



This is a repository copy of *Women write the rights of woman: The sexual politics of the personal pronoun in the 1790s.*

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/81948/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Hodson, J. (2007) Women write the rights of woman: The sexual politics of the personal pronoun in the 1790s. *Language and Literature*, 16 (3). 281 - 304. ISSN 0963-9470

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947007079113>

---

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

# **Women Write the Rights of Woman:**

## **The Sexual Politics of the Personal Pronoun in the 1790s:**

**Author:** Dr Jane Hodson

**Affiliation:** School of English, University of Sheffield

**Abstract:** This article investigates patterns of personal pronoun usage in four texts written by women about women's rights during the 1790s: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Hays' *An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain* (1798), Mary Robinson's *Letter to the Women of England* (1799) and Mary Anne Radcliffe's *The Female Advocate* (1799). I begin by showing that at the time these texts were written there was a widespread assumption that both writers and readers of political pamphlets were, by default, male. As such, I argue, writing to women as a woman was distinctly problematic, not least because these default assumptions meant that even apparently gender-neutral pronouns such as I, we and you were in fact covertly gendered. I use the textual analysis programme Wordsmith to identify the personal pronouns in my four texts, and discuss my results both quantitatively and qualitatively. I find that while one of my texts does little to disturb gender expectations through its deployment of personal pronouns, the

other three all use personal pronouns that disrupt eighteenth century expectations about default male authorship and readership.

**Keywords:** gender; identity; personal pronouns; Hays, Mary; Radcliffe, Mary Anne; Robinson, Mary; Wollstonecraft, Mary

## 1. Introduction

Britain in the 1790s saw the publication of a number of pamphlets championing the rights of women. The main catalyst for this flurry of proto-feminist activity was the French Revolution, which provoked a wide-ranging debate in Britain about ‘the rights of man’. Participants in the debate uniformly understood ‘man’ in this context to be specifically male rather than generically human, and the rights of woman generally went unconsidered.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, some writers did begin to question where women stood in the equation. Most notably, Mary Wollstonecraft contributed to the French Revolution debate with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), which was a direct response to Edmund Burke’s inflammatory *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Like other contributors to the debate, Wollstonecraft assumed that the ‘rights of man’ referred to male rights only, although she also addressed the role of women at some points. Two years later she addressed the question of women much more fully and directly in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and this was followed by several similar pamphlets by women writers, including Mary Hays’ *An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain* (1798), Mary Robinson’s *Letter to the Women of England* (1799) and Mary Anne Radcliffe’s *The Female Advocate* (1799).

A central aim for all of these writers was to extend the political discussion of innate ‘rights’ so that it included women. Wollstonecraft, for example, argues explicitly: ‘[i]f the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of woman, by a parity of reason, will not shrink from the same test’ (1792: viii) while Robinson asks: ‘is not woman a human being, gifted with all the feelings that inhabit the bosom of man?’ (1799: 8). These women were, however, writing at a time when it was truly revolutionary to suggest that women deserved equal political consideration with men, and they faced considerable difficulties in presenting their arguments effectively. At the end of her pamphlet, Hays draws the reader’s attention to one of these difficulties, articulating considerable anxiety about her use of pronouns:

Writing in the first person then, is a practice condemned by the canons of criticism, and the use of it forbidden, where it can be at all avoided. To confound the persons is likewise a deadly sin, in the eyes of orthodox critics – Yet against both these rules has the writer of this little sketch, transgressed, in no common degree.

In short, it must be confessed, that, ‘the monosyllable’ alleged to be ‘dear to authors’ – that the proscribed little personage – I – unfortunately occurs, remarkably often, in the foregoing pages. And that WE – and all its lawful accompaniments, which were introduced sometimes, from a desire to take off from the dictatorial tone of composition; and sometimes, as expressive of the sense of the whole sex, as well as that of the author – are fully as liable to the charge of presumption, as even that, for which they were only meant as humble substitutes. (1798: 298, Hays’ italics)

Hays’ vocabulary is suggestive of Eve and the Biblical Fall: she has ‘transgressed’ in using the first person singular and plural pronouns, because these are ‘forbidden’, ‘a deadly sin’ and ‘liable to the charge of presumption’. She explicitly adds a few sentences later that accusations of presumption are particularly likely ‘when the little urchin is of the feminine gender’ (1798: 299).

In this article I argue that Hays is here wrestling with the fact that during the political debates of the 1790s, even apparently gender-neutral pronouns such as I, you, and we carried unspoken assumptions of default masculinity. This presented a challenge to all of the four writers I discuss. I start by exploring the historical context of political writing in the 1790s, and relate it to recent discussions about texts, pronouns and gender. I then outline the background of each text and author. I use the computer textual analysis programme Wordsmith to identify all instances of first and second person pronouns in these texts, and discuss the results both quantitatively and qualitatively. In conclusion I argue that the patterns of personal pronoun usage in at least three of these texts attempt to reformulate the category of ‘human being’ in subtle but significant ways.

Some previous work has been undertaken on Wollstonecraft’s use of personal pronouns. Smith (1992), for example, explores the ways in which Wollstonecraft addresses her audience, and concludes that Wollstonecraft’s text ‘implies both male and female readers’ although Wollstonecraft allots them different roles (568). Mulholland (1995) examines the varying ways in which Wollstonecraft uses authorial I, and finds that she mixes tentativeness with strong assertiveness, concluding that this ‘could leave her readers with an extremely engaged response’ (185). Both of these articles are very useful, but both focus only on a single aspect of Wollstonecraft’s interpersonal rhetoric. MacDonald (2001) addresses Wollstonecraft’s use of both first person singular and first person plural pronouns, but his analysis is methodologically flawed on many levels.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, none of these articles systematically compare Wollstonecraft to any other woman writing on women’s rights (although Mulholland and MacDonald do draw some

comparisons between Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay). I believe that analysing *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in isolation distorts our understanding of Wollstonecraft and her text. By comparing Wollstonecraft to other writers on women's rights from the same decade, I hope to achieve a clearer understanding of the context within which she was writing and some of the stylistic choices she made, as well as the stylistic choices made by other women writing on women's rights during the 1790s.

## 2. Writers and Readers

In their groundbreaking book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984) Gilbert and Gubar asked: 'What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are, as we have seen, both overtly and covertly patriarchal?' (47-48). Gilbert and Gubar were referring primarily to nineteenth century novels, but their question is equally relevant to political pamphlets of the 1790s. The debate generated by the French Revolution debate opened the space within which the rights of woman could be discussed, but this space was problematic for women writers, not least because of the widespread assumption that pamphlet writing was a male activity. While much recent work in Romantic studies has focused on the extent to which women writers could and did contribute to the public political debates of the period, it remains true that the vast majority of pamphlet-writers were male.<sup>3</sup> When a woman published a pamphlet anonymously, reviewers often assumed that the writer was male. In Wollstonecraft's case, for example, she originally published *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* anonymously. The *Critical Review* therefore automatically uses the male pronoun throughout its review. The reviewer does note the mistake in a footnote added after the review was completed, but comments impatiently that: 'if she assumes

the disguise of a man, she must not be surprised that she is not treated with the civility and respect that she would have received in her own person' (Critical Review 70, 1790: 694). What is particularly interesting here is that the accusation that she assumed 'the disguise of a man' is not the result of any overt deception on Wollstonecraft's part. Rather it arises because the reviewer apparently feels it to be so natural to assume that a writer of political pamphlets is male, that to publish anonymously is to publish as a man. The *Gentleman's Magazine* goes a step further. Reviewing the second edition, and noting that it has now been attributed to a 'Mrs. Wolstonecraft' [sic], the reviewer finds the concept of a female pamphleteer so anomalous that he questions whether it was written by 'a real and not a fictitious lady' (*Gentleman's Magazine* 61, 1791: 154).

