

# A WEB OF REASONS: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S *A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN* AND THE RE-WEAVING OF FORM

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*Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, written in 1792, stands as one of the most comprehensive historical documents in the argument for the rights of women. Controversial at the time it was written, its content and form have received considerable criticism in the 200 years since its publication. In this essay, a non-linear model of argument is proposed, based on an analysis of the form of Vindication, which assists scholars in recognizing the complexity of the work as well as the need to reconsider notions of effective rhetorical form.*

Mary Wollstonecraft, recognized as one of the most influential feminists in history, strived to express her views in an age when the opinions and thoughts of women were seen as insignificant. At a time when the White, male, upper-class perspective was the dominant one and when women writers were scarce, Wollstonecraft emerged as a serious writer, philosopher, and advocate of the equality of women and men. Throughout her career in England in the late 18th century, Wollstonecraft challenged and ridiculed the common sentiment that women naturally were inferior to men, arguing that the prevailing system of reasoning and education, not women's "natural" subservience, kept them in positions of dependence and inferiority. In response to the common belief in women's lack of intelligence, their submissiveness, and their passivity, Wollstonecraft wrote and published her most influential work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792)—a powerful and complex argument for women's rights and equality.<sup>1</sup>

Wollstonecraft's bold and important claims for women's independence have not received as much acclaim as might be expected. Although women prior to the 20th century praised her work,<sup>2</sup> only a few contemporary scholars speak in favor of Wollstonecraft. Todd suggests that Wollstonecraft's work is "so comprehensive that one may say that all feminists, radical and conservative, who followed Wollstonecraft are her philosophic descendants" (1976, p. xi); Sapero argues that any "serious student of feminist theory or gender and political theory must have read [*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*]" (1992, p. 280); Taylor considers Wollstonecraft a "pioneer" (1969, p. 19); Stuart (1978) explores Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*; Griffin (1994) suggests that Wollstonecraft's arguments help explain the experience of alienation from a rhetorical rather than a strictly material perspective; and Huxman (1996) advocates that Wollstonecraft's work be considered a part of a symbolic convergence of early feminist discourse.

In contrast to this small group of supporters, however, the majority of responses to Wollstonecraft are grounded in a harsh rejection of her public image, her arguments, and her overall presentation of her ideas. Perhaps more than any other feminist on record, Wollstonecraft has been so harshly criticized, not only for what she said but for how she said it, that scholars would do well to consider the implications and foundations of this criticism.

Although both the content and form of Wollstonecraft's ideas have been scrutinized,

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shortly after her death in 1798, Wollstonecraft's character also came under attack. She was described as an "unsexed female" in Polwhele's poem, *The Unsex'd Females* (1800, pp. 23-35), and a "hyena in petticoats" by Walpole (1859, p. 452). Many years later, Lundberg and Farnham suggested that Wollstonecraft's theories came from a "tortured woman's soul"—they were "factually erroneous" and "socially mischievous" (1947, pp. 144-145). Wollstonecraft, Lundberg and Farnham suggested, wanted women to behave "as nearly as possible like men" (pp. 144-145). The content of her work also came under scrutiny shortly after her death, and her arguments were described as superficial (*Anti-Jacobin Review*, 1798) and as nothing more than "extravagant, absurd, and destructive theories" (*Anti-Jacobin Review*, 1801, p. 95).

In 1885, almost 100 years after her death, a reviewer for the *Eclectic Magazine* began the attack on the form of Wollstonecraft's arguments. This reviewer suggested that the work was "too long," lacking in arrangement, repetitive, "rambling," and disjointed (pp. 100-107). The intense attacks on her rhetorical form, however, did not take hold until the middle of this century. Beard argued that Wollstonecraft's style was "uninformed" and lacked the neatness and "athletic movement of Paine's English" (1946, p. 100). Kamm (1966, p. 19) criticized the manner in which *Vindication* was written, describing Wollstonecraft's work as "rambling" and a "book which shows every mark of having been hurriedly put together. . . . [A] *Vindication*, like its author, is flamboyant, passionate and sentimental." Nixon (1971, p. 97) suggested that Wollstonecraft's book was "not well planned. She reiterates her arguments without strengthening them, suddenly returning on her steps to insist on some point which previously she had not sufficiently stressed." Tomalin (1974, p. 136) suggested that the "book is without any logical structure"; Urbanski (1980, p. 55) described the book as "ill arranged," repetitive, and too full of digressions; and Brownmiller (1975, p. 4) argued that Wollstonecraft was possessed by the "furies" who "both impelled and choked her, . . . clogging her prose with gulping anger, roadblocks of venom, perilous flights of mannered scorn."<sup>3</sup>

The early rejections of Wollstonecraft's ideas seem to be grounded in questions of lifestyle and content, while later negative responses were based on the actual form of her arguments. This is not a new strategy for criticizing or even rejecting the arguments of feminist and minority rhetors; negative scrutiny regularly moves from what a rhetor says to how those ideas are presented (Spender, 1982, p. 28).<sup>4</sup> These criticisms of the form of a feminist rhetor's argument suggest that when the opposition no longer can refute the content of that argument, a refutation of the form of that argument begins. Although certain argument forms might be so complex or confusing as to be incomprehensible, Wollstonecraft's work clearly does not fall into this category. In this instance, the attacks regarding the proper form or arrangement of an entire argument and the disposition of an entire piece of discourse still are open for discussion.

The question of the nature of rhetorical form or style is not a new one in the communication discipline and has been addressed by several scholars in recent decades. Nelson (1972) argues for a fugal form in the rhetoric of Charles James Fox; McGuire (1977) suggests that critics understand Hitler's *Mein Kampf* as an encyclopaedic myth; Black (1978, 1992) advances the idea of a sentimental style; and Campbell (1980), Dow and Tonn (1993), and Blankenship and Robson (1995) argue for a lyric or feminine style of rhetoric. Recent scholarly efforts also have been directed at envisioning and teaching the complexity of arrangement or disposition in public speaking courses. Jaffe (1995) and Kearney and Plax (1996) advocate an intercultural perspective on form, and S. K. Foss and K. A. Foss (1994) propose a nonconfrontative, transforma-

tional model for presentational speaking that revisions the ways in which ideas are linked together. Taken as a whole, these attempts to advocate and explain the myriad patterns of argument are significant in that they suggest the complexity and diversity of argument forms available to rhetors. They do not, however, explain satisfactorily Wollstonecraft's rhetorical form.

