MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE AMBIGUITY OF ROMANTIC FRIENDSHIP

A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF WOLLSTONECRAFT’S MARY: A FICTION IN ITS SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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I declare that this thesis is my own work except where indicated otherwise with proper use of quotes and references.
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Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft (1795-1797) was a writer in the eighteenth century who was essentially a novelist, but had become very well-known with her political text *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft, as an alternative to existing notions, tried to convince her readers of her personal beliefs in *Rights of Woman*; ideas that differed from the dominant notions on gender roles, class, marriage and reason and emotion. One of her main issues with her contemporary society was the negative definition of women, and in *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft “urges that women be educated so that they too can become fully rational and self-responsible citizens, moral agents, and family members” (Johnson 24). Wollstonecraft tried to inspire women with her writings, because she wanted women to change their habits. Hence, in her writings, Wollstonecraft addresses society directly in their attitude towards marriage ideals and social norms. “An advocate of the rights or claims of women in specific revolutionary situation” (Kelly 1), Wollstonecraft’s ideas would eventually change the position of women in society, even though it took decades for these ideas to take root.

Some time after *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft became to be regarded as “the ‘mother’ of Anglophone feminism” (Tauchert 236), and her works grew to be very influential in feminist studies. Even though it was only after the French Revolution and after her death that Wollstonecraft’s works became highly influential, she did, eventually, play a part in changing the attitude towards gender, and the rights of women. However, as Claudia L. Johnson acknowledges, “today, at the outset of the twenty-first century, as ‘feminism’ is now acknowledged only to be a part of Wollstonecraft’s project, *Rights of Woman* itself, though surely still her popular work, is read with [some of her other works, such as] *Mary: A Fiction, Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman, and her Collections of Letters*” (Johnson 2). One of the most important reasons for taking these texts together is that, taken together, these texts provide for insights into Wollstonecraft’s ideas that might be overlooked if the texts would
have been read separately from each other. Additionally, Wollstonecraft’s personal life might be relevant in explaining certain themes that are present in her works. At the same time, certain themes from her works may be relevant in understanding the connection between these works and what they mean on a broader level. In other words, Wollstonecraft’s personal life may be adding meaning to her works, as will be explored later. Finally, in taking these texts altogether, one important, yet, mostly ignored, aspect of Wollstonecraft’s life comes forward—lesbianism, or, same-sex attraction—which would explain certain ideas Wollstonecraft advocated through her writings.

It is important to acknowledge that “the boundaries between feminist and lesbian theory are ambiguous” (Tauchert 237). This thesis explores the idea that Wollstonecraft’s work should not be considered as exclusively feminist, but instead her works included another social problem that in her own time was an unmentionable subject; lesbianism. In Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985 (1989), the Lesbian History Group argues that in terms of lesbian history “much important material has been suppressed as irrelevant, or its significance overlooked by scholars pursuing a different theory” (3). However, the suppressed or ignored information is vital for the knowledge of history, not only for women and lesbians, but for the entire world, because “it gives us a context in which to place ourselves in the world and a basis for our efforts to change things” (Lesbian History Group 2). In that sense, approaching literature with a lesbian reading is helpful in understanding the context in which the story is set, but also in understanding present circumstances.

Wollstonecraft’s work Mary: A Fiction (1788) is a representation of the repression of the protagonist Mary and her social situation, as well as an exploration of the boundaries considering the subject of lesbianism. Since this subject has gained much more acknowledgement in this decade than in the eighteenth century, it is possible to explore the
matter of lesbianism in Wollstonecraft’s writings and determine whether her work is more than solely feminist. With a theory about ghosting the lesbian, introduced by Terry Castle in *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993), it could be considered that literature as well as society in the eighteenth century rather censored or ignored the lesbian than acknowledged her. Thus, the acknowledgement of lesbianism in the twenty-first century may reveal a, in the eighteenth century, ghosted subject in Wollstonecraft’s writings. This reveal, on its turn, can be used to establish and take into account new interpretations which may allow a further understanding of Wollstonecraft’s works taken in retrospect with her own life. Furthermore, this new way of reading is not meant, in any case, to diminish previous feminist readings and interpretations of Wollstonecraft’s work. Instead it should serve as an expansion of feminist interpretations, where, with the contemporary knowledge and attitude towards lesbianism, Wollstonecraft’s work allows for renewed readings and therefore an enrichment of the already existing ideas about her life and her works. The purpose, then, is that this research introduces an innovative understanding of Wollstonecraft’s work, which is based on the idea that previous research has left out the very important aspect of same-sex attraction in both the life and the works of Wollstonecraft.

Many critics have ignored the idea that the character Mary in *Mary: A Fiction* is a lesbian, “despite the intensity of Mary’s love [for Ann] and the amount of space devoted to its skittish representation” (Johnson 53). This research, therefore, is meant to show that the character of Mary was influenced by her attraction to a woman, and that this same-sex attraction, despite it being often denied by other critics, played a significant role in the life of the heroine of the novel. The novel represents that, due to the existing ideas about lesbianism in eighteenth century society, the character Mary was not able to be her true self, and eventually she saw no other outcome than death, in order to be free from condemnation and suppression in her environment. In that sense, Mary’s personal struggle of dealing with her
sexual identity within an environment of condemnation influenced her life and life choices. Finally, this thesis explores how much the idea of lesbianism can be traced in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and how *Rights of Woman* and *Mary* compare or contrast with each other. Taking up the idea that the character of Mary in *Mary* would be a representation of the narrator herself, or, relying on the fact that the relationship between Mary and Ann in *Mary: a Fiction* is a representation of the relationship between Wollstonecraft and her friend Fanny Blood, this research tries to emphasize the importance of the characters as representations of Wollstonecraft’s life and her same-sex relationship. The first part of this research consists of a literary discussion of *Mary*, and a thorough discussion of the most important characters and their significance. Following that will be an exploration of the idea of the main character’s sexual identity and her relationship with these characters. Chapter 1 will also discuss the idea of genius, an idea Wollstonecraft took from the writings of Rousseau, and which she has used in *Mary* to justify the heroine’s deviance from society. Chapter 2 consists of a discussion of eighteenth century ideas on lesbianism and romantic friendships, and how these fit in a twenty-first century understanding of the terms. Chapter 2 also discusses the biographical work *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798), by Wollstonecraft’s husband William Godwin. Godwin’s *Memoirs*, then, is approached critically for its credibility, since the writing process was influenced by certain personal interest of the author. Chapter 2 will also demonstrate the significance of Wollstonecraft’s friendship with Fanny Blood in *Mary*, as well as in Wollstonecraft’s personal life. This discussion is meant to establish that the ruling factor in *Mary* was a female-female relationship, and it will make evident that a lesbian reading of the novel should not be disregarded. Finally, chapter 2 will discuss the ‘ghosting’ of the lesbian, a theory introduced by Terry Castle, who argues that a certain censoring of the lesbian is present in literature as well as in real life. His idea agrees with the idea of lesbianism having been an ‘open secret’,
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which is discussed in Chapter 1. Chapter 3 discusses why previous interpretations are off the mark, or, at least, incomplete. The discussion of an incomplete interpretation is meant to demonstrate how easily important themes in works can be overlooked. Chapter 3, then, discusses the character Mary and her struggles with society, and how these struggles form an important theme throughout the novel. Chapter 3 also demonstrates how the idea of lesbianism can be traced further down through Wollstonecraft’s other works; all the previously discussed issues are compared to Wollstonecraft’s Rights of Woman. The conclusion will emphasize the fact that this research gives more emphasis to a side of Wollstonecraft’s writing that has often been ignored, but which should get more attention. Finally, this thesis focuses on Wollstonecraft’s fiction and highlights a particular interpretation of her fiction. Although Wollstonecraft’s personal life is taken into account to emphasize or highlight the theme of same-sex attraction in Mary, this thesis does not try to claim that the author was a lesbian herself. Sexuality is never a given, and, although this thesis will show similarities between the novel and the narrator’s life, these similarities are presented in order to put emphasis on the gay-narrative within Wollstonecraft’s fiction. The aim of this thesis, thus, is to highlight a particular interpretation of Wollstonecraft’s work, which, in its turn, is useful in understanding eighteenth century literature in its own socio-historical context.
Chapter 1

Context of Mary: A Fiction, and the Female Genius

The first chapter of *Mary* is used to sketch the idea that women were regarded as mere decoration in society, and that they were seen only as shadows of men. The marriage of Mary’s parents, Eliza and Edward is used to represent such a marriage situation in the eighteenth century. Mary’s parents are shown as a representation of society in terms of norms, rules, and thoughts on marriage. Wollstonecraft describes how mother Eliza tries to follow society’s standards in order to be accepted. If Eliza would act from her true spirit and virtues, society would not have approved of her. Hence, as Wollstonecraft writes, Eliza “carefully attended to the shews of things, and her opinions, I should have said prejudices, were such as the generality approved of” (Wollstonecraft 7). From this sentence a few things can be drawn. Firstly, Eliza seems to adapt her behavior to what is expected from her within the society she lives. Secondly, society, as Wollstonecraft makes it appear, revolves around certain fakeness, or a certain staged performance. Not only does Wollstonecraft implement this idea within the storyline she creates, but she also seems to do so both strategically, and obviously. To explain, by giving the idea of a fake society not too much emphasis, but instead intertwining it in a more or less natural way within the story, it is very easily assumed and not really questioned that society upholds fake social standards. Finally, by stating that Eliza’s adapted opinions are prejudices which are carefully crafted so that society would approve, Wollstonecraft makes clear that the general social standards in society are based upon prejudices, and, moreover, it is not easy to argue against these standards as the person with deviant ideas would presumably not be accepted in society.

