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Female Embodiment, Rape, and the *Vindications*

That other evil, which instantly...runs foul of a woman's imagination...

(Wollstonecraft, 1989, vol. 6, p. 245)

Between 1787 and 1790 Mary Wollstonecraft was a moderately successful writer of works addressed to women, her most successful publication to date a book of moral tales for children. She earned a living wage as a 'hack' writer of translations and reviewer for Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review*. But in 1790 she produced the first – and one of the most significant and enduring of 60 or so – responses to Edmund Burke's provocative *Reflections on the Revolution in France* published earlier in the same year. That there is a new confidence in her 1790 *Vindication of the Rights of Men* is unquestionable, but what triggered this move from the feminised margins to the masculinised centre of literary discourse remains contested.¹ The events of the French revolution from 1789, and the subsequent culture of radical literary activism that coalesced around discussion of these events, undoubtedly politicised Wollstonecraft, as well as offering a public arena for her own developing ideas of cultural reform and public virtue. But the shift between her earlier writings and this first *Vindication* also marks a shift in her status as a writing subject. As a reviewer for the *Analytical* Wollstonecraft had embarked on a period of sustained reading of the decade's most significant publications, and it is in these reviews that we trace the emergence of her distinctive critical voice. This is a voice worrying at sexual difference and virtue, struggling to define femininity and masculinity in new ways,
but persistently aligning itself with the ‘manly’ in cultural forms. In her time as a reviewer Wollstonecraft had encountered female-embodiment as an object of discourse; she emerges from this period as a writing subject engaging directly with the body-politic in an argument concerning the rights and duties of its subjects in her first Vindication. Her Vindication of the Rights of Men is concerned above all else to demonstrate that ‘masculine’ (unadorned, rational) writing is possible in a female-embodied subject. This new writing subject is defined in direct opposition to the feminised style of Burke’s Reflections. In this sense it is an overt example of Athenic writing: consciously incorporating the masculinist voice in a ‘violent foreclosure’ of femininity. It also performs the tension central to a claim to masculinist writing by a female-embodied subject, and signals the high costs associated with Athenic writing for women. The Vindication of the Rights of Woman that followed two years later recapitulates the arguments of the first Vindication, but now takes as its focus specifically the problem of woman as subject (in Wollstonecraft’s terms, citizen.) The claim to masculine writing made in the first Vindication is extended here to a claim to ‘manly’ or ‘masculine’ virtue in spite of a recognition of sexual difference. This move intensifies the tensions inherent in Wollstonecraft’s position as a female-embodied writing subject, by making this the object of its analysis in an attempt to apply the argument to all women. It fails, of course, and in ways which signal the incommensurability of female-embodiment with masculinist writing.

The first Vindication engendered an indignant response in reviews that centred on the sexual difference of the writer (disclosed by the second, signed edition). (Kelly, 1992, pp. 101–2) This wave of reaction is registered in the second Vindication as the discursive context for Wollstonecraft’s arguments concerning women’s rights and duties.4 The movement between the first and second Vindications – from an engagement with Burke over the rights and duties of a generic human ‘mankind’, to an engagement with Rousseau and conduct writers over the rights and duties of a specifically (and problematically) female-embodied citizen – performs a dialectic between the female-embodied writing subject and a masculinist body-politic, that does not recognise her claim for ‘equality’. The Vindication of the Rights of Men’s critique of Burke’s Reflections demonstrates the first wave of this engagement between a female-embodied writing subject and a masculinist body-