism and Rousseau's gender-segregated education, combined with general optimism about progress through education, Wollstonecraft is definitively a product of Enlightenment thinking and liberalism.

Although Wollstonecraft ought to be characterized as a liberal feminist, both her liberalism and her feminism are limited. This is especially the case in matters of education. Her liberalism does not extend to the working class: she argues that all children ought to be educated in the same manner, but only from age five to nine. After that, working class children ought to be "removed to other schools" (1990b: 107). Her feminism does not extend to the working class either: only middle class children (or in her words, "young people of superior abilities, or fortune") should be given the same education. This education would consist of "the dead and living languages, the elements of science, and... the study of history and politics, which would not exclude polite literature" (1990b: 108). Working class children should retain the gender-segregated education Wollstonecraft is so critical of Rousseau for advocating: boys would be educated in the "mechanical trades," and girls would be taught "plain-work, mantua-making [and] millinery" (or in other words, basic sewing as well as more specialized sewing such as gown making and hat making) (1990b: 108).<sup>5</sup> Wollstonecraft's liberalism and feminism also do not extend to women and men of colour: despite over eighty references to slavery in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in almost all of these references she is referring to the "slavery" of white women of her class. Wollstonecraft was well aware of the abolitionist movement, but largely took up its language to apply to women such as herself (Ferguson, 1999). Wollstonecraft's class-based education recommendations, and lack of concern for the equality of men and women of the working class, and her references to "slavery" all point to the limitations of both her liberalism and her feminism.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these limitations, some feminists have gone so far as to suggest that Wollstonecraft is radical in the following way: namely, that she is proposing an embryonic form of socialism in her critiques of class society and private property. For example, Barbara Taylor argues "the scope of her project took her right to the limit of the bourgeois-democratic outlook and occasionally a little way past it" (1993: 6). Susan Ferguson argues that such readings go too far, contending that Wollstonecraft's feminism is firmly class-based and her critiques of property are of aristocratic forms of property (1999). Indeed, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft endorses private property as long as the holdings are not too large. She contends that it is the "barbarous feudal" institution of property to which she objects, as it "enables the elder son to overpower talents and depress virtue" (1990a: 71). She also argues for "large estates [to]

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<sup>5</sup> Here the liberation of middle class women from sewing is at the expense of working class women. Wollstonecraft also argues "against the custom of confining [middle class] girls to their needle" (1990b: 108), and someone clearly needs to do the sewing.

<sup>6</sup> Wollstonecraft is not only unconcerned with the plight of the working class, but at times seems to understand the working class to pose a threat. For example, in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, she warns mothers (of the middle class) to breast feed their own children; otherwise babies will be fed by "ignorant nurses" with "their stomachs overloaded with improper food, which turns acid" (1990c: 28). Therefore, both literally and figuratively, Wollstonecraft understands the acid of the working class to pose a threat to the middle class.

be divided into small farms,” in other words, for the enclosure of common land for private use (1990a: 81). For Ferguson, Wollstonecraft is not a liberal reformer, nor does she have a wider socialist vision. She is, rather, a “social radical,” which Ferguson defines as “a radical politics that disrupts status quo notions of governance and authority.” As such, Wollstonecraft is not overly critical of capitalism but is part of a “liberal-democratic politics of resistance in the late-eighteenth-century Britain” (1999: 433).

Although I agree with Ferguson that Wollstonecraft is not radical in her discussion of class or property, Wollstonecraft does display some degree of radicalism in her understanding of both gender and femininity. Regarding the former, she contends that there are two possible explanations for the condition of women (by “women,” Wollstonecraft means white middle class women):<sup>7</sup> that “either nature has made a great difference between [men and women], or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial.” She goes on to argue the latter, that the position of women is not natural but the result of socialization and “a false system of education” (1990b: 85). She pleads to men to allow for conditions in which women’s “faculties have room to unfold, and their virtues to gain strength, and then determine where the whole sex must stand in the intellectual scale” (1990b: 91). In doing so, she offers a nascent theory of gender-role socialization: women’s intelligence and capabilities will only be discovered with radical changes to society. Wollstonecraft’s radicalism can also be situated in her more specific critique of femininity. She is particularly concerned with three predominant forms of femininity: the mother, the “coquette” and the “lady.” However, only in the latter two forms does she exhibit her radicalism. She does understand the mother to be socially constructed<sup>8</sup> and wants to rethink this form of femininity. She argues for what I would describe as “rational mothering femininity”: women ought to be educated, less so they may enter professions,<sup>9</sup> but more so they will be better (that is, more rational) mothers. For Wollstonecraft, “motherhood informed by reason is and must be the essence of emancipation” (Ferguson, 1999: 445). Indeed, the only form of femininity of which she seems to approve is this rational mothering femininity.

