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Turgid Bombast or Economic Reason: Two Contrasting Interpretations of the Muse through the work of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Wordsworth

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This research paper delves into the contrasting interpretations of the muse by Mary Wollstonecraft and William Wordsworth, as evidenced in their seminal works *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, respectively. The paper critically evaluates how each interpretation shapes contrasting truths about the production and consumption of literature. Wollstonecraft, advocating for reason as her muse, challenges societal norms and seeks to empower women through education. In contrast, Wordsworth embraces feeling as his muse, aiming to directly communicate with the heart of his reader. Through a comparative analysis, this paper explores how these distinct muses inform the authors' approaches to subjects such as education, uniformity, and gender. Furthermore, it examines the Rousseauvian influences on their views, and how each author's position of power shapes their narrative. Ultimately, it highlights the radical nature of both texts in the democratisation of poetry and the elevation of the female sex.

This research paper will evaluate different interpretations of the muse and the impact this has on the production of literature through a comparative critical assessment of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and William Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. Chris Baldick defines the muse as 'a source of inspiration to a poet or other writer'.[1] The concept of the muse is paradoxical in that it is a literary creation which substitutes for creative generativity. In line with Baldick's definition, Wollstonecraft's source of inspiration is reason, reinforced by her writing in political prose as she 'address[es] the head [rather] than the heart'.[2] Wordsworth's muse, on the other

1 Chris Baldick. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

2 Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Miriam Brody (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

hand, is feeling. In particular, 'elementary feelings'[3] to be interpreted as the emotional response to human experience, through which he intends to communicate directly with the heart of his readers. Such contrastingly objective and subjective muses create distinct approaches to subjects such as education, uniformity, and gender. Both reinforce M. H. Abrams' metaphor of 'the prevailing Romantic conception of the poetic mind'[4] as 'a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives'.[5] Neither author writes to simply reflect the exterior world; they seek to incite change.

The contrasting muses of these two authors are employed to achieve contrasting ends. Both Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth, writing in the first person, explicitly declare what the intention of their writing is. In his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth declares his 'principal object'[6] to be to 'make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them [...] our elementary feelings'.[7] In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft declares that she intends, through reason, to reverse the effects of the 'cramping of [female] understanding',[8] and to'sharpen' reason rather than 'senses'.[9] Wollstonecraft employs 'senses' to mean sensibility. She believes that for women to be liberated from inequality, reason must govern emotions. Wordsworth sees emotion as a driving force: an action, rather than a reaction, that assigns meaning to experiences. The discordance between the two authors can be found in a sentence of Wollstonecraft's: 'when we are gathering the flowers of the day, and revelling in pleasure, the solid fruit of toil and wisdom should not be caught at the same time'.[10] Wordsworth believes that such fruits of wisdom are produced only when surrounded by nature and engulfed in a state of pleasure.

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3 William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012): 506-518.

4 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: The Norton Library, 1958), v-103.

5 Abrams, *The Mirror*, v.

6 Wordsworth, Preface, 506-518.

7 Ibid., 507.

8 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*.

9 Ibid., 14.

10 Ibid., 27.

Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* was published in three stages. In order to properly examine his source of inspiration, it is crucial to evaluate each of the parts that blossomed into the final whole. Wordsworth was 'the first great romantic poet',[11] and his writing was 'charged with a strong desire to communicate directly to [his] readership now and in the future'.[12] Consequently, he was sensitive to the reactions of his readers. The *Advertisement* accompanied the first publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, the second was a considerably longer *Preface*, published in 1800, and a more detailed, revised *Preface* was published two years later accompanying the final edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Such an evolution of production demonstrates an acute self-consciousness of writing. Wordsworth would adapt each new publication based on how it was received. His work was active, fluid, and in it we can see an example of text as 'a thing whose modulated surfaces betray the consciousness it contains'.[13] In his 1800 *Preface*, Wordsworth explicitly refers to the 'Reader' thirty-two times. He employs a sympathetic muse by directly communicating with the reader through fulsome comments such as: 'I hope therefore the Reader will not censure me';[14] 'I will not abuse the indulgence of my Reader';[15] and more than once he 'request[s] the Reader's permission'[16] to present his argument in a certain way. For Wordsworth to successfully 'imitate' the 'language of men',[17] he eliminates the distance between author and reader by opening up a personal dialogue between the two. In facilitating 'the nature of reception' and engaging directly with his readership, Wordsworth stimulates the feelings of the reader. Over the course of the three-fold process of publication, Wordsworth's muse 'breathe[s] life [...] *in* or *into*' his text,[18] rendering it an example of a