In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft vocalizes her thoughts on marriage, as she describes that women become obedient, dependent, and underdeveloped when they are married:
Most of the evils of life arise from a desire of present enjoyment that outruns itself. The obedience required of women in the marriage state, comes under this description; the mind, naturally weakened by depending on authority, never exerts its own powers, and the obedient wife is thus rendered a weak indolent mother. (Wollstonecraft 166)

The flawed relationship between Eliza and Edward in *Mary*, therefore, is the embodiment of this idea, and in portraying such a marriage in her novel, Wollstonecraft indeed shows her feminist attitude. As mother Eliza tries to accustom to the general rules of marriage, and, as a result, “became a mere nothing” (Wollstonecraft 7), Wollstonecraft wants to show how female identity is blurred out by male domination and social standards. Wollstonecraft, then, ascribes this nothingness to the entire female gender, by saying that “many such noughts are there in the female world” (Wollstonecraft 7). Put differently, Wollstonecraft establishes the idea that females were considered to be unimportant or insignificant subjects within their marriage, but also within society. However, Wollstonecraft does indicate that the obedient life of Eliza is partly to blame on herself as well. Wollstonecraft judges Eliza by referring to her “self-denial” (Wollstonecraft 9). In the story, Wollstonecraft makes apparent that Eliza did have personal beliefs, yet she tries to follow social expectations, and, therefore, limits herself in her development. She, for example, reads only for useless amusement. Ultimately, with the marriage of Edward and Eliza, Wollstonecraft demonstrates that women, in agreeing to the rules of marriage, deny their true selves and limit themselves in their development. Edward and Eliza are, thus, the embodiment of the marriage system Wollstonecraft advocates in *Rights of Woman*.

The marriage system is discussed from the outset of the novel, as representations of
this system appear in the first paragraph of the first chapter. Wollstonecraft shows how love and the marriage system do not seem to align for Mary’s parents. While Eliza appears to have fallen in love with an officer, Eliza’s father wants her to marry someone “in a more distinguished rank of life” (Wollstonecraft 7), and Eliza obeys the wishes of her father. Therefore, regardless of her true feelings, Eliza “promised to love, honour, and obey, a vicious fool, as in duty bound” (Wollstonecraft 7). From this sentence there are two interpretations for the ‘vicious fool’ that is mentioned. The first is an interpretation where the vicious fool is the man, Mary’s father, to whom Eliza is being wed. In that case, the father of Mary is negatively represented, while Eliza is being victimized. The second interpretation is that Eliza herself is the vicious fool. In this case, Wollstonecraft suggests certain foolishness in marrying a man on the grounds of wealth instead of this basis for marriage being love. Nevertheless, regardless of the way of interpreting who is meant with the vicious fool, Wollstonecraft definitely creates a distance between men and women. Moreover, she attempts to explain this distance by representing the marriage system that existed in the society in which this story is set.

All the characters in the novel are not just additional people in the story, but they are characters with which Wollstonecraft wants to show a particular social issue. These different characters and Mary’s relationship with them represent Wollstonecraft’s thoughts on social issues, and they are also used to give insight into the struggle of Mary Wollstonecraft; that of self-acceptance and social acceptance. To explain, Mary’s mother Eliza is used to show the type of woman Mary opposes; both in her natural character and in her behavior and thoughts. As stated earlier, Eliza also represents the type of woman Wollstonecraft addresses in *Rights of Woman*, as she is obedient to her husband and does not develop her own mind. Having fallen for an officer, Eliza had her heart fixed on someone else, but to obey her father’s wishes Eliza consents in marrying Edward. Having this as the starting point of their marriage, Eliza
and Edward lack love and compassion for one another, and Eliza, having a natural sense of sentiment in her, puts all the love she has into her dogs. Her mother, moreover, does not take Mary's character seriously. Mary “had once, or twice, told her secrets to her mother; they were laughed at, and [Mary] determined never to do it again” (Wollstonecraft 12). Because of this lack of interest and respect, Mary developed a mind of her own and explored it in solitary state more than she would share her thoughts with her mother.

Mary’s mother and father are also used to show a flawed parent-child relationship and how their lack of love and consent caused Mary to search for love elsewhere. Edward represents a type of man with prejudice and negative thoughts on women, and is presented as an uncompassionate man; unable to feel for other human beings and more concerned with status and male dominance. To exemplify, “her father always exclaimed against female acquirements” (Wollstonecraft 10), and was so insensitive that he even “had a dog hung in passion” (Wollstonecraft 11). The lack of love from her father, moreover, creates a void that Mary wants to fill with the relationship with Henry, as will be explained later. Mary, like her mother, marries a man not for love, but to obey her father’s wishes, which was not uncommon in the eighteenth century. Many women in the eighteenth century experienced “great pressure on her to marry” (Faderman 108). Mary, however, tries to find a way to escape from social pressure to marry, and from the restraints she believes the marriage will put on her. While Eliza, throughout her marriage with Edward, taught herself to repress her true self and to live according to what is expected of her, Mary wants to avoid similar future prospects. Together with her friend Ann, Mary wants to leave the country. Mary had met Ann at a young age, and from the start Mary feels a lot of affection for Ann. Feeling trapped in her marriage, Mary finds support in Ann, and envisions an escape with her best friend; away from the marriage and society that hold her captive, and towards a live filled with love and happiness. To justify her leaving, Mary uses Ann’s illness as the main reason for her departure. However, Mary has
also fallen in love with Ann, and she is hopeful of starting a new life together with her friend. Her departure, thus, seems to be an attempt to escape from the reality of repression and hierarchy within their society.

Still, there remains a lot of ambiguity around Mary and Ann’s relationship, despite the novel stating that Mary “loved Ann better than anyone in the world” (Wollstonecraft 20), and despite clear indications that Mary felt romantically for Ann, as will be explained more thoroughly later. Yet, in the story it is obvious that Ann does not feel as strongly for Mary as Mary feels for Ann, which makes it more difficult to understand the exact character of their relationship. Still, the love for Ann is what uplifts Mary’s spirit, and it is not so much their friendship, but the fact that Mary found a person to whom she can direct her love, that gives Mary strength. Ann’s friendship, together with the hope for an escape for freedom with Ann, encourages Mary to develop herself even more. “Ann’s misfortunes and ill health were strong ties to bind Mary to her” (Wollstonecraft 19), and, thus, Mary also finds a person to care for in Ann; her empathy and endless compassion are aimed at Ann at all times throughout the story. Eventually, Ann dies of ill health, and her death seems to evoke the most horrendous emotions in Mary. Mary becomes depressed and careless in her behavior. Although Wollstonecraft does not clearly state Mary and Ann’s relationship as being a lesbian relationship, she does mention that Charles, Mary’s husband, calls Mary and Ann’s friendship a “romantic friendship” (Wollstonecraft 25). The concept of romantic friendship, however, is in itself ambiguous, which will also be explained later.

Mary’s relationship with Henry seems to evolve and change over time, and depends on external factors that are relevant in Mary’s life. Their connection begins when the two meet at a ship. Mary, who still feels strongly for Ann, does connect with Henry intellectually. They share their interest in books, and they have a similar interest in nature. Henry is presented as an educated man, and Henry and Mary “frequently discussed very important subjects”
Tellingly, not only does Wollstonecraft show that Mary is a smart woman herself, since she is able to discuss topics with Henry that seem to demand a certain educational level, but Wollstonecraft also seems to address the idea of equality of sex; something she also vocalizes in Rights of Woman.

Noticeably, at the start of their relationship, Mary is not romantically interested in Henry, and their relationship is purely an intellectual relationship. However, Mary’s attitude towards Henry changes slowly after Ann’s death: Mary becomes more affectionate towards Henry. Since she was young Mary needed “an object to love” (Wollstonecraft 11). With the death of Ann, Mary is left with a void again. Mary, thus, needed a new object to fill the gap in her heart, and it is at this point that she opens up to Henry on a more sentimental level. Towards the end of the novel it appears that Henry and Mary have indeed established a certain love for one another. However, this love is only short-termed since Henry dies from illness. After his death, Mary returns to the life she resented.

The message that Wollstonecraft seems to advocate with the relationship between Henry and Mary, is similar to a message in Wollstonecraft’s Rights of Woman, and concerns the level of friendship that is needed for a well-balanced relationship. On page 65 of Mary: a Fiction, the relationship between Henry and Mary has come to its peak, and it is then that Mary realizes that “it was an advantage to [her] that friendship first possessed her heart; it opened it to all the softer sentiments of humanity: – and when this first affection was torn away, a similar one sprung up, with a still more tender sentiment added to it” (Wollstonecraft 65). Thus, the text assumes that, because their relationship began with a certain equality and friendship, the relationship of Mary and Henry evolved romantically. Comparing this to the few marriages present in the story, that is, the marriage between Mary’s parents and Mary’s own marriage to her husband, the relationship between Henry and Mary seems to be the only one containing a certain level of equality and friendship.
In addition, Henry may have served as a substitute for Mary’s father, or, for the lack of fatherly love. As said before, Mary had an unstable relationship with her father, and her father never showed her the fatherly love she needed. Henry, on his part, does show fatherly compassion for Mary, and with that he seems to fill the void Mary’s father had left.

He had called her his dear girl; the words might have fallen from him by accident; but they did not fall to the ground. My child! His child, what an association of ideas! If I had had a father, such a father! – She could not dwell on the thoughts, the wishes which obtruded themselves. Her mind was unhinged, and passion unperceived filled her whole soul. (Wollstonecraft 42)

Henry, in this paragraph, addresses Mary affectionately and caring. Mary, however, interprets his words as words she wished her father had used. From this point on Mary develops a need for Henry, which is instigated by the fatherly affection Henry showed her. It is after this particular instance that Mary starts to feel closer to Henry; therefore, these feelings seem unlikely to be romantic. This is even more emphasized by the fact that Mary desperately wants to tell Ann about her feelings for Henry, but she realizes she is unable to tell her friend, which makes her sad again. Henry, thus, does not entirely replace Ann at all. From the following sentences it even appears that Mary wants to tell Henry about her feelings for Ann, or, about her seeing him only as a fatherly figure, as page 42 reads: “I must tell the truth, she thought she should see Henry, and this hope set her spirits in motion, but they were quickly depressed by her maid […]”. Regardless of what the truth is Mary planned on telling Henry, this sentence does indicate that Mary wanted to let Henry know the true character of their relationship. Altogether, thus, the relationship between Mary and Henry does not show romantic value, but is more a friendship in which Henry plays a fatherly role.
Additionally, in chapters twenty and twenty-one, there are indications that Mary’s love for Henry is debatable, and these indications undermine the suggestion that the novel has a heterosexual plot. Firstly, in chapter twenty Mary writes in her journal about her happiness being conceived as madness by society. Mary writes that she guards her feelings until “the great day, to which I allude, arrives, the way will again be opened.” (Wollstonecraft 52) In other words, Mary longs for that day that she is free to feel, and that she does not have to fight her true feelings anymore. Altogether, this suggests that Mary wishes for a different reality than the one she is currently living in. Additionally, she wishes for that day that her “ardent affections find an object to fix them” (Wollstonecraft 52). Given the fact that she, at this point in the story, is involved with Henry, her wish to find an object to fix her ardent affections upon suggests that she has not found such an object in Henry yet. Mary, however, had found such an object in Ann, and the textual evidence that Mary prefers Ann over Henry shows that “had Ann lived, it is probable she would never have loved Henry so fondly” (Wollstonecraft 55). Giving this statement, Mary’s relationship with Henry can also be questioned on the grounds of sincerity. Yet, although Mary’s love never seems to be fully returned by Ann, their relationship may be more important for the entire story than critics have regarded it, as Mary’s strong feelings for Ann may lead to an interesting angle on Wollstonecraft’s own ideas about marriage. Rights of Woman, as well as Mary: a Fiction, both advocate several “ground rules” for a good marriage, and it may be that Wollstonecraft, or at least the character Mary, due to her strong feelings for someone of the same gender, was never fully able to enjoy a marriage with a man. Hence, the relationship of Ann and Mary and its significance for the story, and for other works of Wollstonecraft such as Rights of Woman and Maria, or, the Wrongs of Woman, may be explored more thoroughly in order to get a better understanding of it.