I suggest that in order to understand Wollstonecraft's arguments and her rhetorical contribution more fully, scholars must consider the distinctive form or pattern of argument she advanced. Wollstonecraft's treatise illustrates the highly organic nature of an argument suggested by Toulmin (1988), or what Perelman (1970, p. 290) identifies as "a web [of ideas] formed from all the arguments and all the reasons that combine to achieve the desired result." Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* offers scholars an opportunity to scrutinize this web-like arrangement of ideas and to explore the implications of this arrangement for rhetors and rhetorical theory alike.

I propose that Wollstonecraft's arguments are understood best as a web of ideas, woven together through definition, redefinition, repetition, and a careful pattern of interconnection. Her pattern of arguing is web-like in form in that her overall argument begins with a central theme from which all other themes develop and to which all other themes connect. The web pattern continues as each theme is linked to the others by an intricate system of definition and redefinition and the interrelation of each of her ideas to the others. Wollstonecraft builds, in effect, a system in which all parts of her argument function symbiotically and in concert so that the taking apart of one strand of her argument requires addressing each of the other strands. The strength of this argument lies in the difficulty of refuting its entirety; its weakness, however, comes from its complexity and its web-like nature.

To assess Wollstonecraft's rhetorical form, I begin my analysis with a very brief discussion of *Vindication* and Wollstonecraft's perspective on women's rights. I then identify the web model of discourse by discussing her method of organization and illustrating the web pattern within the presentation of her arguments. I argue that Wollstonecraft's arguments create an interwoven pattern of ideas that ask the audience to participate in the argument process by building connection upon connection and relationship within relationship. This same pattern, however, can present difficulties for both the rhetor and the audience, and I address these as well. I conclude my analysis with a discussion of the ways in which Wollstonecraft's work illustrates the complex form an argument can assume when the issue under discussion is equally complex. I also address issues of the role of the audience and the process of argument construction itself, suggesting that the role of the rhetor, the form of an argument, and the task of the audience, at times, may be intimately interconnected.

### WOLLSTONECRAFT'S ARGUMENTS AND AN ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL FORM

In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft attacked and challenged both male dominance and female acquiescence to that dominance. She offered a critique of and challenge to the prevailing system of education for women and proposed a reformed social order, particularly where women and men were concerned. Wollstonecraft argued against the influential theories and writings of Milton, Rousseau, Gregory, Fordyce, and Pope and challenged Biblical strictures, nobility, hereditary rule, and even common-sense notions regarding proper education and the natural social order. She turned arguments from each of these individuals and institutions against themselves, offering refutations of their claims and illustrating the harms done to women as a result. Her primary thesis

was that were women to be properly educated, they would prove themselves to be morally and intellectually equal to men. To trivialize women and to keep them in a state of inferiority, according to Wollstonecraft, was antithetical to God's purpose. Wollstonecraft wanted women to have freedom to think rather than intellectual confinement, a chance for a stimulating education rather than lessons of obedience, and strength of mind and body rather than flattering airs and a child-like nature. Women's character, Wollstonecraft surmised, was a product of oppression rather than nature; were society to alter its views of women as well as the restrictions placed on them, benefits would be reaped by all. Throughout *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft argued that women's position in society ought to improve so that women could become better wives and mothers, live lives of dignity and respect, and make more positive contributions to society as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

As Wollstonecraft argued from her notion of the established truth to examples of the folly of that truth and to a new definition of truth, she addressed one subject or topic, raised issues from another topic, asked the reader to branch out to yet another topic, and to see the relationships among and between each of her ideas. Through this series of connections and threads of relationships, Wollstonecraft developed a complicated system of definition and redefinition, cause and effect, and reasoning and refutation that is, perhaps, more complicated than either Perelman (1970) or Toulmin (1988) suggest. To understand Wollstonecraft's pattern of argument, I argue that the reader must envision the pattern of a web. This web has a central theme or center from which all strands of organization and thought extend. Each strand, as it moves away from the center of the web, intersects with other strands, circling outward and developing or connecting with other themes or strands as the web increases in size. The result is that whether direct and confrontative or indirect and subtle, each idea in *Vindication* becomes an integral part of every other until a reader who might want to reject one of Wollstonecraft's theses can do so only by breaking apart the web and re-weaving a new one, leaving the web half-finished or rejecting the argument in its entirety.

Understanding how Wollstonecraft's pattern of arguments is constructed requires attention to three elements or components of this web pattern: (1) a central idea or theme, which Wollstonecraft identifies as happiness; (2) five strands or topics of argument that she develops throughout the book and that connect to her central idea—woman, man, virtue, nature, and love; and (3) a cross-strand theme of education that connects each of the five strands of argument together. What follows is a description of this web-like style of reasoning as it is developed in *Vindication*, also summarized in Figure 1.