11 M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror*, 103.

12 Sally Bushell, "Wordsworth's 'Preface': A Manifesto for British Romanticism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Sally Bushell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 44 paras.

13 William H. Gass, "The Death of the Author", *Salmagundi*, no.65 (1984): 3-26, https://salmagundi.skidmore.edu/articles/12-the-death-of-the-author.

14 Wordsworth, Preface.

15 Ibid., 509.

16 Ibid., 510 & 515.

17 Ibid., 511.

18 *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, accessed November 19, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2201700710.

'living text'.[19]

In the 1798 *Advertisement*, Wordsworth declares the subject of his writing to be 'the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society'.[20] Yet, in the ensuing 1800 *Preface*, this subject concentrates on 'low and rustic life' more generally, because 'in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'.[21] Through focussing on 'the manners of rural life', Wordsworth is employing an egalitarian subject in a radical departure from the exclusive 'poetic diction'[22] which he so scorns. Wollstonecraft also addresses what she views as the most 'natural'[23] social division. She intends to 'pay particular attention to those in the middle class', arguing that such a class is composed of 'weak, artificial beings' who, through their lack of education, 'spread corruption through the whole mass of society'. Both authors depart from the conservative assumption that readers belong only to the educated upper class, and instead address a more representative audience. Wollstonecraft's attention to the middle class is rooted in her broader critique of societal norms that perpetuate the subjugation of women and the production of artificial beings. Through their chosen subjects, disparate ideas of how to break free from societal corruption become apparent: Wordsworth argues that societal corruption can be escaped through a return to rural life, and Wollstonecraft argues through education and empowerment. Their distinct muses propose distinct lessons: Wordsworth's muse of feeling encourages an exploration of the innate human emotions that are inherent in rustic life, while Wollstonecraft uses reason to advocate for freedom through education.

In the 1802 publication, Wordsworth elaborates on his meaning behind the phrase 'poetic diction'.[24] He critiques the 'poets and men' who

19 Marilyn Butler, "Introduction" in *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 1-10.

20 William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L Brett. et. al. (London: Routledge Classics, 2005), 49-303.

21 Wordsworth, Preface, 508.

22 Ibid., 511.

23 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 4.

24 Wordsworth, Preface, 534.

attempt to recreate the canonical work of the earliest poets through a 'mechanical adoption' of their 'figures of speech', and denounces such false replication as having 'no natural connection' neither to content nor reader. He instead believes that to allow his muse of feeling to breathe life into his writing 'the Poet must descend from [a] supposed height' to converse with humankind. He declares himself to 'have taken as much pains to avoid [poetic diction] as others ordinarily take to produce it',[25] in order to eliminate the gap between poet and reader and 'bring [his] language near to the language of men'. Through his evasion of poetic diction, Wordsworth attempts to remove the poet from a pedestal.

