

# [ The Legacy of Mary Wollstonecraft's Educational and Philosophical Storytelling ]

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**[Abstract]** *In her works, Mary Wollstonecraft was greatly concerned with women's education. Highlighting the importance of exemplary storytelling, she laid special emphasis on the importance of reading in young girls' lifelong learning; she even co-edited a collection of texts specifically designed for female readers. In addition to her novels, political treatises and translations, she also wrote two pieces on education, Thoughts on the Education of Daughters (1787) and Original Stories from Real Life (1788), and an unfinished tale titled "The Cave of Fancy" (1787). I will discuss the unique features of her self-trained storytelling in general, while also exploring disturbing content imagined by a "fanciful" woman's spirit in one particular tale. Mary Wollstonecraft's fantastic tale not only provides a framework for the creative development of the female mind; it also includes several images that would later appear in Romantic philosophical narratives, as exemplified by Mary Shelley's "The Fields of Fancy".*

**[Keywords]** *Mary Wollstonecraft; Mary Shelley; education; tales; fancy; reason; reading*

The eighteenth-century novelist, essayist, and educationalist Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) was an enlightened thinker. She was greatly influenced by the ideas of her radical contemporaries, and she was an ardent believer in reason, common sense and sensibility. In her early works titled *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), she published educational stories and tales to instruct the female reader. In her edited collection *The Female Reader*, she also propagated reading, while in her novels – *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) and *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) – she discussed the possible paths for women's self-development. In her best-known political debates, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she demonstrated that critical thinking was indispensable in personal education, while her reviews, translations and her travelogue also contributed to the process of her self-training.

In addition to being a member of the Radicals, Mary Wollstonecraft frequently attended the dissenters' meetings and lectures that were organised by the publisher Joseph Johnson.<sup>1</sup> She read the fashionable “conduct books” of her time, for instance, Rev. James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), and John Bennett's *Strictures on Female Education* (1787), and she vehemently criticised their rigid notions concerning women's roles and possibilities. These works exemplified the proper behaviour of women, following the rules of etiquette and good manners, which was regarded as appropriate to their social status. Even well-educated girls were not encouraged to read or know anything other than the Bible, and the above-mentioned John Gregory voices his utter despair when he writes about the theatre. In the chapter “Entertainment,” he complains that he can scarcely offer his daughters a literary work from his own era “without a shock to delicacy” or an evocation of unnecessary, disturbing, or even inappropriate emotions (Gregory 62, 68).

Interpreting Wollstonecraft's lifework, I cannot help referring to the influential ‘intellectual fathers’ – John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Edmund Burke among others – whose writings provided her with a framework of thinking in the textual debates she published. John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education* (1762; in English 1763) had a great impact on her philosophy of education. While Locke mainly explored the education of young gentlemen and Rousseau wrote about the natural education of boys, Wollstonecraft tried to apply their notions to women's development. Her early *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Original Stories* (1788) clearly show the influence of Locke's and Rousseau's ideas, and she engaged in a famous debate with Rousseau in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Her other famous debate, in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), was targeted at Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). In *Emile*, in the fifth book on female education entitled “Sophy, or Woman,” Rousseau states that men's and women's education cannot be the same, and the modest Sophy is to be brought up mainly to accompany the naturally educated man, to be a “companion [...] given to him” (Rousseau 357). Moreover, according to Rousseau, girls “ought to be constrained very early,” since it is “inseparable from their sex [...]. All their lives they will be enslaved to the most continual and most severe of constraints – that of the proprieties” (Rousseau 369).