Like the mother, Wollstonecraft understands the coquette and the lady to be socially constructed.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the mother, Wollstonecraft does not want to rethink but completely *eradicate* these forms of femininity. She famously responds, for example, to Rousseau’s argument that women are natural coquettes (and whose education must be constructed with the purpose of refining this tendency) with ridicule. She contends that his argument is “so unphilosophical, that such a sagacious observer as Rousseau would

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<sup>7</sup> References to women and femininity henceforth in this discussion of Wollstonecraft shall be to white middle class women and the forms of femininity they embody.

<sup>8</sup> Although Wollstonecraft argues “the suckling of a child... excites the warmest glow of tenderness,” she is clear that this “maternal tenderness arises quite as much from habit as instinct” (1990c: 28). Also, while she views parenting as a “natural impulse” and “natural parental affection” as the “first source of civilization” (1990a: 69, 70), she also understands that giving *women* the primary responsibility for childrearing is not natural but social.

<sup>9</sup> As Ferguson notes, Wollstonecraft’s understanding of “women who work outside the home are likely to be single or at least childless, and of ‘exceptional talent’” (1999: 444).

<sup>10</sup> Although she never defines the difference between the two forms of femininity, the lady seems to be a somewhat less flirtatious and more refined version of the coquette.

not have adopted it, if he has not been accustomed to make reason give way to his desire for singularity, and truth to a favourite paradox.” In short, his argument represents nothing short of “absurdity” (1990b: 93). She questions whether a man would ever “arise with sufficient strength of mind to puff away the fumes which pride and sensuality have thus spread over [his] subject” (1978: 108). Although conventional histories of feminist theory have long celebrated Wollstonecraft’s harsh critiques of Rousseau, what has often been overlooked is that Wollstonecraft has an even harsher critique of these forms of femininity and the women embodying them. Her characterization of both is implicitly, and at times explicitly, misogynistic. For Susan Gubar, Wollstonecraft’s critique of Rousseau’s misogyny<sup>11</sup> can be explained with the adage “it takes one to know one” (1994: 462).

Wollstonecraft’s misogyny is particularly evident in her treatment of the coquette and the lady. They are “weak and wretched,” “artificial” and “almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures” (1990b: 85; 1990c: 30; 1990b: 91). Wollstonecraft also ridicules their faces:

A made-up face may strike visitors, but will certainly disgust domestic friends. And one obvious interference is drawn, truth is not expected to govern the inhabitant of so artificial a form. The false life with which rouge animates the eyes, is not of the most delicate kind; nor does a women’s dressing herself in a way to attract languishing glances, give us the most advantageous opinion of the purity of her mind (1990c: 32).

The woman who wears makeup, therefore, is not only weak, artificial and irrational but also disgusting, untruthful, seeking attention from men and possibly unchaste. The woman who follows fashion (as the quote cited in the epigraph to this paper suggests) is

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<sup>11</sup> Two of Rousseau’s books in particular have given the impression of misogyny. First, in the 1760 fictional *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, he has the heroine recognize her subordinate position and state: “I am a wife and mother; I know my place and I keep to it” (Rousseau cited in Seidman Trouille, 1997: 17). This book became the greatest bestseller of eighteenth-century France. Second, as already discussed, in the 1762 treatise on education, *Émile*, he advocates for a sex-differentiated education through the figures of Émile and Sophie. He contends that Émile and Sophie’s education is different but complementary; when they marry, they will properly fill the “physical and moral order” (1979: 357). It did not take feminists long to comment after *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Émile* were published. Although Wollstonecraft ranks as the most famous of Rousseau’s contemporary feminist critics, there were several others.