Throughout Mary: a Fiction, Mary seems to be driven by her thoughts and feelings for
Ann, and most of the goings-on in the story revolve around their “romantic friendship”. Even Mary’s relationship with Henry does, to some extent, concern Ann, as Mary continuously compares the two with each other. In fact, Johnson even suggests that Mary is only interested in Henry because he is the male version of Ann. “Henry is Ann resexed, beloved not insofar he is different from Ann, but rather insofar as is like her” (Johnson 57). Evidently Mary’s love for Ann continues even though the character of Ann has died in the story. Mary is able to hold on to her love for Ann to such an extent that she finds a replacement of Ann in Henry. Johnson’s argument, then, undermines existing assumptions that Mary is a heterosexual woman who was mainly confused by her friendship with Ann. The fixation on the heterosexual relationship of Mary and Henry, which evolves at the end of the story, according to Johnson, is a flawed interpretation of a dominant heterosexual storyline, since Henry is merely a male version of Ann. Ann, despite her death, remains Mary’s true and only love throughout the entire story. On that account, although existing readings of the story suggest that Mary has found her love in Henry, and, thus, existing readings focus on a heterosexual plot, Henry might have only functioned as a substitute for Ann.

Additionally, for a story that seems to advocate change and escape from existing marriage ideals and prejudices in society, the ending of Mary is rather odd, as the heroine seems to have been forced to accept her predestined life; society wants her to obey the exact rules and ideals that she resents throughout the story. However, the ending does resemble, in a radical way, the storyline that precedes it. After the death of her most beloved ones – Ann and Henry – Mary returns to society and lives the life society imposes on her. While Mary makes it clear throughout the story that she would “do anything rather than be a slave” (Wollstonecraft 55); a slave to society, a slave to marriage, and a slave to gender ideas, she still returns home. Eventually, Mary would not live a long life, and the final sentences give the assumption that Mary would rather die than live the life that is predestined for her. “In
moments of solitary sadness, a gleam of joy would dart across her mind – she thought she was hastening to that world where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage” (Wollstonecraft 73). In other words, the idea of death, which would be the true release from marriage and its rules, gives Mary joy; no matter how sad her predestined life would make her. Having tried everything to escape from marriage and society, yet being unsuccessful, Mary sees no other way to escape than to die. Her ill health at the end of the story, therefore, does not frighten her, but instead makes her happy, because death releases her from her social repression. Thus, although it seems peculiar that Mary returns home and lives the life she hates, the final sentences show just how badly Mary wants to escape her predestined life of marriage and subordination to a husband. This ending underlines the unhappiness of Mary, caused by the pressure of society. Overall, the ending “expresses yet again Wollstonecraft’s overt rejection of marriage, together with the body and the sexual subordination it implies” (Todd 114).

Finally, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the fact that the heroine Mary is unfit for the ideals of society by giving her the treat of genius; both in her character and in her ideas. The genius, an idea Wollstonecraft took from writings of Rousseau, represents a person that “will educate itself” (Kelly 41). Wollstonecraft “defines genius […] as ‘only another word for exquisite sensibility’” (Elfenbein 234). Wollstonecraft introduces the idea of the female genius in her novel with a quote from Rousseau, “L'exercice des plus sublimes vertus éleve et nourrit le génie.—Rousseau” (Wollstonecraft 3), which is printed on the front page. The translation of this would read: “The exercise of the most sublime virtues raises and nourishes genius” (Kelly 42), which suggests that a true genius is a person who develops and educates through their own attempts. The ‘Advertisement’ that precedes the story, explains how the “Author attempts to develop a character different from those generally portrayed” (Wollstonecraft 5), and, moreover, Wollstonecraft speaks of “the chosen few [who] wish to
speak for themselves, and not to be an echo” (Wollstonecraft 5). Claudia L. Johnson argues that “the portentous quality of the prose shows us an author wishing to say what has never been said” (191). In that case, the idea of genius may function as a justification for the deviance in the main character. Mary, then, was Wollstonecraft’s attempt to represent a female genius, and, moreover, “the freedom of genius from conventional class hierarchies, gender categories, and marriageability” (Elfenstein 236). Thus, through the character of Mary, Wollstonecraft could freely explore the possibilities for a female without them being undermined by society itself. After all, a genius was a human being that automatically would be excused from all the prejudices and expectations of society. In that sense, the heroine Mary was a free-pass for Wollstonecraft in creating a world outside of reality in which her own ideas were free to exist.

All in all, the story of Mary: a Fiction shows how important the relationship between Ann and Mary was for the heroine of the story, and the narrator uses the different characters of the novel to show the social environment in which this relationship was set. The narrator also demonstrates how difficult it was for the heroine to live in a society with so many cultural rules and social expectations. The following chapter will discuss the cultural and social influences of the eighteenth century upon the romantic friendship that is presented in Mary.
Chapter 2

Lesbianism vs. Romantic Friendship

Lesbianism in the eighteenth century was linked to the “invention of the passionless woman” (O’Dricoll 103), and echoes the idea of Wollstonecraft that passion in women was wrong. O’Dricoll explains that “female lust, even if directed toward men, was now defined as unnatural and unfeminine” (113). This idea about the passionless women developed itself mostly in the literary world: “all representations of female erotic activity became increasingly problematic [and] in fiction, unnatural behavior, now defined in women as immodesty or lust, is presumed to be a sign of an unnatural female self” (O’Dricoll 113-14). In “Modesty—Comprehensively Considered, and Not as a Sexual Virtue”, which is chapter 7 of Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft discusses the idea of female passion, as she, among other things, urges to women to “Make the heart clean, let it expand and feel for all that is human, instead of being narrowed by selfish passions” (Wollstonecraft 230). Wollstonecraft argues for modesty as a replacement for passion in women in Rights of Woman. Therefore, she rejects female passion, and advocates for a passionless woman.

Furthermore, O’Dricoll states: “in eighteenth-century realist fiction, the “lesbian” figure is almost never named as a “lesbian” (114). This, then, causes obscurity around same-sex attraction, because literature does not explicitly state lesbianism. This could be explained with the fact that in eighteenth century society lesbians were seen as a threat to male dominance, as she was considered to be a woman who inherited masculinity and therefore did not obey biologically fixed rules. To acknowledge the existence of the lesbian, therefore, would mean undermining male dominance. Significantly, in Mary, Wollstonecraft challenges the idea of masculinity and femininity as being determined by gender, as she presents the main character Mary as a masculine female, who is infatuated by a feminine female. With this distinction, Wollstonecraft enhances the idea that masculinity and femininity were not
determined by sex, but could be inhabited by women and men. Her representation of gender, thus, follows Wollstonecraft’s assumption in Rights of Woman “that the sexes are equal” (Brody 38). To explain, in Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft advocates for equality among the sexes, and, in Mary, masculinity and femininity are not determined by a person’s sex. Therefore, Wollstonecraft uses both texts to enhance each other in her thoughts on gender equality. In that sense, Mary is an attempt to undermine eighteenth-century ideas about gender hierarchy, where men were superior to women. Ultimately, the relationship of Mary and Ann may therefore not have been fully acknowledged by critics, as it could have been “threatening the patriarchal status quo” (Donoghue 7-8). In other words, if all sexes are equal, and if two women could be in a relationship where there is no man required, the “male-dominated society” (Brody 8) would be endangered.

Yet, Elfenbein suggests that, though “some critics have tried to lessen Wollstonecraft’s daring by arguing that a female-female attachment was not remarkable in the eighteenth century, Wollstonecraft’s novel suggests otherwise” (238). Her novel depicts society as a world in which female passion for another woman is condemned, and the actions and feelings of Mary throughout the novel tell the story of a woman who is burdened by her passion for another woman in the realm of the society she lives in. Moreover, the attempt to escape from society, with only death as the final solution for escape, suggests that lesbianism in the eighteenth century was far from being accepted. The ambiguity around the relationship between Mary and Ann, that is, the lack of direct references to lesbianism, and clear vocabulary that would indicate a lesbian relationship, align with the fact that the eighteenth century does not significantly state lesbianism in literature. In addition, Wollstonecraft may have used the idea of a genius in order to cover up too obvious indications of homosexuality. However, the storyline itself does include enough evidence of female-female sexuality, or a lesbian relationship. Altogether, Mary may provide a loophole through which a new narrative
is detected: a pro-lesbian narrative, covered up by socially accepted plots and political arguments, in Wollstonecraft’s novels and political works.

In the eighteenth century, close bonds between women were not uncommon, and women often had a very intimate relationship with other women. A friendship between two women that showed signs of romance, such as the friendship between Ann and Mary in *Mary*, was therefore called a “romantic friendship”. These friendships were not frowned upon; in fact, they were even celebrated as people regarded these friendships as very valuable for a woman’s development: “It was reasoned, apparently, that young women could practice these sentiments (sensibility, faithfulness, and devotion) on each other so that when they were ready for marriage they would have perfected themselves in those areas” (Faderman 75). In that sense, romantic friendships between women were seen as beneficial for men, because women would use their friendships to evolve the sentiments that were necessary in a marriage. A romantic friendship would go as far as hugging and kissing, or sleeping in the same bed. Only sexual contact was unacceptable in a romantic friendship. In literature, therefore, romantic friendships between women would not show any signs of a sexual relationship. As Faderman explains: “since decent women of the eighteenth century could admit to no sexual desires, and decent men would not attribute such desires to them, the sensual aspect of their relationship goes no further in fiction, as it probably would not in [real] life” (Faderman 111). Thus, with the growing idea that women had to be decent and should not show sexual desire, a woman’s relationship, whether it was with a man or a woman, was described in literature as without any sexual behavior. For that reason, a romantic friendship would contain the same aspects as a heterosexual relationship would have, which makes it difficult to decide to what extend a romantic friendship could have been a lesbian relationship.