The same assumption of default masculinity also often operated with regard to pamphlet readers. The eighteenth century had witnessed a rapid expansion in female reading audiences, but women readers tended to be associated with novels and magazines.<sup>4</sup> 'Difficult' subjects such as philosophy and politics were generally deemed 'unfeminine' and female education did little to prepare women to engage with these kinds of texts.<sup>5</sup> Although widely-disseminated texts such as Burke's *Reflections* (1790) and Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791) did attract new audiences, including some women, most pamphleteers assumed that their readers were male. In *Reflections*, for example, Burke compares the way in which government is transmitted to the way in which property is transmitted: 'we receive, we hold, we transmit, our government and our privileges, in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives' (1790: 48). This comparison presupposes a male reader: under English law in the 1790s, female rights to receive, enjoy and transmit property were extremely limited. As

can also be evidenced at numerous other points in the text, the implied reader of *Reflections* is male. The term ‘implied reader’ originates with Iser (1974) as a way of describing the ideal reader that a text constructs. Iser did not explicitly address the issue of gender but a number of others, including Fetterley (1978), Montgomery et al (1992: 223-231) and Mills (1995: 66-79) have done so. Fetterley, for example, argues that: ‘[t]o read the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature is perforce to identify as male’ (1978: xii). By the same token, reading political pamphlets in the 1790s also required that the reader identify as male.

For the purposes of this article, I am specifically interested in how Wollstonecraft, Hays, Robinson and Radcliffe use first and second person pronouns when writing in a cultural context which assumes both writer and reader to be male. The central role that personal pronouns play in constructing and expressing social identities and relationships has been well recognised, particularly within fields such as discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis and feminist language studies.<sup>6</sup> As Benveniste (1971) discusses, these pronouns function rather differently from nominal signs:

What then is the reality to which I or you refers? It is solely a ‘reality of discourse,’ and this is a very strange thing. I cannot be defined except in terms of ‘locution,’ not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. I signifies “the person who is uttering the present instance of discourse containing I.” (1971: 218)

In face-to-face conversations, the ‘reality of discourse’ that is constructed by these pronouns will (normally) be clear in the context of the utterance, and the gender of the referents will (normally) be apparent. In written texts, however, the writer may be separated from the reader by both time and space. Wales (1996) analyses this situation:



... once objects or third parties are out of sight, their existence is presupposed not physically but mentally, in the mental lexicons or encyclopedic knowledge of the conversational participants, to be invoked and 'pointed to' in the universe of discourse held between them. This is even more obvious in the 'displaced' medium of writing.

There are thus three main relevant 'worlds' to consider: the real world, its mental representation, and its re-creation in the universe of discourse; and pronouns can be economically used to refer to all three. Halliday and Hasan themselves therefore usefully distinguish between 'specific' exophoric reference, the immediate situational, and 'generalised' or homophoric, referring to the larger cultural context or presupposed knowledge. (1996: 44)

In the case of eighteenth-century pamphlet writing, the 'larger cultural context' was one of default masculinity. Hence, when an anonymous writer used the pronoun I, reviewers, relying upon their presupposed knowledge of the world, tended to assume that the 'real world' author must be male (and were disconcerted to find that she was not). In the same way, when Burke wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he presupposed a male reader, accustomed to possessing the same property rights as him.

Underlying the whole of the French Revolution pamphlet debate, then, is the assumption that both the participants in, and the subjects of, it are male. This means that when women attempt to articulate their own political concerns they face distinct difficulties in formulating a coherent rhetorical position. While a male contributor to the debate about the rights of man can straightforwardly write as a man to other men on behalf of male interests, a female writer attempting to broaden the issue out to include the rights of woman can make no such easy assumptions. Who is she writing to, as, or on behalf of? Is she writing to women to encourage them to throw off their shackles, or is she appealing to men to grant women more freedom? Is she writing as a woman who has personally experienced the inequalities she describes, or as an impartial spectator

(by default a male role) in order to describe objectively the relationship between the sexes as it currently exists? Is she writing on behalf of women, in order to improve their position in society, or is her argument that improving women's position will work to the benefit of men? Each of these decisions, as I shall show, has ramifications in terms of the writer's deployment of personal pronouns, which in turn has important implications for the 'reality of discourse' that she constructs within her text.

### **3. Texts and Authors**

In this section I will briefly explore the background and content of each of the four texts, focusing in particular on the way in which the private life of the writer interacted with the public life of her text. Mary Wollstonecraft, as has already been noted, initiated this new sub-genre of political pamphlet with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. In it, she combines aspects of a political pamphlet with aspects of an educational treatise; a keystone of her argument being that if women were better educated they would be much better qualified for their roles as wives and mothers. As such, she is clearly influenced by earlier writers, most notably Catharine Macaulay, who in *Letters on Education* (1790) argues that there are no innate intellectual differences between the sexes, and that men and women should therefore receive the same education. Wollstonecraft goes further than Macaulay and makes her argument more explicitly political, demanding that society should treat women as rational beings, and berating both men and women for the current status of women. On publication Wollstonecraft's text was positively received in radical circles, but, unsurprisingly, provoked either patronising humour or outright hostility in more conservative circles.<sup>7</sup> This negative response became much more pronounced after the publication of

Godwin's tender but revealing *Memoirs* (1798), in which he recounts Wollstonecraft's affair with Gilbert Imlay, her subsequent suicide attempts, and her pre-marital affair with himself. These revelations were seized upon by publications such as the anti-Jacobin *British Critic*, whose reviewer was quick to link Wollstonecraft's political views to her immoral life, finding that: '[i]n the narrative before us, we have an opportunity of contemplating the effects of such theories on their own practice.' (*British Critic* 11, 1798: 228)