Although many feminists (including Gubar herself) read Rousseau as a misogynist, his reputation as such is controversial, in both Wollstonecraft’s time and today. In Wollstonecraft’s time, there were even some who found feminist potential in his work. Mary Seidman Trouille argues that in an age characterized by “rigid social decorum, loveless marriages of convenience, sterile family lives, and widespread adultery,” these feminists saw Rousseau as the champion of a new moral order in which women could play a central role (1997: 54-55, 4). Today, feminists continue to disagree about the implications of his work for women: some feminists regard his writings as blatant examples of misogyny and paternalism; others focus on his historical context and defend him on the grounds that his views are more complicated and ambiguous than the first interpretation suggests; and still others focus on the pro-women aspects of his work. What we are left, as Penny Weiss and Anne Harper point out, is incompatible explanations and descriptions of Rousseau’s gender politics (1990: 91).

The question concerning whether Rousseau is a misogynist remains a matter of considerable debate; however, the question is almost beside the point. Whether or not Rousseau is a misogynist, Wollstonecraft’s harsh critiques of Rousseau’s gender politics might have contributed to a lack of interrogation of certain aspects of her gender politics, namely, the misogynistic aspects.

similarly irrational, foolishly buying clothing no matter how ridiculous the style, simply because she is told to by advertisements (1990c: 32).

Since coquettes and ladies tend to get married, Wollstonecraft puts much of the blame for unhappy marriages and families on women in general and their desire for feminized commodities in particular. She blames women in her statement that “affection in the marriage state can only be founded on respect,” and poses the rhetorical question, “are these weak beings respectable?” Moreover, she claims the coquette and the lady become neglectful mothers (1990a: 70). Wollstonecraft blames women’s desires for feminized commodities in the following statement:

My very soul has often sickened at observing the sly tricks practised by women to gain some foolish thing on which their foolish hearts were set. Not allowed to dispose of money, or call any thing their own, they learn to turn to the market penny; or, should a husband offend, by staying from home, or give rise to some emotions of jealousy—a new gown, or any pretty bawble [sic], smoothes Juno’s angry brow (1990b: 108).

In other words, wives are not only manipulative, jealous and foolish, but can also be placated with a mere “bauble.” As such, Wollstonecraft can be situated in the misogynistic tradition that not only blames women for bad marriages and the plight of children, but most importantly for this discussion, castigates women for their frivolous desires and disparages female consumption.

Female consumption is a problem for Wollstonecraft in that it is the chief pursuit of the coquette and the lady, insofar as they have any pursuits. In Wollstonecraft’s words, to be a lady “is simply to have nothing to do, but listlessly to go they scarcely care where, for they cannot tell what” (1990b: 103). She pleads desperately for “the fine lady [to] become a rational woman,” because “refinement inevitably lessens respect for virtue” (1990a: 78). Yet despite their idle lifestyle and lack of virtue, women “*all* want to be ladies” (emphasis mine, 1990b: 103). Moreover, the lady possesses “few traits... which dignify human nature” and “though she lives many years she is still a child in understanding, and of so little use to society, that her death would scarcely be observed” (1990c: 39). Wollstonecraft’s description of women as lacking virtue, her comparison of ladies to children, and her argument that the very existence of a lady does not matter, once again situates her in the misogynistic tradition of western thought. Yet the lady’s existence did matter, if not to Wollstonecraft than to the expanding capitalist economy of her time, in which female consumption played an increasingly important role.