Wahl argues: “The very narrative of romantic friendship has long hindered scholars from serious consideration of representations of female-female desire in early modern
culture” (250). However, Wahl also argues that nowadays it is “no longer possible [...] to ignore the “open secret” that female intimacy might entail lesbian desire” (14). Yet, in the eighteenth century, people believed that female-female desire is only a phase in a woman’s life. “By the early eighteenth century, the more threatening implications of female homosexuality within libertine literature were routinely countered by incorporating representations of female-female desire as a transitory ‘scene’ within a much larger narrative of sexual discovery in which lesbian sexuality could be framed as a preparatory ‘initiation’ leading into heterosexual experience or as a sexual practice that merely sufficed in the absence of an able male partner” (Wahl 236). Put differently, ideas of or hints at lesbianism in literature, or even obvious lesbian representations in literature were turned into a certain phase of a woman’s life, and this phase was seen as something women could outgrow. This lesbian phase, in its turn, was seen as a period of time in which the woman would develop herself and her sexual desires, only to be ready for a heterosexual relationship afterwards, as said before. Thus, female-female desire was seen as practice for a heterosexual relationship, and it was argued that women only experienced female-female desire because they had not met the right man yet. In that sense, lesbianism was acknowledged, but only for the use of a transitory phase towards a good heterosexual relationship. Put differently, lesbianism was, as Wahl argues, an “open secret”, because society did acknowledge the existence, but justified it with the claim that lesbianism was beneficial for heterosexual marriage.

Although “by the second half of the eighteenth century in England, romantic friendships became a popular theme in fiction” (Faderman 103), it was still a very difficult subject to explore, as the subject of female sexuality was restricted. To explain, it was possible for a writer to write extensively about a romantic friendship between two women, where the women cared so much for each other they were literally “willing to sacrifice everything for each other, even life itself” (Faderman 108). Their relationship would be
described as passionate and caring and it would provide women with a feeling of hope. However, because of the limits that were put on a romantic friendship, writers were also limited in their fiction. Since “marriage to a man was frequently regarded as necessary [in the eighteenth century]” (Faderman 108), the stories that would contain a romantic friendship between two women, would eventually have a plot where the woman, or women, would eventually marry to a man. Faderman argues that stories about a romantic friendship would always end with a heterosexual marriage, because, that way “none of the writers could have been accused of attempting to subvert marriage and the social structure” (109). Put differently, society would not object to a romantic friendship between women in fiction, because a friendship would not undermine male supremacy. As stated earlier, it was believed that a romantic friendship would only be beneficial for men. However, if a writer would decide to disregard the existing notions of heterosexual marriage and write about a romantic friendship where the women would stay together forever, the writer could have been accused of wanting to change social hierarchies and the marriage system.

Furthermore, for Wollstonecraft romantic friendships with women were not uncommon; she had a romantic friendship with Jane Arden for a while and continued writing Arden after their relationship had ended. Their letters can be found in The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft, edited by Janet Todd. The more significant romantic friendship Wollstonecraft experienced, however, was with her friend Fanny Blood, who was also the inspiration for the character of Ann in Mary: a Fiction. Mary echoes Wollstonecraft’s biography, since, as Wollstonecraft herself has said, the story of Mary is similar to personal experiences. In 1774, when Mary Wollstonecraft was sixteen year old, she met Fanny, which had an immense impact on the young Wollstonecraft. Very soon, “to live with Fanny became Mary’s dream” (Flexner 26). Fanny would become so important for Wollstonecraft that she would choose Fanny and her family over her own family. Still, Wollstonecraft’s love for
Fanny Blood was later considered to have been nothing more than a teenage crush; a stage in life which Wollstonecraft outgrew when Fanny Blood died.¹ According to the Lesbian History group, this type of diminishing of the lesbian was not uncommon, and “there are many ways to ‘normalize’ a lesbian” (4). Often the relationship of Mary Wollstonecraft and Fanny Blood is depicted as a crush, and only occasionally is Fanny Blood acknowledged as “the main love of [Wollstonecraft’s] youth” (Todd 13), with whom Wollstonecraft wanted to live her life. Still, the main focus of most critics is put on Wollstonecraft’s relationships with men, and, with that, her relationships with women are being diminished. “Historians remain extraordinarily indifferent to the strength of women’s feelings for other women” (Lesbian History Group 4), even though there are often enough indications for believing that a woman was not a heterosexual.

William Godwin, in *Memoirs*, states that “a considerable part of this story consists, with certain modifications, of the incidents of [Wollstonecraft’s] own friendship with Fanny. All the events that do not relate to that subject are fictitious” (Godwin 60). In the letters to Arden, Wollstonecraft was not afraid to express her love for Fanny. The first letter, in which Wollstonecraft mentioned Fanny, dates from around 1780. Wollstonecraft writes:

> At their house too, I enjoyed the society of a friend, whom I love better than all the world beside, a friend to whom I am bound by every tie of gratitude and inclination: to live with this friend is the height of my ambition, and indeed it is the most rational wish I could make […]. (*Letters* 24-25)

In a later letter to Jane Arden, Wollstonecraft writes:

> The roses will bloom when there’s peace in the breast, and
> the prospect of living with my Fanny gladdens my heart: – You
> know not how I love her. (*Letters* 35)

From the letters to Arden it is very clear that Wollstonecraft felt very strongly for her friend Fanny, and her future plan was not to be bound to a man through marriage, but to live with Fanny forever. “Even as late as 1783 Mary [Wollstonecraft] was still pursuing her dream of their life together” (Faderman 139). This shows that Wollstonecraft’s infatuation with Fanny had lasted for about three years, and it would still continue after 1783. Even when Wollstonecraft had advised Blood to marry Hugh Skeys, she did this for Fanny Blood’s best interest, and thus, out of love for Blood. But even after Blood’s death, “Wollstonecraft was never able to forget her first powerful involvement. She always wore a locket with Fanny’s hair, and in 1794 she named her first child Fanny” (Faderman 140).

Despite various indications that Wollstonecraft felt very passionately for Blood, many critics look at their relationship as purely a friendship or, as explained earlier, a romantic friendship. Moreover, her friendship with Fanny Blood is mostly seen as a transitory phase from female-female desire to a perfectly working heterosexual relationship. In that sense, many people consider Wollstonecraft’s love for Fanny Blood a phase. This idea may have been taken from Godwin’s *Memoirs*, as “Godwin’s biography became the standard source for Wollstonecraft’s life immediately upon publication” (Myers 299), and people drew on Godwin’s writings for information about Wollstonecraft and her personal life. In *Memoirs*, Godwin acknowledges the strong passions Wollstonecraft felt for Fanny Blood, as he calls
R.S. Keupink, s1782525, Mary Wollstonecraft and the Lost Battle for Sexual Freedom, Adviser: Dr. K. de Vries, 15.317 words

their connection “memorable”, and says that their friendship was “so warm, as for years to have constituted the ruling passion of [Wollstonecraft’s] mind” (Godwin 20). Godwin also acknowledges the fact that Wollstonecraft devoted a large part of her life to Blood, and he states that Blood became “the chosen object of Mary’s attachment” (Godwin 47) over the course of more than ten years, and even for some time after Blood had died. However, despite his acknowledgement of their relationship, Godwin consistently calls the relationship of Wollstonecraft and Blood merely a friendship, and seems to want to emphasize that Wollstonecraft and Blood mostly had an educational relationship. To explain, Godwin continuously stresses that Wollstonecraft benefited from the friendship with Fanny Blood, as it helped her to develop herself. According to Godwin, “the acquaintance of Fanny […] contributed to ripen the immature talents of Mary” (Godwin 21). He also states that Fanny Blood educated Wollstonecraft in writing and literature, as she “undertook to be her instructor” (Godwin 23). Seemingly, Godwin wanted to make clear that the friendship Wollstonecraft and Blood enjoyed, was educational for Wollstonecraft, and would help her in her further life. Thus, Godwin’s description of the friendship between Wollstonecraft and Blood fits the eighteenth century idea that romantic friendships between women were beneficial in the development of the self.

According to Elfenbein, Godwin’s Memoirs influenced the fashioning of Wollstonecraft as a writer, since his words were taken as facts on Wollstonecraft’s personal life. Ashley Tauchert states: “Wollstonecraft is given her moment of same-sex desire and potentially erotic intimacy, but usually swiftly returned to the familiar and easier to digest narrative of her more central and significant relationships with men” (238-39). Tauchert also claims that critics did seem to acknowledge Wollstonecraft’s same-sex desire, but only to use it as a way of showing what they thought was wrong from right. In that sense, her biographers and the critics ghosted the lesbian aspects of Wollstonecraft’s life, to make her story more
tolerable for the audience. Elfenbein argues that “this tidying-up of Wollstonecraft’s sexuality dates back to the first biography of her, Godwin’s *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* [...]” (229). Godwin’s story of Wollstonecraft caused Wollstonecraft’s biographers to take his writings of Wollstonecraft for truth. Consequently, Wollstonecraft would be regarded as a woman whose main wish was to have a good marriage, and her works, in their turn, were interpreted in a way that would emphasize this idea. Wollstonecraft’s written works were used as evidence for her being a heterosexual woman, or, as Elfenstein states that Wollstonecraft’s “biographers have hyper-heterosexualized her” (233), even though *Mary* suggests a lesbian plot, as discussed earlier. For most people, “the marriage or motherhood of any woman is considered to be proof against the accusation [of lesbian]” (Lesbian History Group 5), and Wollstonecraft’s eventual marriage with Godwin was enough proof for critics to believe that Wollstonecraft’s work was not to be approached with a lesbian reading of the text.