The reading of novels was also discussed in conduct books and educational writings due to its effects on women’s development. Wollstonecraft, who waged a battle against conduct books based on “a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men,” was willing to acknowledge that novel-reading was dangerous for young women (Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication* 11). She believed that reading fashionable romances would stunt girls’ intellectual growth, increase their sensibility and lead to weakness, thus perpetrating their subjection to men. For this reason, not only Wollstonecraft but also her contemporary Catharine Macaulay, in her *Letters on Education*, promoted the critical reading of allegorical fables and satirical novels, as such works provided young people with “instructive lessons” and the possibilities of realising “a perversion of reason and common sense” in the fashionable pieces of *belle lettres* (Macaulay 144–148). Macaulay, best known as a historian, recommends the realistic novels by the contemporary writer Henry Fielding as well as Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, while making no distinction between girls and boys in reading – or indeed in educational matters in general; for instance, thanks to her own aristocratic upbringing, she unwaveringly expects the young learner to know four languages. Macaulay urges a radical and somewhat utopian study of contemporary and satirical readings, since only those novels pose questions about the intricacies of existing reality and also propagate ‘real’ reading – and, as a result, these works will assist the reader-learner in being a virtuous person.

## [1] Educational Tales

Now, focusing on Wollstonecraft’s ideas on female development, I should highlight that in her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), she claims reading to be “the most rational employment” (49). In this educational text, on the one hand she warns against reading novels of sensibility and romances that might mislead the female mind, while on the other hand she instead recommends adventure stories, “beautiful allegories and affecting tales,” in which reasoning is illustrated by “the brilliancy of fancy” and the mind is cultivated by the teacher while allowing the female reader to pursue self-development on her own (Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts* 51). In addition to the works referred to in her *Thoughts*, as the editor of *The Female Reader*, Wollstonecraft also promotes the reading of narrative poems, sermons, journalistic essays, and carefully selected passages from dramatic works, mainly from Shakespeare’s comedies and tragedies.<sup>2</sup>

In the twenty-five chapters of her *Original Stories* (1788), the framework is provided by the tutoring of two young girls, Mary (age fourteen) and Caroline (age twelve). The strict Protestant governess Mrs. Mason can be taken as Wollstonecraft’s mouthpiece; she tells exemplary stories to the girls while walking outside in natural surroundings and in London, when they go on an excursion to the city with the girls. Presenting examples was a well-known and accepted form of instruction at the time, because as the author writes in the “Preface,” the example “directly addresses the senses, the first inlets to the heart” and the mind is enriched by the moral which is later deduced from the tales.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the educational stories and tales in *Original Stories* follow the Lockean notion

of *tabula rasa*, namely that the child's mind is like a "blank sheet" or a "wax tablet" to be filled by a large amount of experience. John Locke himself points out the importance of examples in education, claiming that it is difficult to persuade children to do good simply by presenting rules to them. As he writes in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*: "[...] of all the ways whereby children are to be instructed, and their manners formed, the plainest, easiest, and most efficacious, is to set before their eyes the examples of those things you would have them do or avoid" (Locke, *Some Thoughts* 65). Wollstonecraft agrees with Locke in this regard, and she also builds on his idea of the child as a rational creature. As Mrs. Mason claims about her own tutoring and learning: "this employment humanized my heart, while, *like wax*, it took every impression; and Providence has since made me an instrument of good – I have been useful to my fellow-creatures" (OS 8). The governess not only displays her exemplary stories; she also presents her proper behaviour to the girls as a model in order to "set [them] an *example*" on a daily basis (OS 20).

According to Wollstonecraft, the tutoring of young girls for a virtuous and happy life begins with a love of animals, since every living being is a creature of God, who takes care of all his children. Thus, the cruel treatment of animals, or even the killing of worms, beetles and birds, are evil acts. In contrast, goodness primarily means that one has "to avoid hurting any thing; and then, to give as much pleasure as you can" (OS 3). At the end of the lesson, which teaches general admiration of the beauties of nature, the governess frightens the girls with stories about the torture of animals, and she praises her students who, following God's teaching, "have acted like rational beings" when they rescue a broken-winged bird and its chicks (OS 5). The two children receive a practical education, and their experience of kindness leaves an imprint on their hearts (viz. *tabula rasa*). The acceptance of animals as companions appears in several tales, such as in that of the crazy Robin, who, after losing his family, his wife and children, can only count on his dog, and when the animal is killed, the poor man dies from grief. There is a stronger social critique in the story of a man imprisoned in the Bastille, whose guard tramples on his only friend, a spider. However, the historical events are not of great interest to the girls, and the governess seems to aim rather at affecting the children's emotions.