In the eighteenth century, the centers of commodity production in Europe were undergoing a shift from the household to the market. This shift in production entailed a shift in productive labour, that is, the labour that generated income upon which a family could live. Instead of being undertaken by both men and women in the household, productive labour became the realm of (primarily) men in the public workplace. Women continued to undergo “non-productive” labour in the household, but because that labour did not contribute to the household income, it was devalued (Tong, 1998; Hennessy, 2000). As such, the economic and social position of European women was in decline. In addition, a new consumer culture was emerging in which women were “recruited as the ideal and consummate consumers.” Despite the declining position of women, their consumption played an increasingly important role in managing capitalist overproduction (Hennessy, 2000). Indeed, married women of Wollstonecraft’s class had little to do

*except* consume, as they had servants to do the “nonproductive” labour that was required inside the household (Tong, 1998). Since Wollstonecraft is not critical of capitalism, her critique of women’s frivolity is misogynistic in that she does not find capitalist consumption itself problematic. It is only a problem when it is done by women or involves pretty baubles and other feminized commodities purchased for women. Men consume as well, yet their desires are not constructed as “frivolous” (Coward, 1985).

Wollstonecraft’s misogyny is evident, not only in her treatment of women’s consumption and other behaviour, but her use of language. This is particular evident in her descriptions of femininity and in the titles of her books. On the former, Gubar most concisely summarizes the language Wollstonecraft uses to argue for the eradication of all forms of femininity (except rational mothering femininity):

Repeatedly and disconcertingly, Wollstonecraft associates the feminine with weakness, childishness, deceitfulness, cunning, superficiality, an overvaluation of love, frivolity, dilettantism, irrationality, flattery, servility, prostitution, coquetry, sentimentality, ignorance, indolence, intolerance, slavish conformity, fickle passion, despotism, bigotry, and a “spaniel-like affection” (1994: 456).

On the latter, Wollstonecraft’s word choice in the titles of her two “vindication” books is revealing. The titles are similar, with the important exception that the earlier book is vindicating the rights of men in the *plural* and the later book is vindicating the rights of woman in the *singular*. Her appeals for the rights of men and woman are appeals to men. The woman for whom Wollstonecraft is vindicating rights is *herself*, and possibly a “small number of distinguished women” (1990b: 91).<sup>12</sup> Unusually for a polemical writer, she rarely discusses women as “we,” preferring instead “they”; she writes as if “they” are separate from her, the woman whose rights she is vindicating. As Gubar contends, rarely does Wollstonecraft “present herself as a woman speaking to women” (1999: 457).

For Wollstonecraft, it is impossible to claim the rights of women (in the plural) and speak to women (as a group) because most are failed Cartesian subjects. When the mind is separated from the body, and rationality is associated with the former and femininity with the latter, the women embodying femininity are a lost cause. Wollstonecraft believes such women will not only be hostile to her arguments, but incapable of even understanding them:

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists—I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt (1990b: 86).

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<sup>12</sup> I have defined misogyny as the hatred of women as a group or the hatred of (much of) what is associated with women. Misogyny, therefore, does not necessarily determine one’s attitude towards *particular* women. As such, the implications of Wollstonecraft’s “distinguished women” are similar to those of the proverbial “black friends”: that is, the overall misogyny or racism of the discussion is not softened by referencing particular women or black friends who do not fit the mold.



Wollstonecraft's sentiment might be understandable in that not all women are feminists, and there are always women antagonistic to feminist arguments. Yet her response to this hostility towards feminism is ironically more misogyny: women are hostile to their liberation because they are child-like, overly emotional and weak. Although she states that women "will soon become objects of contempt," they are *already* such objects for Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft's nascent theory of gender-role socialization does not soften her misogyny. Gubar points out that although Wollstonecraft "sets out to liberate society from a hated subject constructed to be subservient... [that] animosity can spill over into antipathy of those human beings most constrained by that construction" (1994: 457). Moreover, Wollstonecraft's misogyny spills over from socially constructed difference to secondary sex characteristics: for example, her contempt of women's "soft phrases" is contempt for the voices of women which tend to project less than those of men. Wollstonecraft's Cartesian separation of the mind from the body renders most women contemptuous creatures whose irrationality is linked to their disgusting, feminine bodies.