### *The Center and Five Strands of the Web*

At the center of the web of reasons in *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft placed what she called a *first principle*. This principle rested on the conviction that God had ordained that all of mankind be happy. She included women in the definition of *mankind* and defined happiness as independence, respect, education, and freedom to grow (p. 91). Wollstonecraft stated this first principle in her opening sentences of the book, and the right of happiness was the theme to which she returned again and again throughout her work. Man's tyranny prevented women from achieving happiness because women failed to receive a proper education and were kept in a state of ignorance and dependence as a result of this tyranny (p. 121). Societal biases as well as inadequate education prevented women from attaining the respect Wollstonecraft saw as integral to this state of happiness (p. 233). The blind obedience to authority that was expected of

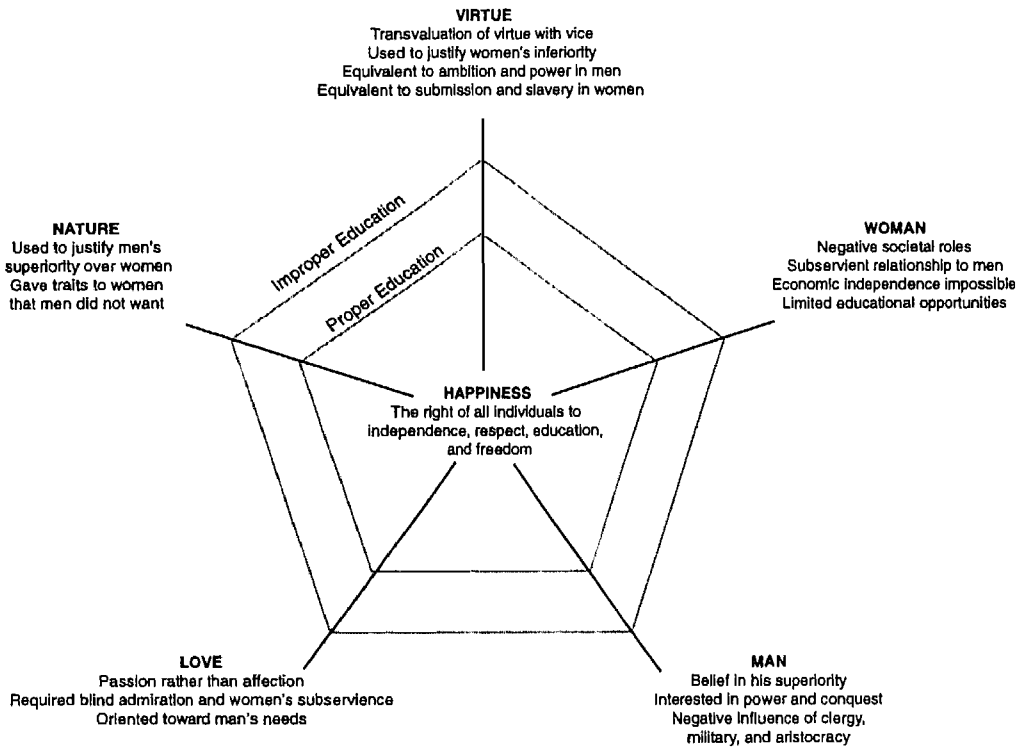


FIGURE 1.

## WOLLSTONECRAFT'S WEB OF CHALLENGE

women led to tyranny, unconditional submission, and the rejection of anything "new" that might bring women closer to this God-ordained happiness (pp. 264–265).

The right to happiness, which women had been denied, lay at the center of Wollstonecraft's arguments and at the center of the web. Each idea she developed in *Vindication* either connected directly or indirectly to this center, and a discussion involving any point in the web would send vibrations toward this center and call to mind this organizing principle. In this way, the reader repeatedly was reminded of this first principle and the focus toward increasing women's happiness. Surrounding this center idea and extending out from all sides were the five topics of woman, man, nature, virtue, and love. The topics were equal in emphasis, and all were connected in numerous ways to one another. As she proceeded through her work, Wollstonecraft articulated the current definition of each topic or strand and the negative impact it had on women, the social order in general, and the possibility of happiness. In arguing in this way, she illustrated the common view of each one of these topics, the ways in which this view had been constructed, and its ultimate impact on the center of the web—happiness.

*Woman.* In constructing the strand of woman, Wollstonecraft analyzed woman's role in society, her relationship to man, her range of choices for economic independence, and her educational opportunities. Wollstonecraft began by identifying the myriad ways that woman had been defined by the society at large, illustrating how far these definitions kept women from the center of the web and from happiness. *Woman* was

defined as obedient; a "gentle, domestic brute" (p. 101); the slave of man (p. 122); subservient to love or lust (pp. 110, 204); a plaything, men's fancy; a lover of power; and a "toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever . . . he chooses to be amused" (pp. 107, 111, 118). Women were seen as submissive, docile and "spaniel-like" in affection (pp. 117, 118, 179), and "naturally attentive" to dress and appearance (p. 129). They were thought to be weak and frail (pp. 141, 153), by nature suited only for domestic duties, in a perpetual state of ignorance (pp. 131, 144-145, 154, 232), possessed of infantine airs (p. 154), and lacking in sensibility (pp. 173-175, 221).

Wollstonecraft argued that a woman, educated to be dependent on men, was to "endure injuries" silently, "smiling under the lash at which [she] dare not snarl" (pp. 117, 135, 180). She was to hide her good sense, should she be lucky enough to possess this quality, so that she did not appear superior to the men in her company (p. 198). Wollstonecraft suggested that because women never had received a useful education and because of the efforts of men to increase women's inferiority, "women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures" (p. 118). They were limited at every turn, "confined to the needle," and shut out "from all political and civil employments" (p. 288). The result of this confinement was boredom and a narrowness of mind that led to "cunning" behaviors and "sly tricks" designed to obtain some "foolish" pleasure that had caught women's attentions (p. 288).

Wollstonecraft argued that, in order to secure a husband, the primary goal in a woman's life (p. 116), women were taught to "feign a sickly delicacy" (p. 112) and to attend continually to their charms, dress, and appearance (pp. 170-172). The practice of "coming out," whereby a young girl was "taken from one public place to another, richly caparisoned," was little more than a marketplace for a "marriagable miss" (p. 289). This practice reinforced women's subservient role to men, emphasizing gaiety, attention to appearance, and little in the way of restraint or morality. The result, Wollstonecraft suggested, was disastrous. Women became accustomed to the gaiety and frivolity of a dazzling night life and, once married, soon lost interest in the drudgery of housekeeping. They began to act "audaciously" and in an "indolent" manner, to neglect their domestic duties, and to squander "away all the money which should have been saved for their helpless younger children" (pp. 241-242). Women soon lost their virtue as well as their reputations and, unlike men, could not gain their honor back again (p. 244).

