‘A Revolution in Female Manners’

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, like most of Wollstonecraft’s work, was conceived and written quickly. She had it in mind by June 1791, began writing in the autumn, gave the manuscript to the printer as she wrote and corrected final proofs in early January 1792. Not surprisingly, she told William Roscoe: ‘I am dissatisfied with myself for not having done justice to the subject’, and complained that had she more time she ‘could have written a better book, in every sense of the word’; but, she adds, those who must write for pay have no choice but to write in haste, unlike ‘gentlemen authors’ such as Roscoe (Letters, p. 205). The book’s ‘Advertisement’ claims that a sequel will include ‘a full discussion of the arguments which . . . rise naturally from a few simple principles’, ‘the laws relative to women’ and ‘the consideration of their peculiar duties’, but admits that ‘fresh illustrations’ occurred as she wrote, so that ‘only the first part’ is now presented to the public.

The book calls for ‘a revolution in female manners’ and it is characteristic of its author’s work in rising from a broad view but addressing a particular historical moment. The moment was Talleyrand’s report to the French National Assembly in 1791, proposing a national system of education but one that directed girls to domestic duties only. Her title also suggests a larger context, echoing her first Vindication and Tom Paine’s Rights of Man, as well as the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of August 1789, which uses ‘man’ as a general noun, though only ‘men’ were to enjoy the rights it set forth. After the Declaration there was a debate on the civic and educational rights of women, including Olympe de Gouges’s A Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Condorcet’s Memoirs on Public Instruction (1790). Nevertheless, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman is addressed to the cultural revolution in Britain rather than to the Revolution in France. It is a critique of ‘woman’ constructed for court culture and appropriated by the professional middle-class cultural revolution through
education in the broad sense, including socialization and culture. The problem again was in finding the right form for such an address. If she were to write on such a subject in a conventionally feminine mode she would be implicitly accepting the existing subordination of women in writing, culture and society. If she were to write in a 'man's' mode she might be discounted as that rare being, a woman of 'masculine mind'. Accordingly, *A Vindication* had to be an experiment in feminist writing for its time – a revolution in discourse to support and to exemplify 'a revolution in female manners'. Wollstonecraft argues for women's liberation, starting with education, leading to full participation in the professional middle-class cultural revolution, resulting in social usefulness and warranting legal and civic equality. She would gain authority for this argument by arguing as a woman – by constructing a textual persona as one who knows whereof she writes and who exemplifies, in the way she writes, the rights of women to full moral, intellectual, social and civic being. In other words, she again adopts the argument from *ethos*.

Her rhetorical strategy was again to 'turn the tables' on a number of writers who in turn represent sexist 'prejudice' in society and the systematization of that prejudice in social relations, the gendering of culture (including writing), education and laws of property and marriage. She aims to 'turn the tables' on the oppression of women that produces their inferiority, an inferiority that is then used to justify their continued oppression. In order to do this she not only attacks oppression directly but also exemplifies in the way she makes her attack how women may convert the conditions of their inferiority and subordination into means for emancipation. For there was no neutral, ungendered discourse, style or genre available to her. All forms of writing were already strongly associated with either 'masculine' or 'feminine' culture, or would become primarily gendered discourse as soon as she applied them to a topic such as 'the rights of woman'. Thus she avoids an objective, detached, learned, syllogistic or sarcastic and sharply polemical style that could be considered as that which a man would use. That could 'unsex' her, undermining her rhetorical authority. But she also avoids what would be considered as a woman's bellettristic, domestic, personal style and relative lack of formal argument. That could undermine her claim that women given the same education, culture and rights as men would be able to take an equal if different role in culture and society with men.