Despite such attacks, Wollstonecraft's influence can clearly be seen on the pamphlet writers who come after her, and each of the writers I discuss here specifically positions their own text in relation to hers. Of the three other writers I focus on in this article, Mary Hays' acknowledgement of Wollstonecraft is the most begrudging. This is on the surface surprising given that Hays was a personal friend of both Wollstonecraft and her husband William Godwin, and that she published a moving tribute to Wollstonecraft after her death in 1797. In the 'Advertisement' to her 1798 *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain*, however, Hays represents Wollstonecraft more as a competitor than an inspiration, stating that she herself was already far advanced in writing her own treatise when she was sent a copy of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Hays justifies her delayed decision to publish anyway by covertly criticising Wollstonecraft for being too extreme, and stating that her own pamphlet will recommend a much more palatable 'gradual reformation' of society (1798: 'Advertisement'). Hays' surprisingly ambivalent attitude to Wollstonecraft in the 'Advertisement' can perhaps be explained by the fact that the 'Advertisement' as a whole is a work of fiction. Hays published her *Appeal* anonymously (although she does

specify that she is a woman), and in so doing she invents an alternative persona for herself. The writer who appears in the ‘Advertisement’ resides in ‘some obscure corner of the kingdom’, does not wish any of her friends to know of her writing activities, and despairs of successfully publishing her work as she is not acquainted with any publishers (‘those formidable gentlemen’) (1798: ‘Advertisement’). Given that Hays lived in London, that she was an integral part of the publisher Joseph Johnson’s circle of writers and critics, and that her writings had been appearing in print since 1791, it is evident that none of the ‘Advertisement’ can be taken at face value. Instead it might be interpreted as a response to the hostility directed towards Wollstonecraft. Hays may well have felt that own pamphlet would receive a fairer hearing if it were thought to originate from a timid ‘country mouse’, rather a well-known associate of Wollstonecraft. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the timid country mouse with the programme of ‘gradual reformation’ is not in evidence for long in the Appeal. In the first chapter Hays engages energetically with the question of scriptural authority for women’s subjugation, concluding that there is none, and by the fifth chapter she is declaring that, with regard to male superiority, ‘I must be permitted to say, that men upon this subject, are deplorably weak and childish’ (1798: 113). Only at the very end of her pamphlet does the country mouse reappear: the passage quoted earlier in which Hays expresses remorse for her pronouns marks a brief return of the earlier apologetic persona.

Mary Robinson, publishing her Letter to the Women of England a year later, also knew that her public persona might make her pamphlet unpalatable. Robinson was infamous for her early career as an actress and her affairs with a series of public men,

beginning spectacularly with the Prince of Wales. Abandoned by the Prince and paralysed as a result of rheumatism, a miscarriage or a botched abortion (depending on whose version of events one chooses to believe), Robinson turned to writing as a means to support herself and her daughter. By the late 1790s she was a successful poet and novelist, and was acquainted with many of the leading literary figures of the day, including Godwin and Coleridge. It must have been evident, however, that if published under her own name, her pamphlet on women's subordination would provide critics with a golden opportunity to exercise their wit and venom. Instead, Robinson published under the name of 'Anne Frances Randall', thereby crediting her text to a completely unknown and untainted author. Within the text she seeks to demonstrate that women are the intellectual equals of men by providing a genealogy of learned and distinguished women, and she also discusses at length the sexual double standards of society, something of which she had had plenty of first-hand experience, although she does not say so explicitly. She makes clear her debt to Wollstonecraft, describing her as 'an illustrious British female, (whose death has not been sufficiently lamented, but to whose genius posterity will render justice)' (1799: 1-2).

Mary Anne Radcliffe felt able to publish her pamphlet under her own name, perhaps because no pre-existing negative associations attached themselves to her, and perhaps because she felt that her own pamphlet, making few claims for women's equality, would be less of a target to hostile critics. Radcliffe had been born into a considerable inheritance, but clandestinely married a feckless husband who squandered her wealth. She ended up trying to support herself and her children by finding employment in London, where she quickly became aware of the limited opportunities available to

women such as herself. This is the central topic of *The Female Advocate* (1799). Radcliffe describes the scarcity of options for a well-born female in need of money, and chiefly finds male milliners, stay-makers and haberdashers responsible, on the basis that they have usurped properly feminine occupations. In many ways, Radcliffe's text is much less revolutionary than the other three texts discussed here. Rather than demanding a wholesale reform of education, manners, and society, the main plank of Radcliffe's reforming programme is that male milliners, stay-makers and haberdashers should gracefully retire from their fields of business. However, her analysis of the ways in which financial hardship forces women into the prostitution for which society then condemns them is remarkably insightful and, in its own way, deeply radical. Nevertheless, she is careful to specify that her goals are not as ambitious of those of Wollstonecraft, and she repeatedly describes herself as seeking only the right of 'protection' for women (1799: x). She also presents herself as having been forced into writing by the oppression she describes, declaring that: 'All women possess not the Amazonian spirit of a Wolstonecraft [sic]. But, indeed, unremitting oppression is sometimes a sufficient apology for their throwing off the gentle garb of a female, and assuming some more masculine appearance' (1799: xi). This metaphor of 'masculine appearance' brings us back to the central argument of this article. Radcliffe evidently expects her readers to feel, like she does, that writing a political pamphlet as a woman is an act of literary cross-dressing that requires explanation and apology.

#### **4. Analysis**

In order to get a broad overview of each writer's pattern of pronoun usage, I used the textual analysis programme Wordsmith to identify all instances of each pronoun.<sup>8</sup> In

doing so I excluded all quotations and direct speech. The personal pronouns in these cases do not construct the relationship between reader and writer in the same way that pronouns in the main body of the text do, although they can be very revealing, and I shall have occasion to refer to them during my discussion. However, to include them in with the author's own use of personal pronouns is to distort the picture by counting two very different things together. On the same basis I also excluded any other textual material which was not part of the main pamphlet: hence, for example, I excluded Wollstonecraft's prefatory letter to Talleyrand-Périgord, and Radcliffe's concluding 'Story of Fidelia'. This left 78,019 words for Wollstonecraft, 51,569 for Hays, 10,749 for Robinson and 20,364 for Radcliffe. I have provided the statistics for the pronouns in two ways in the tables: first, the average (mean) number of pronouns per one thousand words in bold, and underneath the original total figure in brackets.<sup>9</sup> These figures are, however, only the starting point for my discussion. I have also used Wordsmith's concordancing tool to enable me to examine each instance in context, and I have read each text in its entirety several times to try to ensure that I was not missing anything obvious about personal pronoun usage. The computer data can be suggestive, but human analysis is also required to determine the referents of pronouns and to understand the context of each usage.

### **3.1 First Person Singular**

[Table 1]

The most striking aspect of the figures in Table 1 is the small number of first person singular pronouns employed by Robinson and Radcliffe, compared to the relatively large numbers employed by Hays and Wollstonecraft. The figures for Hays and

Wollstonecraft are also high compared to the two most influential male writers on the French Revolution: Edmund Burke uses the first person singular 8.1 times in every 1,000 words in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, while Thomas Paine uses the first person singular 5.3 times per 1,000 words in *Rights of Man*.