To conclude this discussion of *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in these texts Wollstonecraft discusses the forms of femininity embodied by white women of her class, and sets up a tension between feminism and femininity. There is no form of femininity of which she approves (with the exception of rational mothering femininity, which is closer to her Cartesian ideal). Her disapproval of femininity, combined with her understanding of femininity as socially constructed, leads her to disparage all or most of her contemporary women. In other words, because femininity is neither natural nor good, Wollstonecraft treats women who produce femininity and consume the feminized commodities required in its production as objects of scorn. Yet despite her disparagement, she is not critical of consumption or capitalism more generally, only consumption undergone by women and commodities associated with women. Wollstonecraft's critiques of women's consumption, in addition to her critiques of women's (non-consumptive) behaviour and the language she uses to describe femininity, are all misogynistic. Wollstonecraft remains a feminist—albeit a misogynistic one—and underpinning this tension is her Cartesianism. Her belief in the Cartesian subject allows her to make (feminist) arguments for the rights of women, yet this belief is also her (misogynistic) undoing. If the rights of women (like the rights of men) are premised on the abstract, disembodied subject, then the subject abstracted from its body need not have a body at all (Brown, 2006; Jaggar, 1983). The inability to transcend femininity becomes an inability to transcend the body and a failure to achieve the Cartesian ideal. Overall, Wollstonecraft's treatment of femininity suggests that deep within the tradition of Western feminism is a profoundly misogynistic strand.

### **Wollstonecraft's Legacy of "Feminist Misogyny"**

The legacy of Wollstonecraft has haunted and continues to haunt the femininity question in Western feminism. This section considers two classic liberal feminist interventions on this topic. Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* and Brownmiller's *Femininity* share several similarities with Wollstonecraft. First, Friedan and Brownmiller write about privileged women of their own class. Friedan not only equates femininity with white, middle-class, university educated, married housewives, but seems entirely

unaware of the existence of other forms of femininity or other types of women (Elshstain, 1993; Reed, 1964; Tong, 1998). Although Brownmiller demonstrates awareness that not all women are white, middle-class and heterosexual, she assumes such women are the norm, and renders women of colour, working class women and queer women the exception. Second, like Wollstonecraft, Friedan and Brownmiller critique feminized commodities. Friedan offers a sustained critique and analysis of feminized commodities, although erroneously assumes high levels of consumption necessitate most women being housewives. Brownmiller discusses feminized commodities everywhere in her book, but they are theorized nowhere. Finally and most importantly, Friedan and Brownmiller share Wollstonecraft's feminist misogyny and employ similar reasoning to support their misogyny.

The shared reasoning of Wollstonecraft, Friedan and Brownmiller stems from their shared liberal feminism. As Jean Bethke Elshstain notes, liberal feminists understand "the central defining human characteristic [to be] the presumption of an almost boundless adaptability" to the point that people are assumed to be shaped at will like "Play-Doh" (1993: 240). I have rooted Wollstonecraft's feminist misogyny in her Cartesianism; as feminists further removed from the Enlightenment, Friedan and Brownmiller do not take up the language of the Cartesian subject but maintain its assumptions. Friedan and Brownmiller do not use the disparaging language to denigrate femininity and the women who adopt its norms in the manner of Wollstonecraft. However, their basis thesis is the same: femininity is a problem to be overcome, there is no form of femininity worth embracing, and consuming feminized commodities is a problem (although consumption and capitalism more generally are not). Like Wollstonecraft, their misogyny is not a hatred of women as such, but a hatred of much of what is associated with women.

To begin with Friedan's 1963 book, she understands femininity to be something false, an artificial overlay, or in her words, a *mystique*. She defines the "feminine mystique" as the view that "the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their femininity" (1983: 43). The mystique is infantilizing and keeps women in a passive, childlike state; indeed, it is not uncommon to see mothers "as infantile as their children" (1983: 133, 76, 295). Feminine women make bad mothers and produce maladjusted children. In a homophobic and misogynistic vein, Friedan blames "parasitic" mothering on "ominous" developments such as the "homosexuality that is spreading like a murky smog over the American scene"<sup>13</sup> and promiscuous young women (1983: 276). In equating femininity with passivity, childishness, and bad mothering, Friedan's understanding is very Wollstonecraftian. Friedan also makes arguments similar to Wollstonecraft's contention that feminine women are of little use to society and their very existence does not matter. Friedan contends femininity is a "lower level of living" that is antithetical to self actualization and human growth. Moreover, femininity has little value, "no purpose" and as such is "a kind of suicide" (1983: 314, 336).