The image of women presented by Wollstonecraft was harsh, unflattering, and even alarming. Her arguments suggested that women were ill prepared for carrying out domestic duties, finding contentment in marriage, or leading virtuous lives. Woman, Wollstonecraft summarized, had acquired little in the way of intellectual abilities and skills and, instead, had acquired all the "follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit" (p. 151). Throughout her analysis and vindication of women's rights, Wollstonecraft emphasized the harm done to women and to society by the prevailing definition or view of women. This construction of women, Wollstonecraft continually reminded her readers, could not bring happiness to women or to men. Thus, the strand of argument representing woman consistently brought the reader back to the central theme, happiness, and to the myriad ways the prevailing definitions prevented women from achieving respect, independence, proper education, and freedom to grow.

*Man.* In her attempt to vindicate the rights of women, Wollstonecraft offered a strand of argument that reflected her definition of *man*. The definition of *man* that Wollstonecraft offered was as negative as that of *woman* and was responsible for keeping men

away from happiness as well. Wollstonecraft described men in general as arrogant, tyrants, rakes, sensualists, lovers of power, and dazzlers by riches (pp. 92, 106, 107, 113, 224). They were a mixture of "gallantry and despotism" (pp. 106–107) and took advantage of women, thinking only of conquest and sexual desire (p. 147). Men were disrespectful and, with an "impudent dross of gallantry thought so manly," men would "stare insultingly at every female" they met (p. 231). Wollstonecraft argued that this "loose behaviour" illustrated "such habitual depravity, such weakness of mind, that it [was] vain to expect much public or private virtue" from men. Until men could curb their "sensual fondness for sex" and their "impudence," neither women nor men could treat the other with respect (p. 231). Men might "boast of their triumphs over women," Wollstonecraft explained, but boasting of the ability to lure a woman into sin and then to abandon her to "face a sneering, frowning world" was an empty triumph (p. 233). Men then moved on to pursue "new conquests" and had done little more than engage in acts of betrayal (p. 233). The remedy, Wollstonecraft argued, was that "men ought to maintain the women whom they have seduced." This not only would "be one means of reforming female manners," but it would put a stop to "an abuse that has an equally fatal effect on population and morals" (p. 250).

Not only did the male character come under attack, but Wollstonecraft challenged the clergy, the military, and the aristocracy. Although she did not attack the clergy to the degree that she had in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), which constituted her response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), she did label the clergy as "indolent slugs," "relics of Popery," and "rapacious priests of superstitious memory" (1975, p. 276). The military also came under attack as it was full of "despots" and "idle superficial young men whose only occupation [was] gallantry"; soldiers, Wollstonecraft explained, were "dead-weights of vice and folly" (p. 97). The nobility received harsh scrutiny as well—they were a "pestilential vapour" that hovered over society (p. 96). Kings possessed "uncontrollable power," yet this very power was an "insuperable bar to the attainment of either wisdom or virtue," and no man could "acquire sufficient strength of mind" to carry out the duties of someone with such authority and control (p. 96). Kings were not educated to think or reason but were instructed in either "the invention of crimes, or the stupid routine of childish ceremonies." The result was that neither wisdom nor virtue governed the nation (p. 96).

In attacking three of the major institutions of her day—the church, the military, and the aristocracy—Wollstonecraft continued her challenge of male superiority and her development of the theme of man. She not only offered a discussion of her definition and view of man in general in *Vindication*, but she also questioned institutions that were male dominated and male governed, illustrating the ways that each prevented people in general from attaining the happiness she placed at the center of the web. Like the topic of woman, the topic of man also suggested to the reader the difficulties that lay in moving back to the central idea of happiness. As Wollstonecraft illustrated the ways in which the tyranny of male superiority prevented individuals from achieving respect, independence, education, and the freedom to grow, she reminded her readers of the connections among male superiority, oppression, and immorality. The strand of her argument relating to man, then, became directly linked to the central idea of happiness and to the strand of woman. These two were not the only strands of argument to be interconnected throughout *Vindication*, however. Wollstonecraft also argued for a third connection: virtue.

*Virtue.* The topic of virtue also extended out from the center of the web in *Vindication*, and references to virtue can be seen in the preceding two categories. Wollstonecraft developed this strand of argument carefully, constructing yet another strand of reasoning that moved away from the center of her web. Virtue was a necessary part of civilization and could lead to happiness, Wollstonecraft argued, but it had become confused with vice (p. 91). Again, working from definition to redefinition, Wollstonecraft argued for the harms of the current definition of *virtue* and offered an alternative vision of this characteristic. Men's privileged positions, she suggested, enabled them to use their reason to justify women's inferiority and to perpetuate their prejudices, assigning to women the very qualities they themselves did not want (p. 91). Virtue in men thus had become power, ambition, and wealth; virtue in women consisted of happy submission, dependence, and the need for protection (p. 117). Even more absurd, Wollstonecraft suggested, was the belief that men were supposed to be more than happy to instruct or assist these ignorant creatures when necessary. If a "virtuous" woman could not even take care of herself, Wollstonecraft asked, then how was she to fulfill her duties as a wife and mother (p. 137)?

The result of man's unrestrained privilege was that virtue all but had disappeared, while the vices related to expedience and momentary gratification prevented individuals from achieving any real measure of happiness (p. 92). Were women more rationally educated, "human virtue" and "improvement in knowledge" would grow and expand, and virtue would resume its rightful place (pp. 121-122, 126). Unless virtue of any kind, Wollstonecraft summarized, "be built on knowledge, it will only produce a kind of insipid decency" (p. 242). Society, she suggested, must be organized and based on greater equality for virtue to gain its proper influence on human activities. If "one-half of mankind be chained" to the other, morality will never gain ground, and both men and women will continually "undermine" virtue "through ignorance or pride" (p. 252).