Joan Mulholland, noting Wollstonecraft's frequent use of authorial I, suggests that it:

... serves to remind readers that the material they are absorbing has a specific, personal origin, and that it is not to be smoothly merged with their own thinking, as it comes from another's mind. It marks the author's difference, and hence that her ideas may be unusual, with the implication that they be cautiously assessed before acceptance. (1995: 177)

Precisely this kind of effect can, I think, be seen in the following passages in which Wollstonecraft's and Hays' use of I are particularly marked:

Let it not be concluded that **I** wish to invert the order of things; **I** have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue. **I** speak collectively of the whole sex; but **I** see not the shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues should differ in respect to their nature. In fact, how can they, if virtue has only one eternal standard? **I** must therefore, if **I** reason consequentially, as strenuously maintain that they have the same simple direction, as that there is a God. (Wollstonecraft, 1792, 49, my bold)

**I** must here for brevity's sake, adopt the same mode of appeal as upon a former occasion, and instead of bringing forward examples to prove what **I** have advanced, trust to the candor of **my** readers, and ask them; if every law, and maxim generally understood as in favor of women; – and maxims advanced at random by the men with regard to them, are nearly as rigorous as laws; – does not confirm in the strongest manner possible, every word **I** have said? (Hays, 1798, 99-100, my bold)



In Wollstonecraft's case the frequent use of first person singular pronoun gives this argument a very personal perspective: it is the writing I who 'see[s] not the shadow of a reason to conclude', and who feels forced to 'strenuously maintain that they have the same simple direction'. Similarly in the extract from Hays the first person singular pronouns serve continually to remind the reader of the role of the author in constructing the foregoing argument, as she refers to 'what I have advanced' and 'every word I have said'. Both passages give the impression of the author actively engaging with her readers in order to guide them through her own thought processes. On the one hand, this can be seen to encourage readers to involve themselves directly in the debate. On the other hand, however, it also creates space for disagreement. Readers who do not share Wollstonecraft's perspective may feel that there is a reason to conclude that women's virtues are different or that Wollstonecraft is not reasoning consequentially. Readers candidly considering the laws and maxims that favour of women, as Hays invites, may find that in their own opinion her argument is not thereby confirmed. Hays, in the passage quoted in the Introduction, worries that the frequent use of the first person singular is a sign of vanity (it is "dear to authors"). Certainly it serves as a frequent reminder of the textual presence of the writer.

By contrast, Robinson and Radcliffe both tend to state their arguments without this element of personal engagement. To give just one example from Robinson:

In what is woman inferior to man? In some instances, but not always, in corporeal strength: in activity of mind, she is his equal. Then, by this rule, if she is to endure oppression in proportion as she is deficient in muscular power, only, through all the stages of animation the weaker should give precedence to the stronger. Yet we should find a Lord of the Creation with a puny frame, reluctant to confess the

superiority of a lusty peasant girl, whom nature had endowed with that bodily strength of which luxury had bereaved him. (1799: 17)

In Robinson's passage, each step of the argument is presented not as a matter of personal deduction, but as a matter of impersonal fact or shared experience. Robinson makes the reader less directly aware of her thought processes, and the argument is not as closely tied to her textual presence. This perhaps leaves the reader less directly engaged with her line of reasoning, but at the same time it also leaves less space for the reader to disagree with her.

Moreover, it must be remembered that in these texts each instance of authorial I not only 'marks the author's difference' in the sense of reminding readers that they are engaging with another *person's* ideas, but also 'marks the author's difference' by reminding them that they are engaging with a *woman's* ideas. Hays' and Wollstonecraft's repeated use of I guides the reader through their thought processes, and in doing so guides the reader through the workings of their female minds, demonstrating as well as explicitly arguing that woman is capable of rational thought. This is, of course, a double-edged strategy. On the one hand, a reader who is convinced by their arguments will find the proof in both the medium and the message: woman must be capable of rational thought because the female author is thinking rationally. On the other hand, a reader who is not persuaded by their arguments will find the same evidence: the flawed reasoning of the author provides yet more evidence of women's inferior mental capacity. Indeed, one hostile reviewer makes this connection very explicitly in the case of Wollstonecraft, writing that 'if miss [sic] Wollstonecraft had

wished to give a practical instance of the inferiority of the female mind, she has completely effected it' (Critical Review 5, 1792: 133).

### 3.2 First Person Plural

[Table 2]

Although Table 2 is suggestive, it disguises the fact that in English, the pronoun *we* can refer to two different groupings of people. Wales (1996) describes these referents as follows:

As in many other languages, *we* can refer 'inclusively' to speaker and addressee(s) ..., so that the speaker presumes to speak on the addressee's behalf; or it can refer 'exclusively' to speaker and third party or parties, who may or may not be present in the immediate situation ... (1996: 58)

As women writing on the subject of women's rights, these authors could employ either an inclusive *we*, referring to the writer plus her readers, be they male or female, or an exclusive *we*, referring to the writer and all other women, but specifically excluding male readers.<sup>10</sup>

Radcliffe and Robinson are both quite consistent in their use of the first person plural pronoun. For Radcliffe, *we* never excludes male readers, and always assumes a shared set of values, namely that both the author and reader are British, Christian, and sympathetic towards the suffering of others, particularly when those others are impoverished middle-class females:

Good God! is it possible **we** can see **our** fellow creatures debased so low! Can **we** see the tender and delicate frame, which was formerly accustomed to ease and tranquillity, and which was formed by nature to participate in others misfortunes! can **we** let these innocent and helpless beings pass unnoticed, and not commiserate their distress, and ask, from whence the cause? (1799: 36-37)

Robinson similarly sticks predominantly to a single usage, again including reader and writer together in a shared set of values, although in her case *we* tends to be rather more analytical and rather less sympathetic:

**We** know that women, like princes, are strangers to the admonitions of truth; and yet **we** are astonished when **we** behold them emulous of displaying every thing puerile and unessential; and aiming perpetually at arbitrary power ... (1799: 11)

This, use, which I will refer to as a *we* rational beings use, does not distinguish between rational beings on the basis of their gender, although given the gender politics of the day this was by default a male category. As such, these writers are implicitly making claims about the right of women to be considered as rational beings, by including themselves in such a grouping. Nevertheless, they are only doing so on an individual and one-off basis. A central argument for Robinson is that the majority of women are currently unfitted to engage in rational discourse on account of their inadequate education, while Radcliffe, as I have already noted, describes herself as temporarily adopting ‘a masculine appearance’ in writing her pamphlet. Both women avoid using any exclusively female first person plural pronouns, and both maintain a detached position when describing the sufferings of women, despite their own personal experiences of precisely the kinds of suffering they describe. Strikingly, the only instance in Robinson’s text where she does use *we* to refer exclusively to women is on the title page, which carries a quotation from the heroine of a play by Nicholas Rowe (as a quotation, I have omitted this from my results): ‘Wherefore are **we** /Born with high

Souls, but to assert ourselves?’ (my bold). Robinson is thus only willing to employ an exclusively female first person plural pronoun in a quotation where the originator is marked as male. This suggests that Robinson actively avoids aligning herself with women in general.