The distinct muses reveal much about the varying positions of power from which each author writes, and each proposes a different lesson. Where Wordsworth discredits the 'false refinement'[26] of language 'under the influence of social vanity', Wollstonecraft discredits the 'false refinement'[27] under which 'the minds of women' have been 'enfeebled'. Wordsworth speaks from a position of privilege. He preaches that pleasure is easily obtained, and that 'if a [...] mind be sound and vigorous, [it] should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure'.[28] However, for the majority, pleasure is a luxury that is moved to the peripherals as greater concerns, such as the equality of the sexes, occupy the primary focus. Wollstonecraft proves, through her muse, that while her mind is sound and vigorous, it cannot indulge in pleasure due to the degradation of women to 'a kind of subordinate beings'.[29] In many of Wordsworth's poems, such as 'Tintern Abbey', he declares nature to be 'the anchor of [his] purest thoughts'.[30] However, to spend days surrounded by nature in the context of leisure is an activity achievable only by those with an adequate income, thus re-establishing Wordsworth's position of privilege. Meanwhile, Wollstonecraft concerns herself with raising one half of the human race above the 'state of perpetual childhood'[31]

25 Ibid., 511.
26 Ibid., 508.
27 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 2.
28 Wordsworth, Preface, 151.
29 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 2.
30 Wordsworth, Preface, 159.
31 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 4.

to which they have been subjected, where they are 'unable to stand alone', regardless of their positioning in an urban or rural environment. Wollstonecraft's position of power is made apparent by her decision to employ a muse of reason lest her writing be discarded as no more than 'weak elegancy of mind [and] exquisite sensibility'.[32] It is through rationality that she strips away the 'sickly delicacy'[33] of women. She argues for a redistribution of power, and the removal of the 'natural spectre' from the 'feeble hand' in which it has been placed.

Both texts succumb to a Rousseauvian influence which can be examined through the authors' contrasting views on education. Jean Jacques Rousseau was one of the founding figures of the Romantic movement and his writing galvanised political revolutions in France and across Europe. His book *Émile* is a pioneering treatise on education in which Rousseau, in accordance with Romantic principles of individuality and nature-centric learning, argues that human beings are by nature good, yet they become tainted by the corrupting influences of society. He wrote: 'God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil'.[34] A belief in societal contamination is precisely why Wordsworth choses to focus *Lyrical Ballads* on 'low and rustic life'.[35] He believes urban civilisation 'blunt[s] the discriminating powers of the mind'[36] and 'produces a craving for extraordinary incident'. Wordsworth and Rousseau fear for a dampening of the senses as a consequence of the uniformity of society. Francis Jeffery, the editor of *The Edinburgh Review* draws a comparison between Wordsworth and the 'distempered sensibility of Rousseau'.[37] Evidently, some believe that their sensibility has led them into the realms of the unsound.

Wollstonecraft is one example. She contradicts such beliefs by arguing that 'sound politics'[38] is the most liberating form of education. In order

32 Ibid., 5.
33 Ibid., 24.
34 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (New York: J.M. Dent, 1974), 5.
35 Wordsworth, Preface, 507.
36 Ibid., 510.
37 Sally Bushell, "Wordsworth's 'Preface': A Manifesto for British Romanticism", para 22 of 44.
38 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 38.

to avoid the corrupting influences of society that Rousseau fears, Wollstonecraft argues instead for an education system that allows everyone to 'participate in the inherent rights of mankind'[39] because if this is not achieved, 'the virtue of man will be worm-eaten by the insect [(woman)] whom he keeps under his feet'.[40] She argues that 'the most perfect education [...] is to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent'.[41] Therefore, she employs reason when presenting her arguments to ensure that she is at once educating and liberating her readers. She bestows upon her readers the ability to form their own rational arguments and opinions. Like Wordsworth, Wollstonecraft was also offended by a 'blunt[ing]'[42] of 'the discriminating powers of the mind', but particularly of the minds of women. She employs caustic sarcasm when drawing on Rousseau's arguments, remarking how he, along with 'most of the male writers who have followed his steps',[43] have 'warmly inculcated that the whole tendency of female education ought to be directed to one point: - to render them pleasing'. Wollstonecraft employs a muse of reason to present herself as an example of a woman's ability to discriminate and analyse. In *Mary Wollstonecraft*, Sylvana Tomaselli notes that Rousseau's presentation of 'the education of [Emile's] wife-to-be' is based 'entirely on opposite principles' to that of Emile.[44] Despite 'otherwise admir[ing] Rousseau', Wollstonecraft identifies the dangerous irrationality of such a depiction of women. Wollstonecraft rejected Rousseau's belief 'that a woman should never for a moment feel herself independent',[45] and instead bridges the gap in gender representation in the eighteenth century. 'It is a farce' she declares, 'to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason'.[46] To achieve equality of the sexes, Wollstonecraft demands that children 'be sent to school to mix with a number of