Several of Mrs. Mason's parables show the unhappy lives of pampered and spoiled women with telling names: there is the story of the bad-tempered girl Jane *Fretful* (cf. peevish, OS 15–18), of the ill-dressed woman Mrs. *Dowdy* (cf. untidy, OS 48–49), and the notorious liar Lady *Sly* (cf. cunning, OS 21–23). In the planning and strict observation of a daily routine, the girls are to engage themselves in meaningful activities. Apart from learning how to do things around the house and how to help the poor, they have time to practice drawing, to play music and to read. While all useful pursuits are recommended, as they train and sharpen the mind, reading is presented as a privileged activity for the acquisition of knowledge, because when reading "the heart is touched, till its feelings are examined by the understanding, and the ripenings of reason regulate the imagination" (OS 54–55). Here the governess / Wollstonecraft again emphasises the lifelong process of reading, and she suggests not only moralistic pieces, but also light-hearted *works of fancy*. Mrs. Mason recommends stories by the contemporary children's writer Mrs. Trimmer,

specifically her *Fabulous Histories* (1786) for daily reading, and all the “original stories” can be taken as parables assisting young women’s mental development. Although these are fictional literary narratives, the authors mentioned in the text insist that the source of their stories is the world around them, and through their writings they can educate their readers, broadening their understanding of real life. As a farewell gift, Mrs. Mason hands her collection of stories to the girls (OS 87).

In the girls’ upbringing, from the beginning, the children are requested not to lie, and they are instructed to avoid speaking untruths and falsehoods in all areas of life. A true man / woman possesses an inherent love of truth, because the beauty of the soul and its virtue originate in the natural goodness and honesty of humanity. Thus, in accordance with Mrs. Mason’s Protestant ethics, she states that “lying is a vice” for which punishment is imposed, although she does not state in what way she will punish the girls (OS 25). The perfect gentlewoman, the proper lady, is exemplified by Mrs. Trueman (cf. “true man”), who is a virtuous good woman, exercising benevolence and love (OS 77). She behaves in an honest and simple way, while the previously mentioned Lady Sly, who serves as a counter-example, has never behaved uprightly in her life. The former, being a curate’s wife, does not belong to the higher circles of society, while the latter, a lady, reveals the superficiality of her class; her nobility is only a question of her “*state*, not *dignity*” (OS 21, italics in the original). Mrs. Trueman and her husband are “noble people”, but it is not their wealth or social status that makes them noble: in accordance with the Lockean concept of the gentleman, the couple are educated, they have a taste for the arts, and their home is an island of happiness.

In *Original Stories*, self-control is frequently discussed, as the governess’s duties in guiding the two young girls’ development include suppressing anger and other emotional outbursts of temperament. As Locke writes about the early training of the mind:

As the strength of the body lies chiefly in being able to endure hardships, so also does that of the mind. And the great principle and foundations of all virtue and worth is placed in this, that a man is able to deny himself his own desires, cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what his reason directs as best, though the appetite lean the other way. (Locke, *Some Thoughts* 28)

The physical education of the body is not directly addressed in Wollstonecraft’s work, though it is true that the characters walk a lot in nature and the outdoors, and Mrs. Mason regards the endurance of physical pain as a physical and mental exercise (OS 78–79). At the same time, there are several lessons and conversations about the formation of the young girls’ character, and the ways in which their mistakes can be corrected. The parable on the beauty of the “flaunting tulip” and the usefulness of the “modest rose” in Chapter VII not only addresses the question of external and internal beauty; it also reveals the difference between the two girls’ characters (OS 29). Mary is smart, quick-witted and sensitive, while Caroline is beautiful and benevolent. But the clever Mary loves to ridicule others, treats her servants with contempt, and is regularly late and negligent. The charming Caroline is proud of her beauty; as a result, she is often vain and even gluttonous.