Mitzi Myers discusses the idea that Godwin’s *Memoirs* is used to shape the author’s self and the self of the subject. Myers suggests that the difficulty with Godwin’s *Memoirs* is that they are, apart from being, “in a sense, Wollstonecraft’s autobiography, they are also, like all their successors, an interpretation, one which is very much a part of Godwin’s intellectual – and emotional – autobiography” (300). What Myers means is that Godwin wrote *Memoirs* from a personal perspective, but he also used *Memoirs* to positively represent his own character. In that sense, “Godwin’s memoir is an unusual hybrid, one which unites Wollstonecraft’s notions of herself, Godwin’s reading of her character, and his analysis of that character’s impact on himself and his philosophy” (Myers 300).

Furthermore, as Myers suggests, the art of writing, whether it is, fiction, an autobiography, or a biography, involves certain imagination, so each writing is “in important ways necessarily a fiction, the artistic recreation, even creation, of a character’s essence” (308). In the case of Godwin’s *Memoirs*, then, Godwin has used the power of being the author
by “exercising the imaginative freedom of the artist, demonstrating through his selection and shaping of fact” (Myers 308). Moreover, Myers mentions that Godwin had a certain “imaginative apperception of Wollstonecraft” (310) which he, then, helped come alive in Memoirs. To explain, Myers claims that Godwin constituted a certain self of Wollstonecraft; a self that has come to existence by Godwin’s own imagination of her. Myers argues that Godwin uses Memoirs as a tool for self-emendation, and he claims that Godwin “did not in fact tell everything he knew” (309). According to Myers, Godwin decided to omit or alter particular parts of Wollstonecraft’s life in order to make the story fit to his own needs. If this is to be believed, then Memoirs, instead of being a factual representation of Mary Wollstonecraft’s life, is a writing that is intended to shape a public image of Wollstonecraft, but also to shape a public image of Godwin himself. Given that Wollstonecraft was not alive anymore to counter Godwin’s representation of her, Godwin had the entire freedom to create this moral model and to write the memoirs from his own point of view.

One example of Godwin exercising self-emendation and imaginative freedom in Memoirs is when he argues that Wollstonecraft had “never loved till now” (Myers 313). However, this statement undermines Wollstonecraft’s love for Fanny Blood, and agrees to the idea of a story about same-sex attraction ending with a heterosexual plot. Considering that Godwin’s Memoirs were the standard source for preceding biographies of Wollstonecraft, it is not peculiar that people ignored or simply overlooked the female-female desire Wollstonecraft experienced in her life. Yet, by claiming that Wollstonecraft had never experienced love until she met him, Godwin does exactly what many people did in the eighteenth century: he uses Wollstonecraft’s lesbian experiences to turn them into a transitory phase for a good heterosexual marriage. In short, Godwin’s representation of Wollstonecraft in Memoirs makes it even more difficult to determine a definite lesbian storyline in Wollstonecraft’s Mary, because Memoirs easily aligns with the idea of female-female desire
being the transition to a heterosexual plot. Given that *Mary* is a story drawn from personal experiences, as Wollstonecraft and Godwin both stated, the idea of a heterosexual plot in *Mary* becomes more prominent due to Godwin’s *Memoirs*.

Furthermore, in *Memoirs*, Godwin describes a particular instance of Wollstonecraft’s and Blood’s friendship, where Blood desires a home for herself and Wollstonecraft decides to help her. Godwin writes:

> Mary, who felt nothing more pressing than to relieve the inconveniences of her friend, determined to accomplish this object for her. It cost her infinite exertions; but at length she was able to announce to Fanny that a house was prepared, and that she was on the spot to receive her. (Godwin 40)

In Godwin’s words, helping Fanny Blood to obtain a house was purely initiated by Wollstonecraft’s desire to help her friend. Wollstonecraft’s letters, however, suggest otherwise, as Wollstonecraft exclaims her own desire in this particular instance; the desire to live with her friend Fanny. In a letter to Everina Wollstonecraft, Wollstonecraft writes: “with economy we can live on a guinea a week and that sum we can with ease earn”—the lady who gave Fanny five guineas for two drawings will assist us and we shall be independent” (*Letters* 46). Thus, from this letter, it appears that Wollstonecraft’s own intention was to live with Fanny Blood and have financial independence. Faderman argues that, “even as late as 1783 Mary [Wollstonecraft] was still pursuing her dream of their life together” (Faderman 139). All in all, Godwin’s account of the instance where Wollstonecraft searched for a house for Blood is written from a personal perspective, where Godwin leaves out particular information that seems relevant for determining the character of Wollstonecraft and Blood’s relationship. While Godwin suggests that Wollstonecraft merely wanted to help Blood, other texts,
Wollstonecraft’s own letters included, suggest that there was a personal desire involved as well.

Furthermore, it is difficult to establish differences between the eighteenth-century romantic friendship and a twenty-first century lesbian relationship, because both relationships show similar aspects. In the eighteenth century, a romantic friendship would include the same aspects as a lesbian relationship, only without a sexual relationship. In addition, it is difficult to state that all romantic friendships lacked sexual contact, because of the notion that women should be passionless. Moreover, as Faderman suggests, “if one believes that lesbianism is primarily a sexual phenomenon, there is no similarity. But women who identify themselves as lesbian generally do not view lesbianism as a sexual phenomenon first and foremost” (142). The difficulty, thus, lies in the social arena in which the relationships exist. In the eighteenth century, a sexual relationship between women would have been considered unethical, but a romantic friendship, which included hugging and kissing and developing passions that were necessary for a marriage, was accepted and even celebrated. By contrast, a lesbian relationship in the twenty-first century, requires all the aspects that a romantic friendship would have had, but with the additional sexual activity. “If eighteenth-century romantic friends had lived in the twentieth [or twenty-first] century, they would have had to deal very consciously with the “sexual implications” of their attachment […], and they would have realized, had they manifested the same level of involvement with one another, that the term “lesbian” would probably be applied to their relationship, regardless of whether it was really sexual” (Faderman 142-43). Put differently, if two women with a romantic friendship would have lived in the twenty-first century, their relationship would probably have been considered a lesbian relationship. For a twenty-first century reader of *Mary*, therefore, the relationship of Ann and Mary can be regarded as a lesbian relationship, even though Wollstonecraft does not literally state it as one.
Additionally, Wahl argues that the “relations of gender and sexuality within which English culture expressed its expanding consciousness of female homoeroticism, was complicated” (52). Wahl explains that there existed “cultural indifference to the desire of one woman for another” (52), and this indifference is linked to the idea of “ghosting” the lesbian, which will be explained later. Wahl also argues that not acknowledging lesbian relationships in the eighteenth century can be explained by a fear of such relationships threatening “social stability, as defined by a patriarchal system of kinship and marriage” (52). In that sense, Wahl agrees with Faderman, as is explained earlier. All in all, eighteenth century England had more reasons to ignore lesbian relationships than the twenty-first century has, because their social system was different from contemporary society. Therefore, it is not a difference in character of a same-sex relationship in the eighteenth century and in the twenty-first century that defines whether it was a romantic friendship or a lesbian relationship. Instead, the deviance is created by a difference in the attitude towards female-female desire that creates the difference between an eighteenth-century concept and a twenty-first century concept of a female-female relationship. Remarkably, the determination of a lesbian relationship relies on different criteria than the determination of a heterosexual relationship, as a lesbian relationship needs to have clear sexual activity before it can be stated as a lesbian relationship. However, a heterosexual relationship does not need this to be stated explicitly. As the Lesbian History Group argues: “The term ‘lesbian’ refers solely to a sexual practice, and not to a mode of life in which a woman’s political, intellectual, emotional, social and sexual energies are focused on other women” (6). Thus, although a lesbian relationship consists of more than just sexual contact, the only criterion a female-female relationship needs to meet is the sexual aspect for it to be considered a lesbian relationship. The Lesbian History Group explains how “a high degree of certainty is expected before historians or biographers are allowed to use the label lesbian. […]. What our critics want is incontrovertible evidence of sexual activity between
women” (7). However, it seems unlikely for women who were sexually involved with one another to be open and vocal about their sexual behavior, especially in the eighteenth century, because of the taboo around female sexuality. To use sexual contact as an indicator for a lesbian relationship, thus, means an automatic elimination of most lesbian relationships. Moreover, when it comes to heterosexual relationships, sexuality does not need to be the main factor of the relationship. For example, in Mary, the relationship between Mary and Henry is seen as a heterosexual relationship, and many critics read the story with a heterosexual plot. However, nowhere in the novel does Wollstonecraft make it explicit that Mary and Henry are sexually involved with one another. Sexual activity, therefore, is not necessary in order to claim a relationship as heterosexual, while it is a necessary factor for a lesbian relationship.

In addition, if Wollstonecraft’s ideas on sexuality are compared with the relationship of Ann and Mary in Mary, their romantic friendship signifies Wollstonecraft’s notion of a good relationship. In Rights of Woman Wollstonecraft rejects the idea of female passion and advocates for a marriage without sexuality being its main focus. Instead, Wollstonecraft insisted on an emotional bond, with friendship and equality as the base of the relationship, and at the base of society as a whole. Wollstonecraft argues:

This passion, naturally increased by suspense and difficulties,
draws the mind out of its accustomed state, and exalts the affections; but the security of marriage, allowing the fever of love to subside, a healthy temperature is thought insipid, only by those who have not sufficient intellect to substitute the calm tenderness of friendship, the confidence of respect, instead of blind admiration, and the sensual emotions of fondness. (Wollstonecraft 113-114)

Thus, it is clear that Wollstonecraft favored friendship and respect over sexuality, and she
even compares the ability to feel friendship and respect to a certain level of intellect. Todd argues that “Wollstonecraft could be stern on emotion because she insisted on disdaining the passionate sexual love that stayed fixed on this earth” (183). The relationship of Mary and Ann in *Mary*, then, could possibly lack sexual contact, not only because of eighteenth century ideas on lesbianism, but also because Wollstonecraft did not care too much about sex in general. The lack of sexual contact in *Mary* therefore, does not immediately justify the argument that Mary and Ann were not in a lesbian relationship. The argument that sexual activity in a female-female friendship is a way to determine whether or not their relationship can be named a lesbian relationship thus falls short, because sexual activity may not be the main concern.

Furthermore, there may be other indicators of lesbianism in English literature, but these are not easy to detect because writers became “more cautious in the expression of same-sex love” (Jennings 43). As a result, straightforward language was avoided and writers used other tactics to describe same-sex relationships. “Historian Katherine Binhammer has argues that pain and suffering also emerged as a literary device indicating illicit erotic sensibility” (Jennings 44). According to Binhammer “pain functions as a sexual desire in novels such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Mary*, where the heroine is depicted as going to considerable lengths to care for her invalid friend Ann” (Jennings 44). After Ann dies, Mary becomes depressed and eventually longs for death, which also indicates a certain pain and suffering that could indicate that Mary suffered because she could not be herself entirely due to social standards.