As Wollstonecraft developed the strand of virtue in *Vindication*, she linked it to her arguments for the right to happiness as well as to the damage done by defining women as subservient to men. She illustrated the ways in which virtue, as it had been constructed by male reasoning over time, prevented love from developing between men and women, kept women in positions of ignorance and dependence, and even tied men to roles of tyranny and power. Wollstonecraft's fourth topic, nature, follows this same pattern of interconnection and assists in the building of a complicated and tightly woven pattern of argument.

*Nature.* "To account for, and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments have been brought forward" that attempted to prove the natural superiority of the male over the female, Wollstonecraft asserted. The previously uncontested argument for women's natural abilities, dispositions, and characteristics was one of the arguments Wollstonecraft criticized (p. 100). Women's "natural" abilities very frequently were those traits that men did not want—traits that kept women in a state of dependence, servitude, and ignorance. The irony of the argument for women's natural tendencies, Wollstonecraft repeatedly suggested, was that while women were thought to possess certain characteristics or traits by virtue of their anatomy, their entire upbringing was spent making sure these were the qualities they developed. Women had been *defined* as women, and Wollstonecraft set out to challenge this definition.

Girls were thought to be naturally inclined to "sit still, play with dolls and listen to foolish conversation"; yet, their education and upbringing afforded them little else in the way of activities (p. 177). They were said to be "from earliest infancy fond of dress,"

perpetually focused on “personal charms,” and “hardly capable of understanding what is said to them” if it did not relate to their appearance; yet, they were discouraged from developing other traits (p. 176). As mothers, they were thought to be devoted to their children; as women, “they perceive themselves formed for obedience”; but without children and husbands, women would find themselves in the poor house for lack of employment and income (p. 179). Nature was supposed to have given women “fears and blushes,” timidity, and a seductive “weakness” that guaranteed their dependence on men (p. 192), but were they to be freed from the “leading-strings” that made them this way, would women “be cajoled into virtue by artful flattery and sexual compliments” (p. 193)? Hardly, Wollstonecraft responded.

Nature was supposed to have provided women with the desire toward “*respectful observance*” of their husbands; the ability to study “*their humours*,” overlook “*their mistakes*,” submit “*to their opinions*,” and pass by “little instances of unevenness, caprice or passion”; give “*soft answers to hasty words*”; and complain “as seldom as possible.” As the argument for women’s natural traits accumulated, Wollstonecraft suggested, women’s natural qualities sounded suspiciously like the “portrait of a house slave” and a “domestic drudge” (p. 195).

In identifying *nature* as a term that was used against women, rather than a term used to describe any inherent qualities held by women, Wollstonecraft challenged the belief in women’s natural inferiority to men. What was seen as natural, she argued, was used to justify women’s subservient role (p. 318). The prevailing definition of what was natural for women, Wollstonecraft’s analysis suggested, kept women in positions of inferiority, denied them respect and self-determination, and assisted in perpetuating the prevailing definitions of *man*, *woman*, and *virtue*. This “natural” state prevented women from reaching the center of Wollstonecraft’s web-happiness.

*Love.* The final strand of argument Wollstonecraft developed in this portion of the web concerned the question of love. Here, Wollstonecraft addressed the prevailing opinion toward love, illustrated the ways in which love had been defined to oppress women, to meet the physical and emotional needs of men, and to transform vices into virtues. Wollstonecraft argued that love had been reduced to the state of perpetual passion rather than consistent affection. Love had become a woman’s blind admiration for a man rather than women’s and men’s confidence in and respect for one another (p. 114). Love, which focused on pleasing the male only, had become more suited to the sensualist than to the long-term companion. In this state, love was but a fleeting shadow, unable to be maintained for any length of time and more akin to “chance and sensation” than to choice and reason (pp. 113, 115).

Love had been taken over by phrases of “pumped up passion” and by “artful flattery and sexual compliments” that led women astray as though they were nothing more than puppets (p. 193). Within marriage, Wollstonecraft added, love did not take the form of affection, admiration, and liking but, rather, resembled a relationship of dominance, deceit, and submission. In a marriage, love between a man and a woman had become the love of a master for his “trustworthy servant” rather than any real respect or friendship between individuals (p. 159). Love, in addition, was acquired through “affectation” rather than honesty, and it was guided by passion rather than genuine respect and admiration (pp. 112–113). The results were relationships and marriages between men and women founded on “momentary gratification” rather than on “compassionate tenderness” or long-lasting friendship (p. 115). Individuals, in this state

of "love," spent their lives bounding "from one pleasure to another" and acquired neither "wisdom nor respectability of character" (p. 115).

As Wollstonecraft developed her arguments on the hazards and faults of the prevailing views toward love, she illustrated the various ways this definition of love connected with and affected women and men and prevented them from reaching the center of her argument. Love continued to channel women's energies toward subservience, while it perpetuated men's superiority. The result was that neither men nor women could behave in virtuous ways, nor could they attain happiness successfully. Both sexes were prevented from achieving respect by the other, both were dependent on the other for passion and momentary gratification, and both were prevented from growing together as whole and healthy individuals. What society viewed as the "natural" relationship between women and men, Wollstonecraft implied, was, at best, a sure path to unhappiness.

### *Cross Strands of Connection*

Thus far, Wollstonecraft's rhetorical form suggests to the reader that the prevailing definitions of *woman*, *man*, *virtue*, *nature*, and *love* prevented individuals from achieving happiness. Her web, if the analysis were to stop at this point, would look like a wheel, with a central circle and five strands extending out from that center. The theme of education, however, indicates that her arguments are more fluid and complex and less rigid and mechanistic than the metaphor of a wheel suggests. Throughout her treatise on women's rights, Wollstonecraft repeatedly argued for the problematic nature of education as it then was conceived and for the benefits of an improved educational system. In doing so, she created what might be envisioned as circles or rings that link each of the five strands to one another and make reaching the center of the web, realizing happiness, a very real possibility.