Mrs. Mason regularly confronts the girls with the defects in their behaviour, so after a while, the girls pay attention to these defects and learn to control themselves, because “in society virtue is acquired, and self-denial practised” (OS 39). By accepting parental and foster care, the children are able to learn self-control – actually, self-denial – while the “white sheet” of their mind is covered with writing during their training – again recalling Locke’s idea of *tabula rasa*. At the end of the book, Mrs. Mason parts from her disciples, who have changed a lot:

The girls were visibly improved; an air of intelligence began to animate Caroline’s fine features; and benevolence gave her eyes the humid sparkle which is so beautiful and engaging. [...] Mary’s judgment grew every day clearer; or, more properly speaking, she acquired experience; and her lively feelings fixed the conclusions of reason in her mind. (OS 79–80)

At the governess’s request, in the future the girls will report on their emotional and intellectual development in honest letters to her – self-controlling themselves, in other words doing their own “monitoring” (Richardson 31).

The parables of *Original Stories* are sometimes morbid and rather tragic; they seem to be “anti-tales” written for adults. I have already referred to crazy Robin’s misfortune, or the prisoner’s spider companion, but I can also mention the sailor Jack’s stoic suffering, the Welsh harper’s grief, the account of Charles Townley’s extravagant life, or the poverty-stricken London family – all these stories end terribly. The question can be raised what kind of educator seeks to torment teenage girls with such stories. Indeed, the determined protagonist of *Original Stories* Mrs. Mason believes that discussing such real-life narratives will guide the girls’ emotional development while shaping their mind to accept “the principles of truth and humanity”, as stated in the author’s “Preface” (OS xviii). In the book, the governess, being a relentless moralist and rationalist, barely smiles, and there is only one occasion, while listening to the harpist’s playing, when she succumbs to her emotions. In her Christian Stoicism, as if she were above all the characters, she is not afraid of storms or death – “God is still present, and we are safe,” she proclaims (OS 33). The two girls respect and fear her, especially her disapproving expression, and the greatest praise in the book is when she calls Mary “her friend” for her good behaviour (OS 40). At the same time, she helps the poor, she pays attention to the fallen, and she loves her friends, as well as cherishing the memory of her loved ones. Similarly to the stories of the suffering she presents, her own life is full of grief, as she has lost her husband and daughter.

Wollstonecraft’s governess is a special female figure, yet the reader feels some quality of inhuman cruelty in this ideal private educator’s methods and her striving for perfection. It is true that in her later works Wollstonecraft rejects the “masculine” tone of instruction, the style of conduct books and counselling booklets (Jones 119), but this genre also represents an important stage in the author’s own development.<sup>4</sup> This is exactly what I expect from a female educationalist, a philosopher who proclaims that an honest and authentic life can change her and she can develop through her self-denial or

self-transcendence. Regarding the writer’s early works, her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and *Original Stories*, I think that Mrs. Mason did a good job.

## [2] Tales of Fancy

Analysing the elements of Wollstonecraft’s tales, I have already used the term *works of fancy*, which simply indicated the fictitious and imaginative feature of the writings. Wollstonecraft also left behind an unfinished philosophical fable titled “The Cave of Fancy” (1787, posthumously published in 1798), which she composed while writing her early educational narratives. Before analysing this tale, the term “fancy” should be investigated. The term itself sounded rather old-fashioned even by nineteenth-century standards, being related to nostalgia and the medieval romance, as Julie Carlson points out in her essay. Carlson also claims that it frequently occurred in the historical-biographical writings of the Wollstonecraft–Godwin–Shelley family in their “magical communion with the dead” (165).

For fancy, Samuel Johnson in his English dictionary (1755) refers to the Latin *phantasia*, stating that the primary meaning is “Imagination; the power by which the mind forms to itself images and representations of things, persons, or scenes of being” (Johnson). Johnson also lists other meanings of the word, such as “taste”, “opinion”, “image”, “conception”, “thought”, or even “humour”, “fondness”, or “vagary”. Here, I am focusing on the mental quality of *fancy*, the way in which it is based on common sense and coloured by the individual characteristics of the human thinker. Relying on the Lockean framework in Wollstonecraft’s thinking, it is worth noting that in Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the concept of *tabula rasa* is described in terms of the functioning of the mind, fancy and experience:

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the *busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it*, with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience: in that, all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself. (109, italics are mine)