Altogether, the novel *Mary* evokes an ambiguity around the female-female relationship in the storyline, as it is mostly seen as a pathological period in the life of the protagonist Mary; a period that represents the younger years of a lost woman who eventually finds herself due to heterosexual love. As Johnson states: “despite the intensity of Mary’s love, and the amount of space devoted to in skittish representation, it has received little
attention, and is generally passed over quickly to make way for the heterosexual plot later depicted, or discusses as pathological evasion of such relations” (53). Indeed the story devotes much of its quantity to the relationship of Mary and Ann, and even more on Mary’s feelings for Ann and how they influenced her behavior and state of being. Still, their relationship remains rather ambiguous throughout the story, as their relationship is “hardly disembodied” (Johnson 54). Wollstonecraft avoids clear language that suggests a sexual relationship between Mary and Ann, and instead she uses sentences that only hint at sexual contact. Thus, not only do critics deny the idea of female-female sexuality in the storyline, the narrator also remains ambiguous in its language concerning the sexuality of the character of Mary.

The reason for the ambiguity around the sexuality of the character of Mary in *Mary: a Fiction*, then, can be explained with the idea of “ghosting”, presented by Terry Castle, in *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (1993). Terry Castle believes that female-female sexuality in Western literature and culture has frequently and continuously been denied or obscured, and in her introduction to the book she speaks of “the ghosting of the lesbian” (5), by which she means that the lesbian is “made to seem invisible – by culture itself” (4). According to Castle, the ghosting of lesbians happened either unintentionally or intentionally. Of the first type of “ghosting”, the type that happens unintentionally, Castle asks: “Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian – even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us?” (4). She then continues by explaining that this obliviousness is caused by culture itself, and this type of “ghosting” could be categorized as the intentional ghosting. Castle argues that the intentional ghosting of the lesbian happened by culture, and could be explained by the fear of Western civilization of “women without men” (5), and the idea that “the lesbian represents a threat to patriarchal protocol” (4). Put differently, in a world with male domination, the lesbian would be a threat because she would be “indifferent or resistant to male desire” (5), and could therefore undermine the idea that men were needed or
dominant in society. This explanation of ghosting, thus, aligns with previously mentioned explanations for the denial of lesbian existence.

The idea of the “ghosting of the lesbian”, then, is valuable for Mary Wollstonecraft as well, as it is relevant in interpreting her works, but it is also partly present in her own life. Firstly, in *Mary*, the character of Mary shows clear signs of lesbianism, however most interpretations of the work seem to glorify Mary’s relationship with Henry over her relationship with Ann. Furthermore, Terry Castle explains that homosexuality for women was unaccepted in modern civilization, and many “lesbians in real life have engaged in a sort of self-ghosting, hiding or camouflaging their sexual desires or withdrawing voluntarily from society in order to escape hostility” (7). This self-ghosting is also done by the character of Mary, who escapes society with Ann, possibly not only to escape from her marriage but also to escape from the hostility of her society when it comes to lesbianism. As Mary herself says, “the world condemns […] her conduct” (47), and “is ever hostile and armed against the feeling heart” (47). Still, within the storyline Mary seems to try to self-ghost her sexuality, but the novel itself does not blur out the fact that she is attracted to a woman. In that sense, despite clear indications that the character of Mary is gay, the fact that the character of Mary is possibly a lesbian seems to be mostly ignored or simply unnoticed. As Castle argues, “when it comes to lesbians […], many people have trouble seeing what’s in front of them […], even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent, at the center of the screen [and] some may even deny that she exists at all” (2). In the case of Mary, thus, the fact that her character was possibly a lesbian is either denied, or remains unseen, despite the clear suggestions and the obvious proof that is indeed present in the novel.
Chapter 3

Eighteenth-Century Society and Rights of Woman

All the struggles represented in Mary, were “later developed in the Rights of Woman into a universal call for reform of the whole of society” (Brody 14). However, before the two texts can be compared and contrasted with each other, it is helpful to understand the struggles with society Wollstonecraft represents in Mary. In addition, it is important to understand how quickly a certain interpretation of the text can ignore vital themes of a text.

To begin with, Gary Kelly, in Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft, claims that Mary “could be seen as [Wollstonecraft’s] declaration of independence” (40). Kelly used The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft, edited by Ralph M. Wardle and printed in 1797, in order to explain this idea. Kelly says that “Wollstonecraft wrote to Henry Gabell in September 1787 that […] she had ‘lately written, a fiction…it’s a tale, to illustrate an opinion of mine, that a genius will educate itself’ (Letters, p. 162)” (40). However, saying that Mary can be seen as a declaration of independence, is ignoring important parts from the story that are symbolic for the story itself, as well as for the context in which the story is set. A collection of different struggles are represented in the story, and they are also present within different aspects of the story. Altogether, these struggles add to the complexity of the novel which could at its best be an attempt to obtain independence, but does not seem to declare independence it itself. Kelly, in calling the novel a declaration of independence, ignores facts from the story, such as the ending, but he also ignores certain interpretations based on messages that could be hidden under the surface of the story, but which may be very important in the meaning of the story itself.

To explain, Mary is about the journey of a young woman and the struggles she has to face throughout her life. These struggles, which are both external and internal struggles, all add to her persona. Mary does not agree with the marriage system, gender ideas, and social
prejudices in society, and, therefore, tries to escape it. Put differently, the society in which she lives and the existing social standards are different from Mary’s own ideals, and these examples are some of the external struggles Mary has to face. Mary struggles with a void in her heart that causes internal struggles too; she is married off to a man she does not love, and she has parents that never showed her the love she desired. These struggles are, in their turn, influenced by her personal battle between mind and body, between reason and emotion. Throughout the novel, Mary struggles with these issues, yet she continuously tries to conquer them. Mary overcomes some issues, such as escaping the environment in which she lives, and experiencing a relationship based on friendship and equality, so it appears that she has obtained everything she longed for in the beginning of the novel.

Yet, the protagonist Mary seems to remain dependent on many different factors throughout her life, those being the want for love and the need to fill the void in her heart, the need for social connections despite her will to be independent, and her constant depression, which dominates her life. Moreover, Mary’s issues are similar to the issues Wollstonecraft faced in her own life, as Wollstonecraft “struggled for a full life – for personal liberation, economic independence and for a release from the emotional insecurity imposed on her by her refusing the traditional safeguard of early marriage” (Brody 8). Taking this into consideration, it seems unlikely that Wollstonecraft used Mary as a certain declaration of independence, since the protagonist, whether she represents the narrator or not, does not appear to be independent at all. Kelly’s interpretation of Mary as being a declaration of independence, therefore, seems to be purely based on Mary’s success in overcoming some of her struggles. In that case, Kelly seems to ignore the fact that, regardless of the issues Mary overcomes, she remains unhappy throughout the entire novel. In the end of the story Mary’s only true wish left is a death-wish, as mentioned earlier, because she thinks that death is the only way left to escape her predestined life. The ending of Mary, thus, suggests that Mary was not successful.
at all. Therefore, stating that the novel is a declaration of independence is ignoring an important theme in the story; the theme of unhappiness with the social structure. This theme is recurrent in Wollstonecraft’s other works, such as Rights of Woman, and Maria, or, the Wrongs of Woman, and should, therefore, not be overlooked.

Mary’s story suggests that Mary’s struggle is a battle between her feelings and the reasoning of society, and how this struggle creates a gloom in her that changes her character. To demonstrate, as Mary struggles with her feelings for Ann, and the death of Ann, her character develops negatively. While young Mary is a powerful and independent female, adult Mary seems to have lost her power and has become depressed and hopeless. On page 47, then, Mary’s personal struggle becomes even more obvious, as she says “I cannot conquer my feelings”. She continues by saying that “you may tell me I follow a fleeting good, an ignis fatuus; but this chase, these struggles prepare me for eternity – when I no longer see through a glass darkly I shall not reason, but feel in what happiness consists” (Wollstonecraft 47). Mary, in other words, says that she understands how “you”—which in this case can mean any person and therefore can be representative of a general opinion in society—may say that Mary follows a misguiding light, an ignis fatuus, but that this misguiding light is the light she needs in order to get out of the gloom. Mary also suggests that reasoning instead of feeling makes her unhappy. In other words, only when she stops trying to conquer her feelings with reason, but instead allows herself to feel what she feels, only then will she know what happiness is. In that sense, Mary shows how feelings for women, or, same-sex attraction, is being looked down on by eighteenth century society, and the novel shows how society’s standards influence Mary’s state of mind. Yet, these social standards contradict Mary’s feelings, and this contrast creates a constant battle between head and heart; Mary’s heart wants to be free, but Mary’s head is aware of the implications of acting from a free heart. Mary is also very aware of her heart wanting a love which society condemns. Altogether, the story emphasizes
negative consequences of social pressure, as the story shows how Mary struggles with her feelings, and how her feelings do not fit the standards of society. The gloom, then, is created by society, which does not allow Mary to be herself.

Significantly, Mary is completely aware of the fact that her feelings go against society’s standards, and she is constantly being reminded of what is seen as the right way of living. To explain, in chapter six, Mary and Ann embark on a ship and Ann is in such poor health that Mary fears for Ann’s life. Mary shares her sentiment with three ladies on the ship, and exclaims to them: “I cannot live without her! – I have no other friend; if I lose her, what a desart will the world be to me” (Wollstonecraft 24). The ladies are rather surprised by Mary’s outcry, and they ask Mary: “have you not a husband?” (Wollstonecraft 24). From Mary’s response it is clear that she feels ashamed for her sentiments, and, moreover, she understands that her feelings for Ann are not seen as natural by other people, because the ladies immediately ask her about her husband. Given the fact that the response of the ladies is not empathetic, but more a response with a judgmental tone, it is clear that standards of society are significantly present on the novel. Moreover, because Mary is aware of the disapproving character of society towards her feelings, she is constantly dealing with society’s reasoning as opposed to her own feelings. Mary recognizes that acting upon her feelings would mean personal happiness; however, she understands that society would consider her happiness as madness. Therefore, Mary concludes that “anything like happiness is madness” (Wollstonecraft 51), where after she chooses to let go of her hope for happiness and continue to live “in the deep shades o’er which darkness hangs” (Wollstonecraft 52). From this it can be concluded that Mary’s happiness, which is the freedom to feel attracted to women and act on that, will be seen as madness by society. Mary, moreover, is aware of this condemnation by society of her true self, and she decides to live her life in unhappiness instead of following her heart.
All in all, the character of Mary is constantly guided by a love for Ann, but she feels misguided because society forces her to act differently. Moreover, she does not feel the freedom to act upon what her heart wants, but instead she experiences constant pressure from society to live by the rules. This pressure, in its turn, is based upon social gender roles. In the eighteenth century a woman is expected to have a husband, and, moreover, is not free to develop herself and her own character. Since many, if not all of Wollstonecraft’s writings deal with the issue of gender and female emancipation, *Mary* evokes the idea that lesbianism might be another issue that was present in Wollstonecraft’s writings. In that case, the reading of *Mary* can be applied to *Rights of Woman*, and the aspect of lesbians, additional to feminism and equality, could come forth. Consequently, a lesbian reading of *Rights of Woman* may change the character of the text itself.