Both Hays and Wollstonecraft also employ the inclusive we rational beings, and speak of women (as well as men, on occasion) in the third person:

Upon the same principles **we** cannot help doubting much, whether because the minds of women are more pliable, and yield more readily to the pressure of circumstances, without altogether sinking under them; that **we** are thereby entitled to brand **them** with weakness or levity. (Hays, 1798: 43, my bold)

In treating, therefore, of the manners of women, let **us**, disregarding sensual arguments, trace what **we** should endeavour to make **them** in order to co-operate, if the expression be not too bold, with the Supreme Being. (Wollstonecraft, 1792: 36, my bold)

In both passages there is a clear distinction between we rational beings who are examining women’s situation, and they women who are being examined. Unlike Robinson and Radcliffe, however, both Wollstonecraft and Hays also at times write very explicitly as women, and they both employ exclusively female first person plural pronouns in order to do so. Hays for example writes:

But **we** relinquish willingly this kind of preference which **you** force upon **us**, and which **we** have no title to; and which indeed is an intolerable burthen in the way **you** contrive to administer it; and instead of this, **we** only entreat of **you** to be fair, to be candid, and to admit, that both sexes are upon a footing of equality, when they are permitted to exert in their different spheres of action, the talents their Creator has been pleased to bestow upon them. (1798: 61-62, my bold)

Each of these first person plural pronouns refers exclusively to women, and men have been cast into the role of you. Wollstonecraft similarly groups herself with women through her use of the first person plural:

Thus Milton describes **our** first frail mother; though when he tells **us** that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive **us** of souls, and insinuate that **we** were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation. (1792: 33, my bold)

Evidently ‘our first frail mother’ and ‘tells us’ have the potential to be inclusive of the whole human race, but by the time Wollstonecraft writes ‘he meant to deprive us’, only women are included. Indeed, it is particularly noticeable that Wollstonecraft’s transitions from we rational beings to we women are often abrupt and unannounced. To give another example:

It is time to effect a revolution in female manners – time to restore them to their lost dignity – and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world. It is time to separate unchangeable morals from local manners. – If men be demi-gods – why let **us** serve them! And if the dignity of the female soul be as disputable as that of animals – if their reason does not afford sufficient light to direct their conduct whilst unerring instinct is denied – they are surely of all creatures the most miserable! (1792: 92-93, my bold)

Wollstonecraft begins by declaring the need to make women reform themselves, but suddenly, as if exasperated, breaks into an exclamation in which the us is inclusive of herself and all women, and explicitly exclusive of men. Smith (1992) has suggested that Wollstonecraft deliberately distances herself from women’s follies through her selective deployment of we women: ‘she often does so to show herself the mutual victim of an

insult without being a companion in folly' and 'generally excludes herself from statements that demonstrate feminine follies and weaknesses' (560). This argument, I think, implies that Wollstonecraft could have written more consistently as we women if she had chosen to do so, and that her decision not to requires explanation. However, my survey of these writers suggest that none wrote comfortably and consistently as we women, and that it is the few instances when they did feel able to do so that needs to be accounted for. Offering a modification of Smith's argument, I would therefore suggest that Hays and Wollstonecraft's textual performance of indignation enables them to abandon their role as writing on behalf of we rational beings in order to temporarily write as we women.

In both Hays' and Wollstonecraft's pamphlets, the we women exclusive pronoun is comparatively rare. In Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* only 41 out of the total 286 first person plural pronouns (14%) refer clearly and unambiguously to we women; in Hays' *Appeal* only 29 out of the total 352 first person plural pronouns (8%) do so. Nevertheless, I would suggest that the sudden shifts that both writers make between talking of we rational beings to talking of we women are potentially very disruptive. A male reader, accustomed to find himself squarely positioned as the implied reader of a political pamphlet, periodically finds himself ejected from that privileged position. A female reader, meanwhile, accustomed to occupy a more marginal textual position, suddenly finds herself explicitly addressed by the author.

### **3.3 Second Person Pronoun**

[Table 3]

In Table 3 it is Radcliffe's very limited use of second person pronouns that most immediately stands out. Closer inspection reveals that this is because Radcliffe very rarely addresses her reader directly. All four of the instances of you recorded above, appear in the formulaic phrase 'if you please,' (for example, 'Let us then, if you please, select one of these distressed females' (1799: 29).) These are instances of 'impersonal' you, in which Radcliffe appeals to people in general, rather than to any group of people in particular.<sup>11</sup> The single instances of thou / thee / thy / thyself, which all occur within the same two sentences, address an imagined orphaned child ('Pitiable object! thy fate seems hard indeed' (1799: 78). Only the two occurrences of ye and the single occurrence of yourselves really speak to the reader directly:

But **ye** of the world, whose understandings have so long been carried down the stream of misrepresentation, suffer not **yourselves** to be any longer led away by false and mistaken prejudice [...] (1799: 63, my bold)

But whose conduct of the four, think **ye**, was the most commendable, or pleasing in the sight of God or man? (1799: 116, my bold)

On both of these occasions, Radcliffe is using an religious register, signalled by her use of imperatives, archaic syntax ('suffer not yourselves' for 'do not suffer yourselves', and 'think ye' for 'do you think'), and the archaic form ye.<sup>12</sup> In most of her pamphlet, Radcliffe seems reluctant to directly engage with her readership, but here her use of religious language seems to enable her to address her readers, although without any reference to their gender.



Hays shows a much more frequent use of second person pronouns. 4 (3 you, 1 ye) are indefinite in reference. 10 appear in a single passage that apostrophises an imagined woman who devotes all her time to beauty:

For oh! what patience and industry, what time and trouble, what acute observation, what intense thought, what ceaseless anxiety, what hopes and fears, alternately elate and depress **thy** trembling spirit, **thou** busy priestess of vanity! The half of the talents, the perseverance, the resolution and attention, hadst **thou** been but a man; might have placed **thee** on the woolstack, or have put a mitre on thy head, or a long robe on **thy** back, or a truncheon in **thy** hand. Or, being even what **thou** art, the fiftieth part of **thy** misemployed talents if turned into proper channels, might have made **thee** what is tantamount, to a Chancellor, a Bishop, a Judge, or a General – An useful, an amiable, and an interesting woman. (1798: 79)

As with Radcliffe's use of ye, the use of archaic pronouns here appears to invoke a religious register: the addressee is 'thou busy priestess of vanity'. Indeed, Hays also uses 7 instances of thou / thee / thy to address God directly. The remaining 2 instances of the archaic second person singular pronoun are used to chastise the 'pampered race' of wealthy families (1798: 244). Every other second person pronoun (11 ye, 47 you, and 15 your) address male readers specifically. For example, she writes: 'to **you** fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, and lovers, I submit the following pages' (1798: iii, my bold), 'They are indeed directed to **you**, oh man!' (1798: 28, my bold) and 'Ah! **ye** abettors of hypocrisy! **ye** self-imposers! **ye** slaves to surface!' (1798: 123, my bold). Hays' direct and repeated address to men is perhaps to be expected given that the title of her pamphlet is *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain*: her text is explicitly aimed at male rather than female readers.