Indeed, the main emphasis is on the empiricist roots of our knowledge, yet the filling of the mind takes place via the mutual functioning of reason and imagination. Fancy is also strongly connected to memory; Locke writes that memory is “to furnish to the mind those dormant ideas which it has present occasion for,” being a storehouse of the ideas, and “having them ready at hand on all occasions,” when “invention, fancy” and wit need them (Locke, *An Essay* 151). Wit is associated with the quickness of the mind, operating with fixities and memories, and in the eighteenth century, imagination and fancy were both defined in close relation to wit. In contrast to the critical activity of judgement, “fanciful” wit is pleasurable, since “lying most in the assemblage of ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity,

thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy" (Locke, *An Essay* 153; cf. Burke 68–69).

In fancy, the imaginative mind's functioning is regulated by reason, but it is also shaped by our personal creative capacities, while through experience we can acquire our knowledge of the world. In Wollstonecraft's "The Cave of Fancy", the tale presents an imagined realm, where the hermit, the old wise Sagestus (cf. sage) lives in sublime surroundings at the end of the world:

In a sequestered valley, surrounded by rocky mountains that intercepted many of the passing clouds, though sunbeams variegated their ample sides, lived a sage, to whom nature had unlocked her most hidden secrets. *His hollow eyes*, sunk in their orbits, retired from the view of vulgar objects, and *turned inwards*, overleaped the boundary prescribed to human knowledge. Intense thinking during fourscore and ten years, had whitened the scattered locks on his head, which, like the summit of the distant mountain, appeared to be bound by an eternal frost. (Wollstonecraft, "The Cave of Fancy" 191, italics are mine)

In his cogitation, Sagestus's isolation and self-closure are emphasised not only by his eyes (turning inwards), but also by the faraway and ancient cavern through which he can enter the depths of the earth, where "the various spirits, which inhabit the different regions of nature, were here obedient to his potent word" (Wollstonecraft, "The Cave of Fancy" 191). The grave-like cave, being like a "limbo" between life and death, welcomes the ghosts of the dead; some of them are evil, waiting for their long purification, and some are good, like "guardian angels" who are allowed to leave their prison.

In her depiction of the cavern, Wollstonecraft relies on the Platonic image of the cave and the idea that man should come out of "his" cave and into the light, in order to re-discover the truth of human existence. The cave itself is associated with the body and the skull, and the narrative reflects on the workings of the human mind, including some references to Wollstonecraft's radical friend William Blake's understanding of imagination. Blake writes that "the Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself," and that man should open "the doors of perception" – the holes of the senses in the head/skull – in order to be able to experience infinity (Blake 522 and 154). In Wollstonecraft's understanding, fancy, together with the image of the cave, also stand for the secrets of the female heart, the mind and sexuality; Meena Alexander even claims that "the cave itself, in a kind of imaginative extremity is both the womb of Mother Nature and the tomb of all mothers" (185). On the one hand, in her educational writings, Wollstonecraft's thinking female characters (similarly to herself) struggle to find their home, their partner and their role in the world, while also having to learn to tame their desire. On the other hand, as Sylvana Tomaselli writes, Wollstonecraft – in a Platonic way – presents "human love as an ephemeral delusion in an uneasy relation to virtue and esteem, which must not be allowed to usurp the rightful place of divine love in the soul" (30).

In Wollstonecraft's allegorical "Cave," the wise man Sagestus is able to sense (imagine or fancy) the life-stories of the dead, studying their bodily features. Then, when he

finds a baby-girl who has survived a shipwreck, he adopts the child and later educates the young girl (named Sagesta, after himself) by allowing her to listen to the narratives of (dead) women. Only one female spirit's life-story is completed, and it gives Sagesta a warning "that women should beware confusing fantasy and reality in their visions of love," as Julie Carlson points out (168). In the (promised) realistic narrative(s), the emotional, financial and bodily struggles of the eighteenth-century women are revealed, and in this way Sagesta – through her fancy – is trained to become a wise and sensitive human. It seems likely that she will assist or replace the aged Sagestus in coordinating the spirits at the cavern, but this can only be guessed at, since the tale is unfinished.