However, despite similar themes in Wollstonecraft’s writings, it could be argued that *Rights of Woman* does not align with the theme of *Mary*, as it is interpreted and explained in chapter 1. To explain, Wollstonecraft is very clear about her opinion on sexual relationships, and, moreover, speaks against female sexual activity in one particular passage:

In nurseries and boarding-schools, I fear, girls are first spoiled, particularly in the latter. A number of girls sleep in the same room, and wash together. And though I should be sorry to contaminate an innocent creature’s mind by instilling false delicacy, or those indecent prudish notions which early cautions respecting the other sex naturally engender, I should be very anxious to prevent their acquiring nasty or immodest habits; and as many girls have learned very nasty tricks from ignorant servants, the mixing them thus indiscriminately together, is very improper. (Wollstonecraft 234)
Firstly, this passage seems to suggest that Wollstonecraft is against all-girl schools, since she argues that putting girls together would enhance their indecent behavior. The girls, as Wollstonecraft argues, would eventually practice ‘nasty tricks’, with which Wollstonecraft refers to sexual activity. This passage, thus, might evoke an idea that Wollstonecraft is against all-girl schools, because it will lead to girls practicing sexuality together. This, in its turn, could be associated with lesbianism. In that case, the interpretation of this passage does contrast with the interpretation of Mary that is suggested and explained in chapter 1. Susan Gubar explains that “Wollstonecraft the novelist valorizes the nurturing comfort and intensity of female intimacies; however, Wollstonecraft the philosopher hints at the obscene debaucherries of such contacts” (461). Gubar, herewith, underlines the contrasting tones of Wollstonecraft’s fiction and her political work concerning the topic of female intimacy.

However, Gubar further explains that these “odd juxtapositions […] imply that the misogynist portrait of the feminine penned by the feminist may, in fact, represent Wollstonecraft’s efforts to negotiate the distance between desire and read, what she thought she should have been and what she feared herself to be” (461). In other words, the friction between Wollstonecraft’s novels and Rights of Woman may have been a representation of a battle between head and heart.

By contrast, though, Janet Todd suggests that the passage concerning the school girls does not clearly state that Wollstonecraft is against lesbianism. It does state her clear position against female sexual activity, which can arise at a very young age due to bad influences, but Wollstonecraft “was vague whether she meant masturbation or lesbianism” (Todd 23). Moreover, Wollstonecraft makes clear in Rights of Woman that she believes in a certain class distinction, and this passage also underlines her idea that lower classes have a bad influence on classes that rank higher on the social ladder. The passage, therefore, means to say that “the improper mixing of the classes leads to sexual impropriety” (Furniss 199), and, as Furniss
further explains, relates to the need of a certain modesty in women. Moreover, it was difficult for women to speak of sexuality in the eighteenth century, which further explains the absence of sexual activity in Mary, and Wollstonecraft’s stance on the subject.

Still, the ambiguity concerning female sexuality in Rights of Woman aligns with the vagueness and ambiguity around Mary and Ann’s relationship in Mary. If Wollstonecraft indeed practiced some type of self-ghosting in Mary, as is suggested earlier, then the act of self-ghosting might be an explanation for ambiguity in Rights of Woman as well. Terry Castle says that “politically speaking, the lesbian is usually treated as a nonperson” (5), which would mean that a lesbian would be completely stripped from her human rights. In the eighteenth century, Wollstonecraft questioned the idea of human rights and how they were dependent on gender, and her feminist ideas are acknowledged entirely as she is now considered to be a “revolutionary feminist” (Kelly 1). Wollstonecraft’s Rights of Woman, moreover, is considered to be one of her most feminist works as it contains many arguments that aim at female rights and the role of a woman in society. However, it could be considered that the radically feminist ideas in Rights of Woman were not only feminist ideas, but they also served as a camouflage for Wollstonecraft’s other wish; to have a world that was less condemning towards same-sex attraction. Following the words of Castle once more, “lesbians in real life have engaged in a sort of self-ghosting, hiding or camouflaging their sexual desires” (7), it could be possible that, in order to prevent herself from being considered a nonperson, Wollstonecraft had to camouflage part of her intentions in her political writings in order to make sure her words would be read or heard. Or, as Tauchert argues:

Since love between women has no formal mode of self-expression
in the late eighteenth century, we could argue that it would be expected
to manifest as a claim to encoded masculinity in writing, as well as in figurations
of an Imaginary transgendered body. Feminism might in this context be considered a mode emerging from the transgendering of female-embodied same-sex desire. (241)

Tauchert, in this case, argues that masculinity in females may have been a way to explain same-sex attraction, as the idea of masculinity and femininity was more accepted than same-sex attraction for females. Masculinity in women, then, was a way of explaining why a woman would be attracted to another woman, but, moreover, it was a justification of the female-female sexuality as making a woman masculine would automatically diminish the idea that masculinity was, or, men were not needed. Yet, Tauchert uses this argument to present the idea that feminism may have been a way to explain lesbian ideas, as feminist ideas were more or less accepted. In this case, feminism serves as the camouflage for lesbianism, and this idea aligns with Terry Castle’s ideas on self-ghosting.

Johnson suggests that “In Mary, then, Wollstonecraft tries to imagine a possibility which Vindication of the Rights of Woman denies” (54). This suggestion aims at the possibility for women to inhere a certain masculinity which in Rights of Woman seems to be only possible for male bodies. Johnson continues by saying that “denial often implies the presence of something to be denied, and in [Mary: a Fiction] Mary’s attachment to Ann is brought into specific conflict with heterosexual norms” (55). What Johnson seems to suggest is that the denial of homosexual behavior in Rights of Woman is presumably a result of it being present, and the text ought to achieve that the heterosexual norms presented in the political text are there to undermine or camouflage pro-homosexual tendencies. In fact, in Mary, Wollstonecraft seems to use the idea of a female genius in order to justify a female-female relationship, and in Rights of Woman she also refers to the genius. Although Wollstonecraft “avoids the vocabulary of genius for the most part” (Elfenbein 239), she does
provoke an assumption that *Rights of Woman* refers to the genius, and not just the male genius but herself as a genius as well. Elfenbein suggests that “the sexual implications of Wollstonecraft’s identification with genius in *Rights of Woman* surface only at the margins of her argument” (239). According to Elfenbein, Wollstonecraft uses the footnotes to refer to female geniuses “whom she admires because the received a ‘masculine education’” (239). These references show Wollstonecraft’s idea of women inheriting masculinity, which does align with the storyline of *Mary*, in which Mary is presented as a masculine female. However, as Elfenbein also states, “In moving from the private arena of *Mary* to the public one of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft discovers that genius shares too much with forms of sexuality that she needs to stigmatize to be useful to her” (240). The idea of genius, then, even though only lightly present in *Rights of Woman*, does represent Wollstonecraft’s ideas about gender, and in how far genius is considered to be a word that is generally linked to masculinity. In addition, her lack of addressing the word in full shows how she is perfectly aware of the implications and consequences that the usage of the word ‘genius’ could have for the credibility of *Rights of Woman*. Therefore, instead of addressing the idea of a female genius, Wollstonecraft shifted to addressing certain political claims such as gender equality, with which she tried to get rid of conventional ideas on gender distinctions. Ultimately, *Mary* and *Rights of Woman* are more similar to each other than first assumed, because they both challenge the eighteenth-century concept of gender distinctions. *Mary* does this with its representation of a female genius, and *Rights of Woman* in a more direct approach to advocate gender equality, and by referring indirectly to the female genius.

The argument that *Rights of Woman* does not align with *Mary* in its attitude towards same-sex relationships, then, could be undermined with a simplification of the themes of *Rights of Woman*. Tomalin argues that the main theme is:
That women are human beings before they are sexual beings, that mind has no sex, and that society is wasting its assets if it retains women in the role of convenient domestic slaves and “alluring mistresses’, denies them economic independence and encourages them to be docile and attentive to their looks to the exclusion of all else. (105)

If the theme Tomalin suggests indeed sums up the main issues Wollstonecraft wants to advocate, then it can be said that Wollstonecraft does not speak against homosexuality in her texts at all. In fact, Wollstonecraft appears rather liberal in terms of sexual preferences. To explain, the argument that “women are human beings before sexual beings” shows that Wollstonecraft values emotions and feelings of sexual feelings and behavior. Apart from insisting that women ought to be treated as equal to men, the statement suggests that women are human beings, and are, therefore, entitled to their feelings, their emotions, and their own thoughts. If this is to be compared to the novel Mary, in which the character Mary is independent in terms of feelings, emotions, and thoughts, and, most importantly, is devoted to Ann, then Rights of Woman seems to align with the novel Mary. Moreover, the lack of sexual behavior as an argument for Mary and Ann to have been nothing more than friends, now is completely undermined, since Wollstonecraft believes emotions are more important than sex.

In addition, the next issue explained by Tomalin is “mind has no sex”, which could be explained with the idea that Wollstonecraft is arguing against the idea of masculinity being exclusively inherited in men, and femininity being exclusively inherited in women, as mentioned earlier. If a mind is free of sex, then a human being is free of limiting itself to a one sex. In that case, Rights of Woman only tries to advocate what the novel Mary contained: that love has no gender, and a person should not be limited in their freedom, whether it is
emotional freedom, educational freedom, religious freedom, or any other freedom a human being should enjoy.