39 Ibid., 108.
40 Ibid., 109.
41 Ibid., 12.
42 Wordsworth, Preface, 510.
43 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 21.
44 Sylvana Tomaselli, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Vindication of the Rights of Men and a Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Hints* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 318.
45 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 19.
46 Ibid., 12.

equals'.[47] She argues in favour of uniformity and demonstrates that it is those who benefit from systems of uniformity who are able to condemn it, whereas for marginalised people, uniformity of education is a starting point in the establishment of uniformity of human rights.

Alan Richardson crucially notes how the 'gendered division of reason and passion [...] serves as a target for Mary Wollstonecraft'.[48] She was 'fundamentally [...] opposed to the very distinction between [the] rational male and [the] sensible female',[49] and therefore chose to affect a revolution in the perception of women through the implementation of a muse of reason. Wordsworth conforms to this division by suggesting that emotions are inherently female through his declaration of 'maternal passions'.[50] He also presents the arts as female: 'poetry and painting [...] we call them sisters'.[51] In his portrayal of a feminine muse, the prevailing cultural tendency to associate women with emotions and sensibility is reinstated. Wollstonecraft, however, disrupts this categorisation as her muse of reason is feminised: 'Reason offers her sober light'.[52] Consequently, Wollstonecraft actively avoids the 'turgid bombast of artificial feeling'[53] while Wordsworth relishes in it, as seen in his affected flattery of the reader. Wollstonecraft scorns writers' use of 'flowery diction' and 'pretty superlatives',[54] while Wordsworth posits that 'organic sensibility'[55] is imperative for the production of 'poems to which any value can be attached'.

Both Wordsworth's 'manifesto'[56] and Wollstonecraft's treatise are prosaic; both present their muses as female; and both are radical texts that attempt to reform either the perception of the rights of women or

47 Ibid., 105.
48 Allan Richardson, "Romanticism and the Colonisation of the Feminine" in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne Mellor (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), 14.
49 Ibid., 21.
50 Wordsworth, Preface, 509.
51 Ibid., 512.
52 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 35.
53 Ibid.,5.
54 Ibid., 6.
55 Wordsworth, Preface, 508.
56 Sally Bushell, "Wordsworth's 'Preface': A Manifesto for British Romanticism", para 26 of 44.

that of the subject matter of poetry. Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* is radical in its democratic view of poetry. By using accessible language and focusing on everyday life, he breaks away from the elitist belief that poetry was reserved only for the educated upper class. His work serves as a reminder that the joys of literature can be enjoyed by all because 'human blood circulates through [poetry's] veins'.[57] Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, emerges as a pioneer of feminist literature through her assertion of the rational capabilities of women. Her work saw ripples of impact spread across the world as it 'had significant influence on the women's rights movements in Great Britain and the United States'.[58] Through a radical choice in pronoun and subsequent presentation of reason as feminine, Wollstonecraft challenges the societal norms that limit women to the domestic sphere and deny them intellectual and rational capabilities. She argues that if equality of the sexes is not achieved, men will become virtuous humans while women are sentenced to reach no further than the status of virtuous wife.

57 Wordsworth, Preface, 512.

58 Karen Sottosanti, "Mary Wollstonecraft", *Britannica* (2023), https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-Wollstonecraft.

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