By contrast, Robinson's second person pronouns are unexpected given that her title is *Letter to the Women of England*. Despite this title, she does not begin by addressing her

readership as ‘My Dear Countrywomen’, and indeed she describes her intention as being to: ‘remind my enlightened country-women that **they** are not the mere appendages of domestic life’ (1799: 3, my bold). Thus from the beginning, women are referred to in the third person, spoken of, rather than spoken to. Furthermore, Robinson also twice addresses men directly, using a total of 7 second person pronouns:

Read this, **ye** English fathers and husbands, and retract **your** erroneous opinions, respecting female education. (1799: footnote, 41, my bold)

Sensual Egotists! woman is absolutely necessary to **your** felicity; nay, even to **your** existence: yet she must not arrogate to herself the power to interest **your** actions. **You** idolize her personal attractions, as long as they influence **your** senses; when they begin to pall, the magick is dissolved; and prejudice is ever eager to condemn what passion has degraded. (1799: 85, my bold)

These passages suggest that, despite the title of her pamphlet, she is conscious of her potential male readership. In fact there is just one paragraph in which Robinson directly addresses women and this occurs towards the very end of her text and contains 9 second person pronouns:

O! my unenlightened country-women! read, and profit, by the admonition of Reason. Shake off the trifling, glittering shackles, which debase **you**. Resist those fascinating spells which, like the petrifying torpedo, fasten on **your** mental faculties. Be less the slaves of vanity, and more the converts of Reflection. Nature has endowed **you** with personal attractions: she has also given **you** the mind capable of expansion. Seek not the visionary triumph of universal conquest; know **yourselves** equal to greater, nobler, acquirements: and by prudence, temperance, firmness, and reflection, subdue that prejudice which has, for ages past, been **your** inveterate enemy. Let **your** daughters be liberally, classically, philosophically, and usefully educated; let them speak and write their opinions freely; let them read and think like rational creatures; adapt their studies to their strength of intellect; expand their minds, and purify their hearts, by teaching them to feel their mental equality with their imperious rulers. By such laudable exertions, **you** will excite the noblest emulation; **you** will explode the superstitious tenets of bigotry and fanaticism; confirm the intuitive immortality of the soul, and give them that genuine glow of conscious virtue which will grace them to posterity.  
(Robinson, 1799: 93, my bold)

The emotional heat has been turned up, and Robinson engages directly with women for the first time, in order to urge them to take responsibility for their own lives. Yet again a religious register is in evidence, even if the old-fashioned *ye* is not employed.

Robinson exhorts her female readers to seek self improvement with a series of imperatives, archaic syntax ('seek not' rather than 'do not seek') and modals that promise triumph ('you will excite the noblest emulation; you will explode the superstitious tenets of bigotry and fanaticism'). The remaining 1 second person pronoun is indefinite in reference.

Wollstonecraft uses the archaic second person singular pronoun *thou* / *thee*/ *thy* / *thyself* to address a wide range of interlocutors: God (6), virtue (4), modesty (3), Rousseau (1), religion (1), and her reader (1). She apostrophises an imagined fallen woman in a lengthy paragraph using 13 of these pronouns (1792: 284-5). 'Hapless woman' is also addressed at length:

Hapless woman! what can be expected from **thee** when the beings on whom thou art said naturally to depend for reason and support, have all an interest in deceiving **thee**! This is the root of the evil that has shed a corroding mildew on all **thy** virtues; and blighting in the bud **thy** opening faculties, has rendered **thee** the weak thing **thou** art! It is this separate interest - this insidious state of warfare, that undermines morality, and divides mankind!  
(1792: 216, my bold)

Here Wollstonecraft addresses 'woman' and uses the singular form of the pronoun, but appears to be doing so in order to address the female race as a whole, a usage which is not to be found in any of the other three authors. Of the 60 second person pronouns taking the form *ye*/*you*, 28 are indefinite in reference. She writes, for example: '[i]f **you** mean to secure ease and prosperity on earth as the first consideration, and leave futurity to provide for itself; **you** act prudently in giving **your** child an early insight into the

weaknesses of his nature' (1792: 245, my bold). She also, however, uses you to speak directly to her female readers at two points, accounting for 28 of her second person pronouns. At the end of Chapter 7 she writes:

Would **ye**, O my sisters, really possess modesty, **ye** must remember that the possession of virtue, of any denomination, is incompatible with ignorance and vanity! **ye** must acquire that soberness of mind, which the exercise of duties, and the pursuit of knowledge, alone inspire, or **ye** will still remain in a doubtful dependent situation, and only be loved whilst **ye** are fair! The downcast eye, the rosy blush, the retiring grace, are all proper in their season; but modesty, being the child of reason, cannot long exist with the sensibility that is not tempered by reflection. Besides, when love, even innocent love, is the whole employ of **your** lives, **your** hearts will be too soft to afford modesty that tranquil retreat, where she delights to dwell, in close union with humanity. (1792: 296-7, my bold)

This religious register becomes even more marked in the final chapter when she again addresses women. This time the passage takes the form of a catechism for women who consult mediums:

I must be allowed to expostulate seriously with the ladies who follow these idle inventions; for ladies, mistresses of families, are not ashamed to drive in their own carriages to the door of the cunning man. And if any of them should peruse this work, I entreat them to answer to their own hearts the following questions, not forgetting that they are in the presence of God. Do **you** believe that there is but one God, and that he is powerful, wise, and good?  
Do **you** believe that all things were created by him, and that all beings are dependent on him? [...] (1792: 415-6, my bold)

In total, Wollstonecraft asks women a series of 7 questions, interspersed with some additional commentary. However, the fact that she initially seeks permission to address women explicitly ('I must be allowed to expostulate') suggests that up until this point she anticipates a mixed audience. Furthermore, her pamphlet actually concludes with an exhortation to men:

Be just then, O **ye** men of understanding! and mark not more severely what women do amiss, than the vicious tricks of the horse or the ass for whom **ye** provide provender – and allow her the privileges of ignorance, to whom **ye** deny the rights of reason, or **ye** will be worse than Egyptian task-masters, expecting virtue where nature has not given understanding! (1792: 451-2, my bold)

Wollstonecraft's pamphlet thus closes with an address in which she speaks directly to men, explicitly excluding women, who are instead spoken of in the third person.

Overall then, none of these 4 pamphlets use second person pronouns exclusively to address women: Radcliffe and Hays do not address you women at all, while Robinson and Wollstonecraft do address you women, but also address you men. It is also noticeable that writing to you women only seems to be possible when a religious register is in use: the writer temporarily adopts the voice of a clergyman, and this enables her to harangue her female readers personally. While this religious register is not limited to you women (Radcliffe, for example, uses it to address 'ye of the world'), there are no instances of a non-religious you women. These patterns are particularly striking given that in her pamphlet, Hays addresses you men so frequently, often without any religious colouring. Taken together these pamphlets suggest that it was fairly straightforward for a writer to address the men of Great Britain, but much harder for a writer to address herself consistently to the women of Great Britain.

## 5. Conclusion

Of the four authors I have discussed here, Radcliffe does the least to challenge the 'larger cultural context' within which both readers and writers of political pamphlets were assumed to be male. Her sparing use of the first person singular pronoun means

that the reader is not insistently reminded of her female textual presence. Her first person plural pronouns never presume a shared community of author and female readers. Her second person pronouns never address her readers on the basis of their gender, so male readers are neither marginalised nor personally targeted. This is perhaps because she requires no direct action from her readers, other than a change in attitude towards distressed females. It also perhaps also explains why, despite its virulent attack on Wollstonecraft, the *British Critic* was happy to declare ‘society at large may be much benefited by the perusal of the labours of Mrs. Radcliffe’ (*British Critic* 14, 1799: 686).)