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<sup>13</sup> Friedan approvingly cites Freud her argument that mothers are to "blame" for their son's homosexuality (1983: 275). She contends "the boy smothered by such parasitical mother-love is kept from growing up, not only sexually, but in all ways. Homosexuals often lack the maturity to finish school and make sustained professional commitments.... The shallow unreality, immaturity, promiscuity, lack of lasting human satisfaction that characterize the homosexual's sex life usually characterize all his life and interests" (1983: 276).

Friedan places much of the blame for the feminine mystique on the education of women and girls, which is also reminiscent of Wollstonecraft. Friedan complains that at elite American universities (such as Vassar) women are groomed for little more than getting married. As such, “the very aim” of women’s education at universities is not intellectual growth, but “sexual adjustment” (1983: 172). Their education is not intended to develop critical thinking skills or for “serious use” in professional occupations but for “dilettantism or passive appreciation” (1983: 366). This is similar to Wollstonecraft’s complaint that rather than instilling in women the ability to reason, they were educated in the art of pleasing through the pursuit of “accomplishments” (such as learning to play the piano or speak foreign languages). Friedan sets up an oppositional relationship between femininity and education geared to intellectual growth: femininity results from the lack of such an education, and education destroys femininity (1983: 172, 308). Friedan argues that her liberal feminist predecessors, including Wollstonecraft herself and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were able to make their feminist arguments *only* because they were allowed an education geared to intellectual growth. Friedan credits her predecessors for pressing for women’s access to higher education and political participation, as well as particular forms of discrimination in law. Yet despite such gains, the feminine mystique came to “fasten itself on a whole nation in a few short years” (1983: 68). Given how quickly it took hold in the post-war era, the feminine mystique may be false, but it is also incredibly powerful.

Friedan expands beyond a Wollstonecraftian analysis in placing some of the blame for the strength of the feminine mystique on corporate interests. She establishes connections between femininity, the consumption it necessitates and the changing economic circumstances of her time. She contends that American women are “a target and a victim of the sexual sell” and equates consumption with victimization (1983: 205). Moreover,

in all the talk of femininity and woman’s role, one forgets that the real business of America is business. But the perpetuation of housewifery, the growth of the feminine mystique, makes sense (and dollars) when one realizes that women are the chief customers of American business. Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives (1983: 206-207).

Friedan assumes a direct relationship between the women’s role as housewives and high levels of consumption in the post-war era. She argues that businessmen on Madison Avenue or Wall Street (using “men” here intentionally) have a strategic interest in keeping women in the home; indeed, if all women “get to be scientists and such, they won’t have time to shop” (1983: 207). She contends that although there was no “economic conspiracy directed against women,” this relationship between number of housewives and levels of consumption is an economic necessity: a decline in the number of housewives would mean a decline in national consumption (1983: 207-208).

Despite identifying important connections between the feminine mystique and corporate interests, there remain several problems with Friedan’s analysis. First, she underestimates the ability of marketers to adjust to the changing roles of women. The ascendance of “commodity feminism” today (that is, the reduction of feminism to a commodity that can be bought and sold on the capitalist market) demonstrates that there

is not necessarily a relationship between high numbers of housewives and high levels of consumption (Dowsett, 2010). Second, her solution to the problem of femininity focuses entirely on education; as such, she ultimately ignores the corporate interests she so meticulously documents. Friedan glorifies education as the one and only path that will save women from the feminine mystique (Elshtain, 1993). Thus, although her analysis strays beyond Wollstonecraft, her solution is nearly identical. Like Wollstonecraft, Friedan cannot come to any other conclusion because she does not understand consumption and capitalism as such to be a problem; it is the consumption of feminized commodities that are required in the production of femininity that are the problem. Third and most importantly, Friedan's framework is misogynistic. On certain occasions Friedan strays into the more explicit misogyny of Wollstonecraft, such as when she blames foolish women for the plight of their children. However, generally she does not treat the feminine mystique as something for which women can be blamed; she treats it as something that confuses and clouds the judgment of improperly educated women. Yet her framework remains Wollstonecraftian feminist misogyny: femininity is the problem and it must be overcome.