In the philosophical and spiritual setting of the tale, the reader is also invited to sense the movement from outer features to inner thoughts. This is partly inspired by J. C. Lavater's notions of physiognomy; when Wollstonecraft was working on this puzzling story, she was influenced by (and also debated) the Swiss thinker's stereotypical approach – especially in the understanding of the female character. The inspirited ghosts are individuals, not types, and the highlighting of female voices brings a new direction in the writer's work. In Mary Wollstonecraft's own lifework, "The Cave of Fancy" presents a new way (out), embodying the author's opening up and her new readings of the 'fathers' works'. Through her liberating fantasy / fancy, she moved towards her rebellious writings, in which she began to re-define the female body, sensibility and consciousness. As about the main character of her first novel, *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) she writes, "a new genius will educate itself," growing out of her own spiritual (in)fancy (Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 211).

Regarding the legacy of Mary Wollstonecraft's tales, I can refer to the Romantic and Gothic features in the stories written by female writers in the nineteenth century. Her own daughter, Mary Godwin (later Mary Shelley), published a collection of such tales in the *Keepsake* during the 1820s–30s. Now, let us focus on fragmented narrative titled "The Fields of Fancy" (1819) that was supposed to be an introduction (later attached as an appendix) to Mary Shelley's short novel, *Mathilda* (1819–20; posthumously published in 1959). Striking similarities can be found in the mother's and the daughter's Platonic tales of fancy, but here, Julie Carlson indicates, "fancy comes alive as Fantasia, the sage is a 'prophetess', and fancy moves into the fields" (171). In the tale, the female narrator is deeply in grief, dejected, and she cannot sleep. Fantasia, the winged spirit, appears to her and offers her consolation, but the narrator, being overwhelmed by the loss of her beloved, rejects her invitation into the realm of fantasy. Then, falling into a reverie, she is carried away to the Elysian Gardens. In Mary Shelley's fanciful tale, instead of the aged man Sagestus, it is Fantasia who is the guiding spirit; Fantasia takes her to the Elysian Fields, where she listens to "the Prophetess Diotima the instructress of Socrates" teaching some young people about the beauties and the sublimity of the world (Shelley 683). Fantasia also explains the differentiation of the spirits: some are here to find consolation, to forget, some are to study, "to become wise & virtuous", while some are to be punished before returning to the earthly world (Shelley 681).

In Shelley's tale, both Fantasia and Diotima provide a 'superhuman' perspective, being detached from reality; the former is an immortal spirit, the latter is immersed in her

pursuit for wisdom. Although the Platonic character Diotima, named “Diotima of Mantinea,” lectured Socrates on the art of human love in *Symposium*, in the tale she is speaking about universal, divine love, the selfishness of man and the corruption of civilization (cf. Plato). Diotima is asked by the young female spirit whether she can understand human passions, as in her own life she has been lost in the darkness of her heart, “of the dreadful struggles of a soul enchained by dark deep passions which were its hell & yet from which it could not escape” (Shelley 691). The Second Chapter is supposed to relate the young female's life story, but “The Fields of Fancy” ends here in order to introduce Mathilda's narrative. Initially, the narrator does not want to be inspired by Fantasia and be comforted in her mourning. However, later she wants to listen to the beautiful female spirit's account. Feeling that she can sympathise with the wretched female, having both experienced similar misery, the narrator/Mary Shelley is eager to learn a lesson:

Tomorrow I will again woo Fantasia to lead me to the same walks & invite her to visit me with her visions which I before neglected – Oh let me learn this lesson while yet it may be useful to me that to a mind hopeless & unhappy as mine – a moment of forgetfulness a moment [in] which it can pass out of itself is worth a life of painful recollection. (Shelley 692)