Sexual behavior is one of the main themes in Rights of Woman, and Wollstonecraft uses the political text to exclaim her thoughts on the sexual repression of women. Wollstonecraft had “adopted the view that sexuality was wrong in itself, redeemed only by parenthood, and largely imposed on women by men” (Tomalin 106). Furthermore, In Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft is “connect[ing] genius to liberation from constrained heterosexual relations” (Elfenbein 241), since she mostly advocates for masculine femininity and the idea that marriage should be a bond of friendship, or, a sexless marriage. Therefore, Wollstonecraft argues that if women would put more time in their education, and listened less to their sensibility, instead of obeying to sexual behavior imposed onto them by men, they would become better women. Wollstonecraft argues:

To render chastity the virtue from which unsophisticated modesty will naturally flow, the attention should be called away from employments which only exercise the sensibility; and the heart made to beat time to humanity, rather than to throb with love. The woman who has dedicated a considerable portion of her time to pursuits purely intellectual, and whose affections have been exercised by humane plans of usefulness, must have more purity of mind, as a natural consequence, than the ignorant beings whose time and thoughts have been occupied by gay pleasures or schemes to conquer hearts. (Wollstonecraft 229)

Throughout Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft, thus, even rejects female passion in total, arguing instead that women should remain modest and focus instead on developing the mind. For feminist scholars like Cora Kaplan, the idea of ignoring female passion,
however, was seen as failure, as it undermined feminist ideas concerning equality amongst the sexes. Still, while Kaplan and other critics seem to interpret the rejection of female passion in *Rights of Woman* as a rejection of female sexuality in total, the rejection of female passion is mostly aimed in a heterosexual context. Wollstonecraft mainly focuses on the female passion in contrast with male passion. It may very well be that *Rights of Woman* does not reject female sexuality in total, but simply tries to create space for female-female sexuality, or, same-sex attraction. It is, therefore, not remarkable that critic Cora Kaplan find it difficult to see Wollstonecraft as “the foremother of modern feminism” (Kaplan 246), and calls her “an ambiguous symbol both of feminism and femininity” (246). The ambiguity that Kaplan recognizes does not merely signify contradicting feminist ideas such as Wollstonecraft’s rejection of female passion versus other feminist ideas that do recognize feminist passion. Instead, the ambiguity may be caused by a rejection of heterosexual passion.

Wollstonecraft “had to write in ways that would reach the widest possible readership if she were to revolutionize the ‘reading public’ and especially women” (Kelly vi), and, when her novels and political works are compared and contrasted with one another, it could be that Wollstonecraft purposely censored her writings to hide a too obvious idea of lesbianism so that she would reach enough people. *Rights of Woman* is a political text, so in order to reach enough people, Wollstonecraft needed to speak in a language people would possibly not find offensive. Ultimately, *Rights of Woman*, since it is a political text, is a text that is written to achieve something, to change something in the existing ideas present in society. If Wollstonecraft would have written the text in a pro-homosexual tone, *Rights of Woman* may have gotten negative responses and the text would not have become as influential as it eventually was for feminism and women’s rights. Therefore, given the attitude towards social issues and the way Wollstonecraft seems to have packaged her messages in *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft seems to have found a way to make her own reality work within the existing
reality she lived in. Put differently, as Elfenbein says, “given the brilliance with which Wollstonecraft dissected the brutal effects of the sex/gender system on women in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, […]” it was “an innovative attempt to live out her own principles” (233). To demonstrate, the female-female sexuality that is highly present in *Mary* rejects the idea of a heterosexual relationship. In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft also seems to reject aspects of a heterosexual relationships, in particular the sexual part of marriage. Just like Mary did in *Mary*, Wollstonecraft would agree to marriage between a man and a woman, but only if this marriage was based on friendship rather than on a sexual level. Her idea of a platonic marriage echoes her own marriage with Godwin, as, even though they got married, “the couple would live as if the ceremony had not occurred” (Todd 417). In that case, Wollstonecraft found a way of making the marriage work for her, without being entirely suppressed in her freedom.

All in all, *Mary* and *Rights of Woman* indeed have some relevance to one another, as in both works Wollstonecraft opposes sexual activity. Wollstonecraft’s attitude towards sexuality, advocated in *Rights of Woman*, is an important factor in the argument whether or not the relationship between Mary and Ann in the novel is more than just a friendship. Wollstonecraft’s rejection of female passion and the eighteenth century’s attitude towards female sexuality undermine the argument that sexual activity is the indicator of a lesbian relationship. In order to understand the character of Mary and Ann’s relationship, it is therefore necessary to look beyond the idea that lesbianism is only determined by sexual contact between women.

Moreover, *Rights of Woman* seems to advocate for a platonic relationship between male and female, which supports the idea that Wollstonecraft rejects passion, but it, once again, evokes an idea that Wollstonecraft may have preferred female-female sexuality over heterosexual relationships. To demonstrate, Wollstonecraft says marriage is best as
friendship; a non-sexual relationship between male and female, and in Rights of Woman she “expressed the view that it was better for marriage to exclude passionate love” (Tomalin 106). While this is mostly interpreted in the idea of gender equality and female emancipation, the pro-lesbian attitude of Mary allows for a lesbian reading of Rights of Woman. Tauchert states, in Mary Wollstonecraft: Feminist, Lesbian, or Transgendered?, that “Wollstonecraft appears to shift between either feminist, or lesbian, or transgendered categorization, with differing aspects of her biography and written work coming into focus to support each identification” (236-37). Tauchert, in this statement, asks for particular focus on the words ‘either’ and ‘or’, and, thus, wants to make clear that all three categories are treated separately, and there is hardly ever a categorization that exists out of a collision between two or more of these categories. Mainly because of the separation of these categories, arguments exist between lesbian and feminist theory and these arguments “are central rather than peripheral to our understanding of Wollstonecraft’s life and work as a woman” (239). However, when both categories are taken into consideration, without ruling each other out, the works and life of Wollstonecraft may get more meaning than it, up until now, has been given. In that case, as Tauchert also argues, there could be a change in perspective concerning the works of Wollstonecraft, as “what we read as Wollstonecraft’s proto-feminism may be read differently, for a trace of the evaporation of female-embodied same-sex desire in writing” (241). This collision of feminism and lesbianism may then be helpful in understanding Rights of Woman differently as it allows for an additional interpretation of the work.
Conclusion

Mary Wollstonecraft publically fought for feminist ideals which have been acknowledged by critics, and she is now considered to be a woman who put many feminist ideals on the agenda of society; ideals that eventually changed the scope of society itself. For this reason, she won the battle for increasing equality and female rights. By publically addressing issues in political works, Wollstonecraft successfully changed notions on gender and class difference. However, she is ambiguous about the romantic friendship between Ann and Mary in *Mary*, since the friendship remains within the boundaries of an accepted romantic friendship, yet Wollstonecraft’s emotional descriptions concerning Ann suggest a deeper romance, as discussed earlier.

As demonstrated, when exploring the previously ignored theme of lesbianism in *Mary*, the story reveals additional aspects in Wollstonecraft’s writing that allow for further research. The character of Mary shows a development from a young woman to an adult, and throughout this development the character shows how her personal issues interfere with her life. Moreover, the standards of society, that is, the ideas about marriage and gender roles that existed in the eighteenth century, do not align with Mary’s personal ideas. Mary shows resistance against society but is unable to win the fight for personal freedom. Her repressed lesbian feelings create a personal struggle which she, ultimately, loses. Hence, following the storyline of *Mary*, the story is representative of a personal pursuit for freedom for the main character, and this can only be achieved by escaping from reality in total. *Mary*, then, opens up new ways for interpreting the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, as the story not only discusses female emancipation, but also personal freedom and sexual freedom. However, since Wollstonecraft lived in an era where the lesbian was ghosted rather than acknowledged, her writing itself is ghosted as well, which is indicated by the indirect approach of female-female sexuality and the obscurity around the relationship between Ann and Mary. As it was
“almost impossible to approach the question of sexual feelings without guilt in England or Scotland” (Tomalin 102), it is highly unlikely for an eighteenth century writer to write about a female-female relationship where the two women are sexually involved with one another. In Mary the friendship between Ann and Mary remains between the boundaries of an accepted romantic friendship, and Wollstonecraft does not imply anywhere that the two women were sexually involved with one another. This makes it difficult to understand exactly to what extent the two women were involved with each other. Wollstonecraft never wrote in explicit terms concerning female-female desire and, thus, never crossed any socially created boundaries concerning romantic friendships and lesbianism. Ultimately, Wollstonecraft avoids direct vocabulary that would indicate lesbianism. This could mean a disinterest in or opposition to sexual activity, which comes forth in Rights of Woman. Another explanation, however, is that her freedom of writing was limited, given the social situation of the eighteenth century. Yet, because of Wollstonecraft’s personal disinterest in sexual behavior, the absence of sexual contact in Mary is logical as well. However, the absence should not be interpreted as the absence of lesbianism in total. It is the more interesting to approach Wollstonecraft’s other works with a lesbian reading, as texts such as Rights of Woman allow for different interpretations as well if they would be considered as ghosted or censored due to the inability of writing freely. Ultimately, then, despite the many struggles Wollstonecraft has won, there remains one issue that Wollstonecraft never overcame; the struggle for sexual freedom in terms of same-sex attraction, and this struggle is recurrent in her works, be they either fictional or political works.

Finally, the dominant lesbian-narrative in Mary, often ignored by critics, opens up a new interpretation for Wollstonecraft’s political work Rights of Woman, and, with that, sheds light on an under-researched side of the works of Mary Wollstonecraft. It appears that “those critics who have consciously chosen to read as lesbians argue that this perspective can be
R.S. Keupink, s1782525, Mary Wollstonecraft and the Lost Battle for Sexual Freedom, Adviser: Dr. K. de Vries, 15.317 words

uniquely liberating and can provide new insights into life and literature” (Zimmerman 452). Therefore, there are various reasons, given Wollstonecraft’s works, to do further research on the aspect of same-sex attraction in Wollstonecraft’s work, as it would expand the knowledge of eighteenth-century literature. Moreover, a lesbian reading would allow for a new angle “from which to criticize and analyze the politics, language, and culture of patriarchy” (Zimmerman 452). This research means to establish the introduction and reasons for acknowledging the previously ignored topic of lesbianism in Wollstonecraft's works. Still, more research is necessary in order to establish a well-rounded conclusion.
Works Cited.


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