As she addressed the themes of woman, man, virtue, nature, and love, Wollstonecraft regularly called attention to the ways in which current societal definitions and assumptions regarding education directed each of these themes away from the center of the web—she created one connecting strand that focused on the effects of an inappropriate education. She also developed a second cross strand with her discussions of education that illustrated how redefining or redesigning the educational system could bring individuals and their behaviors closer to that center. The result is a sophisticated use of definition and redefinition, a fluid argument that depends on intricate connections among each of the five strands, and a move back to the center of her argument.

*Improper Education.* The cross strand that takes the reader farthest away from the center of the web is Wollstonecraft's recurring argument for the problems of the current system of education. Her focus as the book begins is on the effects of an inadequate education on her theme of woman. Wollstonecraft argued that the contemporary system of education left women in a useless state and only functioned to keep women in positions of dependence and servitude. "The great advantages which naturally result from storing the mind with knowledge," she noted, are obvious (p. 219). Yet, women spent the first years of their lives "acquiring a smattering of accomplishments"—a little music, a little literature, and considerable instruction in methods of beauty—that directed them toward marriage rather than self-respect or independence (p. 83). The result was that women, prepared for marriage alone, could not support themselves or their children if an accident should befall their husbands (pp. 135–136, 289).

While she did address the issue of education for women as it related to women alone, Wollstonecraft consistently connected this theme to the effects of women's education

on men and the relations between women and men. As noted above, men became tyrants and sensualists as a result of women's improper education. This happened, Wollstonecraft went on to explain, because, according to most writers of her generation, women's education should be "always relative" to the needs of men. So far did this notion go that, in the words of Rousseau, women were to be educated

to please, to be useful to us [men], to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young, and take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable—these are the duties of women at all times, and what they should be taught in their infancy. (p. 175)

The discussion of improper education called attention to the link between the two themes of woman and man and to the ways in which it facilitated unhealthy individuals, unhealthy relationships, and unhappiness.

Wollstonecraft drew connections among an improper education, nature, and virtue. Education, as conceived in Wollstonecraft's era, was built on what she considered the ill-conceived principle that women lacked the ability to reason (p. 142). Wollstonecraft challenged those of her generation who insisted that knowledge was inconsistent with women's character (p. 144). Nature had not determined women to be incompetent, she argued, but an improper education had facilitated this tendency. The "narrowness of mind" so common to women, Wollstonecraft reasoned, was the result of "almost insuperable obstacles" placed in women's way "to prevent the cultivation of the female understanding"; nature had not done this—"the very constitution of civil governments" had (p. 144).

Faculty education, moreover, distorted conceptions of virtue. Education left women so "weakened by false refinement" that their "condition [was] much below what it would be were they left in a state nearer to nature" (p. 153). Education rendered women "innocent," "alluring and indulgent." Of what use, Wollstonecraft asked her readers, were these "virtues" beyond some foolish fancy designed by well-intentioned but misguided males (p. 187)?

Finally, an improper education did much to distort the relations between women and men. Love, as a result of women's lack of formal education, became the quest for marrying "advantageously," resulting in nothing more than legal prostitution (p. 151). For a "short time," Wollstonecraft reminded her audience, women became an "object of desire" (p. 189). All too soon, however, men lost interest because women, "kept from the tree of knowledge," had nothing in the way of intellect to offer them (p. 189). An attraction that could have developed into "natural fondness" soon burned out, and women often were discarded as their husbands went in pursuit of other pleasures (p. 189).

Woven throughout *Vindication* were Wollstonecraft's strong sentiments on the harms done to women by an improper education. So prevalent are these arguments that the reader can begin at any section in the book and soon will come to her critique of this faulty system. But Wollstonecraft also argued for a system of education that had the potential to bring individuals closer to the state of happiness she advocated. Although she hinted at its content in the earlier pages of her document, she addressed it most fully in the latter half of her work. In this second cross strand, the strand that brings readers closer to the center of the web, Wollstonecraft continued to draw connections among her themes as she discussed the components and illustrated the benefits of an adequate education for women.

*Proper Education.* Again, from the opening pages of her work, the reader senses the centrality of a proper education for reaching the state of happiness Wollstonecraft

advocated. She dedicated her work to M. Talleyrand-Perigord, an advocate of a national system of education in France, explaining that a national system of education that included women as well as men “would advance, instead of [retard], the progress of those glorious principles that give a substance to morality” and virtue (p. 85). This national system would combine qualities of both private and boarding-school educations, and the effects of such an alternative form of education, Wollstonecraft argued, would be astounding: “It is plain from the history of all nations, that women cannot be confined to merely domestic pursuits, for they will not fulfill family duties, unless their minds take a wider range” (p. 294).

A proper education, Wollstonecraft reasoned, would redefine conceptions of woman, man, virtue, nature, and love. In this cross strand, however, Wollstonecraft began with the themes of man and virtue and then quickly incorporated the effects of a proper education for woman and love. A public education, she explained, would be “directed to form citizens; but if you wish to make good citizens, you must first exercise the affections of a son and brother” (p. 279). Wollstonecraft saw this attention to males as the only way to improve society; “public affections, as well as public virtue, must ever grow out of the private character” (p. 279). Children of both sexes must have room to move about and to “walk in a superb garden” in order that their minds and bodies might grow (pp. 281–292). They must learn “chastity” and “modesty”; personal habits, she reasoned, had “more effect on the moral character” than generally supposed, and a proper education could ensure that these habits were acquired (p. 282).

Education could improve the relations between women and men because, were they allowed to study together, “those graceful decencies might early be inculcated which produce modesty” (p. 283). Young people would learn lessons of “politeness” (p. 283), “friendship,” “respect and confidence,” (p. 284) and their minds would be “stored . . . with knowledge” (p. 285). Women’s identity also would be strengthened by this system. Allowed to interact with others—to “mix with a number of equals”—young girls would be able to “form a just opinion” of themselves (p. 293). They would be taught to occupy their minds with a wide range of subjects beyond appearance and marriage and to “found their virtue on knowledge” (p. 294). Men’s identity also would be enhanced because, as women develop their intellect and attain greater virtues, men also would become more virtuous, for the “improvement and emancipation” of both women and men “must be mutual” (p. 296).