In many ways Robinson’s use of personal pronouns similarly does little to disturb her reader’s existing ‘mental image’ of the world. Like Radcliffe, her use of the first person singular pronoun is sparing and she avoids speaking as we women. However, as I have noted she does speak directly to you women in an extended passage at the end of her text. Nevertheless, this is perhaps a rather meagre passage given that her whole text is supposedly a letter to the women of England and particularly given that she also twice addresses you men. Overall, I would suggest, Robinson’s pattern of second pronoun usage stands as testimony to the difficulty that these writers found in imagining a female audience for their texts even when their titles suggests that they set out to write for one.

Hays, as I noted at the beginning of this article, explicitly reflects upon her use of the first person pronoun in the closing section of her pamphlet. It is noticeable that the features she identifies are remarkably similar to those I have discussed in my analysis: a frequent use of the first person singular (‘the proscribed little personage’), and a

frequent use of the first person plural that shifts between we rational beings ('to take off from the dictatorial tone of composition') and we women ('expressive of the sense of the whole sex'). These usages, I have suggested, challenge the existing 'cultural context' in which both writers and readers of pamphlets were assumed to be male, and construct an alternative 'reality of discourse' in which women do both read and write political pamphlets: her frequent use of the first person singular, and her collective use of we women serves repeatedly to remind her reader that that a woman wrote the pamphlet, and that she purports to speak on behalf of all women. She does not address you women directly, but this may be accounted for by the fact that her pamphlet is *An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain*.

Wollstonecraft presents the most complex pattern of personal pronoun usage. She frequently uses the first person singular, and she rapidly switches between using the first person plural to speak as we rational beings and we women. In addition, she (albeit rarely) addresses women directly as you women, and also addresses 'woman' in the abstract as thou. The male reader of Wollstonecraft's text is thus repeatedly reminded of her female textual presence, and is periodically deposed from his position as the implied reader by both you women and we women. A reader, male or female, cannot help recognising that the 'reality of discourse' she creates in her pamphlet is rather different from that of most pamphlets.

Wollstonecraft has nevertheless sometimes been criticised for the fact that she does not more consistently address herself to women. Vlasopolos (1980), for example, has written that: '[t]o an extent surprising for those of us primed to look upon *A Vindication*

as a feminist manifesto, the book proves to be written for men' (462), and she finds that Wollstonecraft's tone when she does address women directly 'is condescending, even insulting' (463). Poovey (1984) similarly finds that Wollstonecraft: 'rejects a female speaking voice' and that in her occasional addresses to women 'both her formal, self-consciously rhetorical address and her condescension distance her from her natural allies' (79-80). Other critics have attempted to account for Wollstonecraft's apparent disdain for her female audience. Gubar (1994), for example, argues that: 'feminist expository prose inevitably embeds itself in the misogynist tradition it seeks to address and redress' (462). Gubar draws on Bakhtin's concept of the 'overpopulation' of language to describe the fact that, in 'expropriating' the language of others in order to make it serve their own ends, feminist writers such as Wollstonecraft often end up reproducing the misogynistic discourses they are attempting to discredit (465). Finke (1992) writes that Wollstonecraft: 'wants to make an argument for women a public agents, but she has no language out of which to construct this role except that of the masculine public sphere' (120). Also drawing upon Bakhtin, Finke argues that Wollstonecraft 'interweave[s] the languages and genres of public rationality and domestic feeling in a dialogue that allows her to create an oppositional stance within public-sphere discourse' (129).

My own findings suggest that a Bakhtinian approach to these texts is fruitful, particularly when coupled with a detailed analysis of personal pronouns, which can alert us to the shifting discourses that these writers employ. Language, Bakhtin (1981) writes, is only unitary in the abstract:



Actual social life and historical becoming create within an abstractly unitary national language, a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems; within these various systems (identical in the abstract) are elements of language filled with various semantic and axiological content and each with its own different sound. (1981: 288)

The genre of political pamphlet writing in the 1790s, partly through its pattern of personal pronoun usage, encoded the social belief that reading and writing political pamphlets was a male activity. The very act of writing a pamphlet as a woman disrupted this belief system: the I of these pamphlets denotes a textual female presence. However, these writers also disrupt the social belief system of the political pamphlet by incorporating alternative discourses which allowed for alternative patterns of personal pronoun usage. Some of these, as I noted at the beginning of my analysis, I have excluded from this study for practical reasons: quotations, letters and embedded stories, for example. But even my limited analysis has identified the presence of some alternative discourses, such as Hays' and Wollstonecraft's exasperated outbursts in which they identify as we women. Most notable, however, is the way in which these writers use the discourse of the pulpit to offer them alternative ways of addressing their readers.<sup>13</sup> In particular, as I have noted, both Wollstonecraft and Robinson use archaic/religious discourse to address their audience as you women. This, I would suggest, is perhaps because although the genre of the political pamphlet did not habitually recognise its audience as female, the genre of the sermon did.

In conclusion, I would argue that my analysis suggests that it was by no means straightforward for these writers to write political pamphlets as women, or to anticipate women readers for their pamphlets. Despite this, Robinson, Hays and especially Wollstonecraft do succeed in speaking as we women and/or addressing you women for

brief passages in their texts. These passages, despite their fleeting nature, succeed in constructing an alternate ‘reality of discourse’ in which women could participate in public political discourse.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> On the historical semantics of man Baron (1986) notes that: ‘While it is generally agreed that the original sense of man in Proto-Germanic or Indo-European was simply ‘human being,’ by historical times the word had developed a masculine meaning that eventually supplanted the primary, unmarked meaning’ (137-38). Writers such as Paine in *Rights of Man* certainly give no indication that their arguments about ‘rights of man’ are intended to include women. The assumption that man equals male can also be seen very clearly in the *Monthly Review*’s broadly positive response to Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The reviewer specifically laments the fact that English lacks a general term to denote the species of ‘human being’, commenting that ‘The want of such a general term is a material defect in our language.’ (*Monthly Review* 8, 1792: 209). This complaint implies, of course, that the reviewer understands the term man to be specifically male.

<sup>2</sup> For example, MacDonald (2001) claims to have discounted all pronouns used within quotations, but appears to have left in the quotations themselves when calculating the total word length of the texts, which he then uses for calculating the overall comparative frequency of these pronouns (32). His application of linguistic theory is also cavalier. He quotes from Henley, Miller and Beazley (1995) that the ‘passive voice may be used to deprive subordinates of their agency’ (2001: 33). Ignoring the cautious may in this quotation, and the fact that the authors conclude by arguing that ‘[w]e sorely need more psycholinguistic study that takes social knowledge and context into account’ (1995: 81), MacDonald uses this quotation to licence his creation of what he calls an ‘agency ratio’ for Wollstonecraft’s *Vindications*, whereby he divides the number of first person singular pronouns that are the subject of passive clauses, by the number of first person singular pronouns that are the subject of active clauses (33-35).