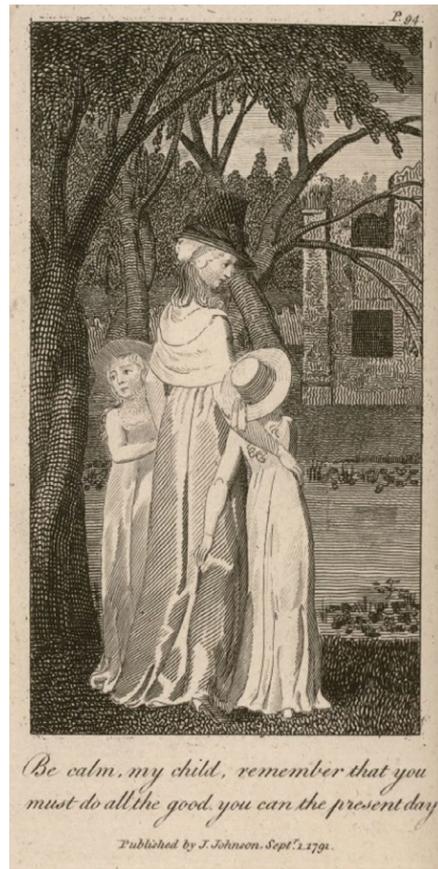
In this sense, the female spirits help each other in their self-understanding, and the narrator steps onto the path of self-consolation. Accordingly, writing her novel *Mathilda*, Mary Shelley begins her work of mourning, in which her memory and her imaginative fancy are therapeutically combined. Moreover, I cannot forget that in the tales of fancy, the daughter is also connected to the lost mother, and in Shelley's interpretation, the spiritual guidance of Fantasia–Diotima recalls reminiscences of the rebellious motherly voice heard from beyond the grave.

### [3] Coda: Blake's engravings for *Original Stories*

The illustrations in this volume were created by the author's contemporary and friend William Blake. Blake was one of the first appreciative readers of *Original Stories*, and his engravings spectacularly highlight the essentials of the radical-minded Wollstonecraft's concept of education. Two of the five pictures created by the Romantic poet-artist depict the nurse, Wollstonecraft's alter ego (with the character's typical garments, a simple dress and a pointed hat or a headband), who leaves the parental house with the girls for a walk, and they spend time in nature together (see Ill. 1 and 2). “Look, what a fine morning it is. Insects, birds, and animals, are all enjoying existence [this sweet day],” says the nurse in the opening image of the book (Ill. 1; cf. *OS* 5), and her outstretched arms allude to the joy of showing the new world to her pupils, while the girls step out of their house in a posture expressing delighted enthusiasm. The other illustration depicts the group returning from a walk (Ill. 2), and shows that one girl would rather stay in nature, while the other – facing the house – is hiding in Mrs. Mason's embrace, as if she were hesitant to accept that the lessons learned from the stories will help her thrive in social life in the