More implicitly than explicitly, Wollstonecraft linked nature and education together. Nature, as it had been defined for both women and men, was the antithesis of a proper education in Wollstonecraft’s web of argument because it defined women as everything that education would prevent. Wollstonecraft’s arguments suggested that human nature actually was to be educated, to reason, and to participate fully in society. Human nature was to live in a state where equality existed between women and men, to honor and respect others, to pursue independence, and to live in a state of happiness. A proper education could alter this unnatural state quickly.

Education, whether positive or negative, affected the definition of *woman*, the relationships between men and women, and the images and ideals of virtue. The predominant notions of the qualities nature had given women, in addition, served as the foundation for their education. Healthy love and honest virtue could not exist without alterations in the prevailing views of education for women as well as men. Each topic of argument was linked to the organizing principle of happiness, and the topic of education moved the reader closer or further away from that center, depending on its framing. The result was that, throughout her analysis and discussion of woman, man,

virtue, and nature, the reader must return time and again to the question of the right to happiness and the societal barriers that prevented individuals from attaining this right.

### SUMMARY OF A WEB MODEL OF REASONING: RECONCEPTUALIZING RHETORICAL FORM

As Wollstonecraft argued for the vindication of the rights of women, she not only challenged women's position in society but she placed this challenge within a non-linear framework of argument. At the center of her claims lay her belief in a God-ordained right to respect, education, independence, and freedom to grow, which she labeled *happiness*. Individuals of both sexes had a right to this happiness, but numerous barriers lay in the way of reaching this state. In articulating these barriers, Wollstonecraft constructed five strands of arguments that extended out from her central idea of the right to happiness. Each strand represented a different topic—woman, man, love, virtue, and nature—and as she developed each one, she offered an analysis of the prevailing view of that topic and the implications of those views on men, women, and society at large. Her circular and interconnecting theme of education created cross strands of arguments that assisted her in highlighting the interrelationships among her ideas. In doing so, she illustrated the cause-and-effect relationships within each of the strands and the need for increasing connections to be made within the prevailing system of reasoning.

A web model of reasoning necessitates a belief in and recognition of connectedness. Wollstonecraft's web reminds the reader of the connections among the prevailing system of reason and power, social structures and happiness, men and women, and even among seemingly disconnected ideas. Wollstonecraft's critics interpreted her work as rambling and disorganized, but this analysis of form suggests that her work was highly organized around patterns of connections that earlier critics overlooked. Organized as an intricate pattern of interconnections, *Vindication* presents not only a sophisticated rhetoric but an alternative framework for argument.

Several areas of interest worth pursuing are suggested for rhetorical scholars by a model of reasoning as a web. The web model itself, of course, needs further exploration and analysis. In order to refine and extend the model, it must be studied in other contexts and through other cases. A preliminary examination of the discourse of other rhetors—Douglass (1950), Nightingale (1992), Noggle (1983), and Le Guin (1989)—suggests that the web model is not unique to Wollstonecraft and that the traditional linear model of reasoning frequently can be inadequate or inappropriate in explaining the argumentative patterns employed by some rhetors.

This analysis also suggests the possibility of the existence of yet other ways of arguing.<sup>6</sup> Linear theories of arguing suggest that arguments require a distinct major premise, minor premise, and conclusion, or even, as Toulmin (1988) suggests concerning the field-invariant nature of arguments, that arguments proceed from a claim to grounds to warrant (incorporating the backing, modal qualifier, and rebuttal as well). Wollstonecraft's arguments, however, challenge this assumption.<sup>7</sup> The arguments in *Vindication* indeed may incorporate each of these components, but they do not always follow this linear pattern and frequently upset the order to which scholars have become accustomed. The web model used by Wollstonecraft reveals that arguments may have a center thesis with supporting arguments spinning out from this center that simultaneously act as rebuttals, qualifiers, backing, warrants, and claims. Each of these strands, in addition, contains elements of Toulmin's schema, but their use indicates a highly complex and intensely interconnected process of argument development.

A web model of reasoning also calls attention to the role of the audience in the process of arguing. Wollstonecraft's arguments, while not difficult to follow, are a great deal more complicated than some other forms of presentation, and the role of listeners or audiences in a web-like style is quite different from their roles when responding to a more linear form of arguing. A web form, which is more involved and interconnected, might require more work from the audience in order to process the arguments. Yet, the repetition of topics and ideas throughout the web and the continual reminders of connections to previous topics seem to ease some of the tension that might exist between intricacy and detail of reasoning and the processing of the arguments. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) have argued for a form of knowing or listening that might help explain the epistemology or the stance of the audience in this process. These researchers identify a form of knowing, which they call "connected knowing," that constitutes an epistemology that may be more consistent with Wollstonecraft's web pattern of argument. Connected knowing involves a process in which listeners store a variety of perspectives and ways of knowing in their minds—listeners hold all ideas as possibilities, assessing the implications of each. They then come to a decision that is highly contextual and interconnected, recognizing the power of each idea or possibility to influence others. Connected knowing encourages a view of the argument as a whole as opposed to a view of the isolated segments or parts of an argument, and Wollstonecraft's web suggests such a focus on the whole rather than the parts.

As a rhetor, Wollstonecraft seems to have made use of both connected and the more traditional form of separated knowing. In using the more familiar separate form of knowing, Wollstonecraft did challenge, doubt, refute, and argue against the views of the dominant framework. But she also asked her readers to keep in mind the whole of that dominant argument, suggesting a more connected stance or epistemology. Wollstonecraft located her argument against women's oppression within a larger interconnected framework of social codes and norms—something that had not been done as comprehensively before. She also wove a web of connections in support of women's emancipation for her audience. In this way, she relied more heavily on the connected stance and encouraged her listeners to follow in kind. Her work suggests that rhetors as well as audiences may use both of these stances productively.