Wollstonecraftian understandings of femininity continued into the 1980s. In *Femininity*, Brownmiller employs liberal feminist arguments for the liberation of women, such as ambition being the opposite of femininity, and the usual liberal feminist arguments for the inclusion of women in public life and the nurturing of women's ability to reason (1984). She also employs radical feminist arguments for women's nonconformity. Brownmiller's definition of "women," however, is limited in that it does not include transgendered women,<sup>14</sup> and her arguments for gender nonconformity only extend to biological woman who continue to identify as women. Also in a similar manner to Wollstonecraft, Brownmiller understands femininity to be artificial and irrational. The stated purpose of her book is "not to propose a new definition of femininity" but rather to "explore its origins and the reasons for its perseverance, in the effort to illuminate the restrictions on free choice" (1984: 235). Yet there is little actual discussion of the "origin question": neither the origin of women's subordination, nor the origin of femininity. She does argue throughout, however, that it is impossible to separate women's subordination and femininity as the two are intrinsically interconnected. Femininity is a problem for Brownmiller not only because it restricts "free choice": at its best it is uncomfortable or annoying and at its worst it is physically painful (1984).

Brownmiller organizes her book around chapters that each considers a particular aspect of femininity, including body, hair, clothes, voice, skin, movement and emotion. Femininity is understood to be firmly embodied—it concerns the female body and how it looks, sounds and is adorned and manipulated—and how this embodiment discourages reason. Her book has a confessional tone. For example, in her chapter entitled "Hair," she admits to dying her hair to cover her premature graying, despite the fact that she knows perfectly well it is a "shameful concession to all the wrong values" (1984: 57). In the "Clothes" chapter, she confesses that "on bad days" she misses wearing skirts and criticizes her feminist friends who have gone back to wearing them as indulgent and frivolous (1984: 80-81). In the "Skin" chapter, she is embarrassed to reveal that she was

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<sup>14</sup> Brownmiller is quite transphobic; for example, she accuses a transwoman tennis player of undergoing sex-reassignment surgery just so she can play against other women and win (1984: 196).

so concerned she was growing hair on her face that she went to an electrologist; she was relieved to find out that what she feared was stubble was in fact a mole (1984: 129). In the “Movement” chapter, she admits to practicing how to raise her eyebrow for hours in front of a mirror (1984: 171). *Femininity* contains countless examples of Brownmiller confessing how she has not overcome femininity to the degree to which she ought.

Brownmiller aligns herself with Wollstonecraft in her “failures” to overcome femininity. She reports that the eighteenth-century writer and politician Horace Walpole once described Wollstonecraft as a “hyena in petticoats” which had the effect of “slandering her femininity and the movement for women’s rights in one wicked phrase” (1984: 31). Rather than critique Walpole’s misogyny, she assumes feminine apparel is incompatible with feminist politics. She suggests that “part of the reason many people find old photographs of parading ‘suffragettes’ so funny is that their elaborate dresses seem at odds with marching in unison down the street” (1984: 101). Just as Wollstonecraft ought to have given up her petticoats and the suffragettes ought to have given up their elaborate dresses, Brownmiller ought to give up her hair dye. She does sympathize with her predecessors in suggesting that although femininity is fundamentally incompatible with feminist politics, it continues to be hard to overcome.

Brownmiller does not embrace the more explicit misogyny of Wollstonecraft (and on certain occasions Friedan). Her misogyny is always implicit. Indeed, she is critical of the explicit misogyny of those who use “the expensively dressed woman as the hated symbol of selfish disregard for the ills of the world” (1984: 100). This is clearly a strategy used by Wollstonecraft in her critique of the lady (although Brownmiller is referring specifically to the new left of the 1960s and the “religious moralists” before them). Yet because the only relationship Brownmiller establishes is between the subordination of women and femininity, to adhere to the norms of femininity is to be immature, to be a bad feminist, and most importantly, to participate in one’s own subjection. Brownmiller’s misogyny is making femininity a problem and blaming women as the source of that problem. The solution to this “problem” is wearing pants and not wearing makeup (in other words, embracing a more masculine aesthetic). Her solution is simple because her analysis of femininity is simple: she does not consider the relationship between adhering to the norms of femininity and women’s economic security, nor does she establish any relationship between femininity and commodity production. The undercurrent of misogyny in twentieth century liberal feminist interventions on the femininity question can be summarized with the question Elshtain uses to characterize liberal feminism as a whole: “why can’t a woman be more like a man?” (1993: 228).