<sup>3</sup> Pendleton (1982) lists 340 pamphlets, of which only three of them are obviously by female writers. Allowances need to be made for the fact that Pendleton may well have overlooked some pamphlets, some of the anonymous pamphlets may have been female-authored, and some of the apparently male authors may be pseudonyms for female writers. Nevertheless, it is evident that male authorship of political pamphlets during the 1790s was very much the norm. For examples of recent scholarship on women’s contributions to the public sphere during the period, see Mellor (2002) or Cracuin and Lokke (eds.) (2002).

<sup>4</sup> Traditional accounts of eighteenth century reading audiences posit a strong link between women readers and novels. Altick (1957), for example, writes that ‘when *Pamela* appeared (1740-41) its success and that of the novels that followed it revealed the extent of the female audience which for several decades for something to read’ (45). More recently this correlation has been challenged by Fergus (2000) who in a study of the records of two Midland booksellers finds that ‘the female audience for fiction was not especially large’ (172). Despite this, popular opinion in 1790s certainly equated female readers with the novel.

<sup>5</sup> Guest (2000) argues that although female learning was celebrated in England in the mid-eighteenth century, by the 1770s and 1780s it was becoming increasingly problematic. She attributes this to a larger cultural shift which took place in during these decades, which saw ‘a new emphasis on the values of private, domestic, and familial as the basis for public morality’ (159). In her *Appeal* Hays attempts to discredit a view she finds to be widespread: ‘[t]hat knowledge renders women masculine, and consequently disgusting in their manners’ (1798: 172).

<sup>6</sup> See for example Duszak (2002), Fairclough (2001) and Penelope (1990).

<sup>7</sup> See Janes (1978) for a good account of the early reception of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*.

---

<sup>8</sup> WordSmith is a suite of tools for studying texts, including tools for creating concordances, word-lists and key-words, etc. It is designed by Mike Scott of the University of Liverpool. Full details can be found on his web page, <http://www.lexically.net>. For this project I have predominantly used the wordlist and concordancing functions.

<sup>9</sup> In an earlier draft of this article I kept the numbers directly comparable by just using the first 10,000 words from each of the texts. This proved unsatisfactory, however, as these extracts were not necessarily representative of the texts as a whole.

<sup>10</sup> We can of course also have a number of other meanings. For a full discussion, see Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990: 168-206) and Wales (1996: 64-68).

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of 'impersonal' you see Wales (1996: 78-84).

<sup>12</sup> Historically, *ye* was the subjective case of the second person plural pronoun until the objective case *you* supplanted it in the early modern period. See Wales (1996: 89).

<sup>13</sup> Carpenter (1986) has argued that Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* should be read within the tradition of prophetic discourse, and that Wollstonecraft used this tradition to disrupt the 'prisonhouse of language and rational discourse' within which she found herself (227). Carpenter is primarily interested in analysing the way in which Wollstonecraft engages with the Book of Job, but her argument can also be applied to the way in which all of these writers engage with the rhetoric of preaching.

## References

Altick, R. (1957) *The English Common Reader*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Anonymous. (1790) Review of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. *Critical Review* 70: 694-96.

Anonymous. (1791) Review of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. *Gentleman's Magazine* 61: 151-54.

Anonymous. (1792) Part 2 of Review of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. *Critical Review* 5: 132-141.

Anonymous. (1792) Review of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. *Monthly Review* 8: 198-209.

Anonymous. (1798) Review of *Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. *British Critic* 11: 228-23.

Anonymous. (1799) Review of *The Female Advocate*. *British Critic* 14: 686.

- 
- Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination*. ed. M. Holquist, transl. by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Baron, D. (1986) *Grammar and Gender*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Benveniste, E. (1971) *Problems in General Linguistics*, transl. by M. E. Meek. Florida: University of Miami Press.
- Burke, E. (1790) *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. London: J. Dodsley.
- Carpenter, M. (1986) 'Sibylline Apocalypics: Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Job's Mother's Womb', *Literature and History* 12: 215-28.
- Cracuin, A. and Lokke, K. (2002) *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Duszak, A., ed. (2002) *Us and Others: Social Identities Across Languages, Discourses and Cultures*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Fairclough, N. (2001) 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. *Language and Power*. Harlow: Longman.
- Fergus, J. (2000) 'Women Readers: a Case Study', in V. Jones (ed.) *Women and Literature in Britain 1700-1800*. pp. 154-175. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fetterley, J. (1978) *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- 
- Finke, L. (1992) *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Gilbert, S. and Gubar, S. (1984) *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Godwin, W. (1798) *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. London: J. Johnson and G.G. and J. Robinson.
- Gubar, S. (1994) 'Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of 'It Takes One to Know One'', *Feminist Studies* 20: 453-473.
- Guest, H. (2000) *Small Change: Women, Learning and Patriotism 1750-1810*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press
- Hays, Mary (1798) *An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women*. London: J. Johnson and J. Bell. [originally published anonymously]
- Henley, N., Miller, M. and Beazley, J. (1995) 'Syntax, Semantics, and Sexual Violence: Agency and the Passive Voice', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 14: 60-84.
- Iser, W. (1974) *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.
- Janes, R. (1978) 'On the Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39: 293-302.

- 
- Macaulay, C. (1790) *Letters on Education*. London: C. Dilly. [published as 'Catharine Macaulay Graham']
- MacDonald, D. (2001) 'The Personal Pronouns as Political: Stylistics in Self-Reference in the *Vindications*' in H. Buss, D. MacDonald and A. McWhir (eds.) *Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley: Writing Lives*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press. 31-42.
- Mellor, A. (2002) *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830*. Indiana: UP Bloomington.
- Mills, S. (1995) *Feminist Stylistics*. London: Routledge.
- Montgomery, M., Durant, A., Fabb, N., Furniss, T. and Mills, S. (1992) *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Mühlhäusler, P. and Harré, R. *Pronouns and People: The Linguistic Construction of Social and Personal Identity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Mulholland, J. (1995) 'Constructing Woman's Authority: A Study of Wollstonecraft's Rhetoric in her *Vindication, 1792*', *Prose Studies* 18: 171-187.
- Paine, T. (1791) *Rights of Man*. London: J. Johnson.
- Pendleton, G. (1982) 'Towards a Bibliography of the Reflections and Rights of Man Controversy', *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 85: 65-103.
- Penelope, J. (1990) *Speaking Freely: Unlearning The Lies Of The Fathers' Tongues*. New York: Pergamon Press.

- 
- Poovey, M. (1984) *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Radcliffe, Mary Anne (1799) *The Female Advocate; or An Attempt to Recover the Rights of Women from Male Usurpation*. London: Vernor and Hood.
- Robinson, Mary (1799) *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*. London: T.N. Longman and O.Rees. [originally published under the pseudonym 'Mary Anne Randall']
- Smith, A. (1992) 'Roles for Readers in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*', *Studies in English Literature* 32: 555-570.
- Vlasopolos, A. (1980) 'Mary Wollstonecraft's Mask of Reason in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*', *Dalhousie Review* 60: 462-471.
- Wales, K. (1996) *Personal Pronouns in Present-day English*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary (1790) *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. London: J. Johnson.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary (1792) 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. London: J. Johnson.

**Address**

Jane Hodson, Department of English Literature, William Empson House, Shearwood Road, Sheffield, S10 2TD [e-mail: j.hodson@shef.ac.uk]