Understanding an interconnected or web-patterned argument like Wollstonecraft's may be easier from a connected stance. From a connected stance, the listener can suspend judgment, store a series of arguments and connections, and then offer a response to or extension of the speaker's ideas or claims. From a position of separate knowing, listeners may experience a great deal more difficulty. With a focus on doubting the knowledge of another, a separate knower's task is disconnection as well as the isolation of ideas. Attempting to refute and challenge the myriad strands that a web pattern presents as they are being developed might be frustrating, time consuming, and even a bit overwhelming, not to mention disruptive of the listening process.

An epistemology of connection implies a reconceptualization of patterns of argument and suggests yet another area of interest to rhetorical scholars. From a connected stance, listeners not only store and process arguments more comprehensively, but they also may be able to assist in the construction of the web. A web pattern of argument challenges traditional assumptions regarding the oppositional nature of argument and suggests the possibility of cooperative argument.<sup>8</sup> Traditional conceptualizations of argument focus on the process of convincing or persuading an individual or group to believe in a particular way, the attack of another's ideas, an adversarial or even

“rapist/seducer/lover” stance, and the notion of participating in an argument as involving some kind of self-risk.<sup>9</sup>

A web model, however, suggests that participants might assume a more connected, cooperative, or collaborative stance. Participants in an argument might not challenge the claims of the other, hoping to prove the opponent wrong, but might instead engage in a process of contributing or adding their own connections and ideas in order to build an argument together. Participants in cooperative argument might adopt Gearhart's (1979) or S. K. Foss and Griffin's (1995) stance of a co-creator, working with another in order to construct a web. A cooperative argument, based on the web model, might involve a collaborative discovery of a perspective or plan of action, for example, and would emphasize the construction of the web and the various connections and themes that could be developed.

Finally, Wollstonecraft's method of reasoning in *Vindication* calls into question the issue of rhetorical form or style itself.<sup>10</sup> Her work suggests that definitions and attitudes toward form be re-evaluated and that the perimeters around rhetorical form be expanded. Specifically, what do scholars mean when they speak of form or style, and how do scholars determine the appropriateness or even effectiveness of a rhetor's form? Wollstonecraft's form or style has received much criticism since she failed to achieve the standards of appropriateness identified by rhetorical scholarship thus far; her arguments have been ignored or denigrated as a result. *Vindication* raises questions regarding the nature, function, and criteria used to determine appropriateness of form and suggests that discussions regarding the elements of rhetorical form be re-introduced into the ongoing debate over the nature of rhetoric itself.

As important and clear as her arguments were at the time she made them, the style and organization of Wollstonecraft's essay assume an equally important role. Wollstonecraft's entire argument was based on questioning the “natural” order and improving the position of women. She spoke to the larger truths of morality, virtue, and reason as a way of freeing women from the tyranny of men. Like feminists after her, Wollstonecraft illustrated the effect a change in women's status would have on society at large: children would receive a better education, relationships between men and women would be healthier, and marriage would be grounded in the firm bonds of friendship rather than the subservient ties of lust. While her work was considered powerful and angry at the time she wrote it, the arguments in *Vindication* remain bold, confrontative, and challenging even today. In questioning the predominant order, Wollstonecraft not only challenged the content of that order, but she altered conceptualizations of appropriate form with her web-like reasoning process. Recognized as the “first feminist declaration of independence,” *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* also might be seen as a first model for a feminist web of reasons.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Several women made arguments for women's rights, particularly in the arena of improved education for women, before Wollstonecraft. These arguments are as significant as Wollstonecraft's but are not as comprehensive. See, for example: Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) and *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), both in Rogers (1979); Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Women Not Inferior to Man* (1739), *Woman's Superior Excellence over Man* (1740), and *Letters* (1718), all in Ferguson (1985); and Catherine Macaulay, *Letters on Education* (1790) in Luria (1974).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Hays (1800), and Stanton and Anthony (in Spender, 1982).

<sup>3</sup>I am offering only a small sample of the criticisms against Wollstonecraft and her arguments here. For a more comprehensive discussion of these criticisms, see Griffin (1992).

<sup>4</sup>The phenomenon is not uncommon; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Florence Nightengale, and Simone de Beauvoir, to name but a few, all have undergone the same treatment. See Spender (1982) for an assessment of this practice.

<sup>5</sup>Wollstonecraft advocated a relational form of feminism (Offen, 1988) in which the family is taken as a primary organizing social structure and the necessary and appropriate starting point for a healthy social order. Women and men have clear and distinct roles in relational feminism, yet they are viewed as equals. For a critique of some of the pitfalls of Wollstonecraft's relational stance, see Gaten's (1991) discussion of the tensions between the public and the private and Wollstonecraft's construction of the "citizen/husband/father and the citizen/wife/mother" (p. 121).

<sup>6</sup>Gilligan (1982), for example, suggested a process for making ethical and moral decisions that relied on seeing the relationships among all parts of an issue and the various implications of each part as they related to one another. This relational process is much more complicated than reasoning in isolation—separating an issue into its parts and judging that issue on the basis of one of its parts alone. Dialectical reasoning, which entails the process of dividing a thing into its parts, offers a very different perspective from reasoning as a web. In the latter, connections, rather than divisions, are the focus, and truth grows out of the relationship among all connections rather than the synthesis of the many into one.

<sup>7</sup>Classical conceptualizations of arrangement argue for this same general pattern. This pattern is reflected in Aristotle's call for an exordium, statement of case, proof, and epilogue in an argument. The author of *Ad Herennium* differs only slightly from this schema, suggesting that a rhetor must offer an introduction, statement of facts, division, proof, refutation, and conclusion.

<sup>8</sup>The idea of cooperative argument is explicated by Makau (1990, 1991).

<sup>9</sup>These conceptualizations are derived from the following research on the nature or position of the individual in an argument: Brockriede (1972), Hamblin (1970), and Natanson (1959).

<sup>10</sup>S. K. Foss and K. A. Foss (1994) also suggest that scholars reconsider the nature of form in presenting ideas. In *Inviting Transformation*, they suggest that "the relationships among ideas" can take a number of nonlinear forms (p. 30).

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