## **Conclusion**

I have contended that misogyny is a danger in critiques of femininity; however, I added the caveat that such critiques can also serve an important feminist function. For example, much of the behaviour, roles, aesthetics and commodities associated with femininity are heteronormative. As such, there must be space to critique these practices without being charged with misogyny. I have largely adopted Allyson Mitchell’s view of misogyny with this caveat. In fairness to Mitchell, however, by suggesting that it is a misogynistic act to reject femininity because of the way it has been constructed, she is not defining misogyny so much as offering a view about what constitutes a misogynistic

act.<sup>15</sup> Key to this distinction—between feminist critiques of femininity that are misogynistic and those that are not—is the degree to which misogynistic understandings of femininity are uncritically adopted by the feminist in question, as well as the degree to which femininity is seen to be the sole cause of women’s oppression. Wollstonecraft contains a high degree of the former and Brownmiller the latter. Brownmiller’s 1980s confessions concerning how she has not overcome femininity to the degree to which she ought can be contrasted with the 1990s liberal feminist Naomi Wolf. In *The Beauty Myth*, she suggests that “the questions to ask are not about women’s faces and bodies but about the power relations of the situation” (1997: 280).

This paper has focused on the femininity question in key texts of Western liberal feminism. I have situated Wollstonecraft as positing an early and influential articulation of this question. In understanding femininity as a problem to be overcome, Wollstonecraft sets up a tension between feminism and femininity that is highly misogynistic. Her “feminist misogyny” is evident in her critiques of women’s consumptive and non-consumptive behaviour, as well as the language she uses to describe femininity. Underpinning her feminist misogyny is a belief in the abstract and disembodied Cartesian subject. This belief allows Wollstonecraft to make liberal feminist arguments for the rights of women in the abstract, while at the same time, belittle women who fail to transcend their disgusting feminine bodies and achieve the Cartesian ideal. I have also examined how Wollstonecraft’s treatment of femininity has influenced twentieth-century liberal feminists Friedan and Brownmiller. Femininity is a problem for all three feminists: it is a problem because it interferes with the development of women’s rationality (Wollstonecraft), it is a problem because it is opposed to intellectual and human growth (Friedan), and it is a problem because weak-willed women participate in their own subjection (Brownmiller). Feminized commodities are also a problem for all three feminists, although none are critical of commodities or capitalism more generally. The feminist misogyny of Wollstonecraft suggests that her framing in the history of political thought and feminist thought should be reconsidered.

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<sup>15</sup> Mitchell offers this view in the context of her reaction to people calling her “Mom.” She is normally called Mom after she is “too bossy” or has prepared a meal. Although Mitchell is not a mother, she contends she is called “Mom” because she wears dresses (and other clothing associated with femininity) and is a large woman. Yet she resents being called Mom *not* because she is not actually a mother, but for two reasons: first, because of meanings attached to “mother” in our society; and second, because the tone in which it is said suggests she is acting like a “shrew” (Slone and Mitchell, 2002). Mitchell contends that her resentment suggests she needs to examine her own “internalized misogyny.” Although she is a self-identified fat femme and fat activist, Mitchell resents being called “Mom” because she has internalized the idea that mothers are fat, un-sexy shrews. Similarly, Gubar has suggested that Wollstonecraft also suffers from internalized misogyny. For example, after discussing Wollstonecraft’s two suicide attempts and disastrous love affairs, Gubar questions: “Did anyone better understand slavish passions, the overvaluation of love, fickle irrationality, weak dependency, the sense of personal irrelevance, and anxiety about personal attractiveness than Wollstonecraft herself?” (1994: 460).

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