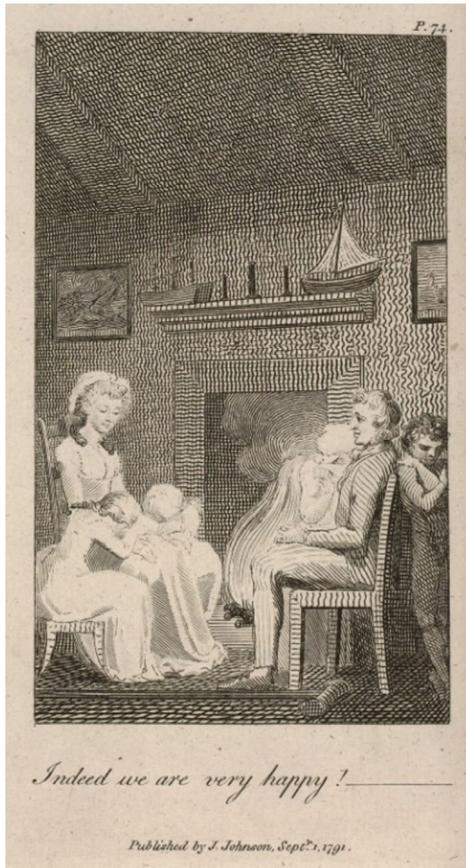
III. 1



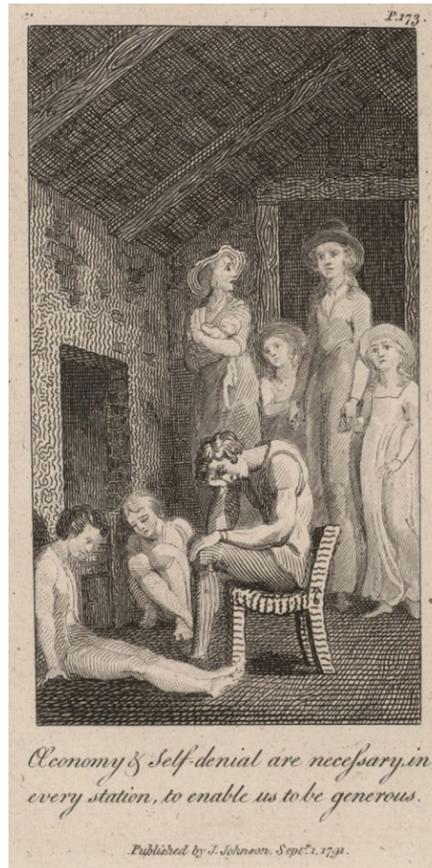
III. 2

long run. As the quote goes, “Be calm, my child, and remember that you must [...] do all the good you can the present day.”<sup>5</sup>

As a counterpoint to the lessons spent outdoors, two illustrations display what life is like for those living in poverty (see Ill. 3 and 4). In contrast to the images of a natural upbringing that suggest openness and unfolding, these two engravings show a mood of confinement and depression. One presents the home and family of Jack, a half-blind sailor who has suffered multiple shipwrecks, while his story testifies that the unfortunate though good-hearted man helped others even in his misfortune. However, the highlighted quotation in the caption below the illustration sounds rather ironic: “Indeed we are very happy!” (cf. OS 36) The other drawing, depicting a poor family in London, gives the following advice: “Economy and self-denial are necessary in every station, to enable us to be generous” (cf. OS 86). The advice is originally given to the girls, but it is also a general warning provided by Blake and Wollstonecraft to their own society. In both illustrations, the characters seem to have accepted their fate, and they look rather languid; only



III. 3



III. 4

the educator's figure suggests some energetic independence. In the drawings, the rigid, framing lines of the beams and the meticulous pattern of the interior space not only illustrate the constraints of the contemporary family and social life; they also summarize the author's (and the illustrator's) social critique: the individual can only be happy by accepting limitations, and only through strict self-control. While William Blake looked for the cause of people's suffering in the spread of mechanical rationality, and in his later works he would find a way out of this by freeing his imagination, Mary Wollstonecraft saw the oppression of women as the source of the problems, as she would later discuss in her masterpiece *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she would provide concrete reform proposals.<sup>6</sup>

## [Notes]

- 1 See more about this in Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974) 89–109.
- 2 See Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Female Reader*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, vol. 4 (London: William Pickering, 1989, 53–353). The original title, without the indication of Wollstonecraft’s editorial work, reads: *The Female Reader: Or, Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Verse, Selected from the Best Writers, and Disposed under Proper Heads, for the Improvement of Young Women* by Mr. Cresswick, Teacher of Elocution to which is Prefixed a Preface, Containing some Hints on Female Education (London: J. Johnson, St. Paul’s Church-Yard, 1789).
- 3 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories with Five Illustrations by William Blake*, with an Introduction by E.V. Lucas (London: Henry Frowde, 1906) xviii. Subsequent references to this source, abbreviated as OS, are given as page numbers in brackets in the text.
- 4 In “Editor’s Introduction” written by E. V. Lucas in 1906, he not only highlights Wollstonecraft’s rigour, but also states that the early work is a step backwards in the author’s career (xiii).
- 5 In the book, a fifth illustration also appeared. It is probably the best of them, and it shows Mrs. Mason listening to the Welsh harper. Moreover, there was a sixth drawing depicting a madman with his dog, standing next to his dead children (cf. crazy Robin’s story); however, being so terrifying, it was finally left out, upon the publisher Johnson’s request. See Mitchell 27–28.
- 6 See my article “Irony and Culture in Feminist educational Writings: Wollstonecraft, Edgeworth and Macaulay,” *Practice and Theory in Systems of Education*, Volume 12, Number 2 (2017): 100–107.

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