

Chapter Two: The “Wounded Mind”

Feminism, Trauma, and Self-Narration

in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman*

“Virtue flies from a house divided against itself – and a whole legion of devils take up their residence there.”

(MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, *A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN*)

“We are all the creatures of education.”

(MARY HAYS, *MEMOIRS OF EMMA COURTNEY*)

Near the end of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798), Maria asserts, “I exclaim against the laws which throw the whole weight of the yoke on the weaker shoulders” (171), protesting vehemently against the “rigid laws which enslave women” and the reigning “false morality” that makes “all the virtue of women consist in chastity, submission, and the forgiveness of injuries” (171). Maria’s written defence against her tyrannical husband Venables’ charge of adultery abounds with such powerful political statements; it is a feminist manifesto, denouncing the array of wrongs done to women and proclaiming the right of women to free themselves from the yoke of male oppression. Given the feminist awareness expressed throughout Wollstonecraft’s unfinished, posthumously published novel,¹ it is not surprising that its politics has received considerable scholarly attention. Feminist but also biographical approaches to Wollstonecraft’s novel constitute the dominant paradigms; as Claudia Johnson states, most critics read *The Wrongs of*

1 In his preface to *The Wrongs of Woman*, Godwin emphasizes that the work is a fragment and that Wollstonecraft, who died from complications after childbirth, was “far from considering [it] finished” (“Preface” 66). On Godwin’s editing of Wollstonecraft’s works see Tilottama Rajan’s “Framing the Corpus.”

Woman “either as an extension of her biography or as a fictionalization of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*” (“Wollstonecraft’s Novels” 189).²

In this chapter, I draw on these readings of *The Wrongs of Woman* but also pursue a different trajectory, bringing into focus a theme that is crucial to the novel and its feminist politics but that has so far received virtually no attention: the theme of trauma. Constructed as a series of interlaced life-stories of suffering, the novel depicts a bleak vision of the nuclear family as dominated by ruptured relationships. Participating in the Romantic fascination with suffering and disruptions of the psyche, *The Wrongs of Woman* foregrounds women’s and children’s traumatic experiences and the impact of these psychic injuries as well as processes of narrating, sharing, and transmitting trauma. Mediating between the individual and the collective, between a psychology of the “wounded mind” and a political analysis of women’s oppression, trauma, as I will show, plays a central role in the novel’s feminist vision, but it also transcends and disrupts this vision in several ways. Both the interrelations and the tensions between trauma and feminist politics are, then, crucial for an understanding of the politics and psychologies of trauma in *The Wrongs of Woman*.

The novel displays a significant tension between its persistent emphasis on scenes of women’s and children’s traumatic experiences and its powerful gesture towards controlling the impact of trauma, towards transforming the posttraumatic into a source of resistance and power. These seemingly contradictory impulses can, however, both be seen as part of the text’s feminist politics, which combines a vehement accusation of male cruelty and patriarchal tyranny with a vision of women’s potential for resistance. Yet the novel also signals that trauma and the posttraumatic are not fully contained within the text’s two-pronged feminist vision: Maria’s life-story reveals trauma to have a force of its own, which repeatedly breaks forth with striking power. In these moments, trauma seems to override the feminist trajectory and develop its own dynamics. Eruptions of the traumatic manifest themselves in several key scenes, embedded in a cluster of images circling around visions, dreams, and nightmares as well as in a number of the text’s narrative, structural, and linguistic characteristics.

The novel’s representation of the friction between attempts at healing the wounds of the past and the uncontrollable, persistent powers of the pathological will also be discussed in the light of psychological and psychiatric perspectives; trauma theory will help reveal that *The Wrongs of Woman* reinforces the dynamics of trauma and resistance, recovery, and growth through a sustained contrast of the

2 Among the studies one could mention here are Barbara Taylor’s *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Gary Kelly’s *Revolutionary Feminism*, Anna Wilson’s *Persuasive Fictions*, Maria Falco’s *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft*, and Julie Carlson’s *England’s First Family of Writers*.

verbal and the visual. Throughout the novel, speaking and listening, words and narratives are associated with attempts at connecting with others as well as processes of working through, while the visual appears in connection with posttraumatic suffering, emphasizing the forces of trauma and the lasting crises it produces. At the same time, these themes – the psychopathological as uncontrollable and isolated suffering versus shared suffering – also relate to the novel’s general response to contemporary discourses within the mental sciences. The novel can be read as enacting the shift from an eighteenth-century to a Romantic approach to madness. It moves beyond the Enlightenment fear of madness and the instability of reason to express a Romantic fascination with the complexity of the disrupted mind and a readiness to allow proximity to and interaction with suffering and mental illness. This chapter, then, reads Wollstonecraft’s novel both as a negotiation of Romantic-period responses to mental disturbances and as a nuanced exploration of the potentials and the limitations of language and narration in the face of trauma.

WRONGED AND WOUNDED WOMEN: FEMALE TRAUMA AND FEMINIST POLITICS

The Wrongs of Woman contains a striking number of stories of women wronged by their fathers, husbands, families, and/or society. Many of these “wrongs” – whose paramount importance to the text is encapsulated in the title – are of such a painful, disruptive, and emotionally overwhelming nature that they invite a reading in the light of trauma. Not only are the female protagonists, Maria and Jemima, victims of multiple traumas, but their narratives also include a series of further narratives of women’s suffering, of their emotional and physical injuries. These life-stories are scattered throughout the text and embedded in an episodic and dialogic structure that produces powerful resonances among the individual stories. The sheer number of these narratives – about twenty-five – and the many parallels between them contribute to the sense that the novel collapses the distinction between the private and the political; *The Wrongs of Woman* as a whole echoes the tone of a treatise, while the individual stories carry undertones of case studies. Contextualizing individual psychological portrayals of disrupted lives within larger socio-political structures of oppression and violence, the novel embeds its psychology of trauma in an extended vision of “gender trouble” (in Judith Butler’s terminology) and “family trouble.”

The Wrongs of Woman, then, displays a distinct generic hybridity, which has been emphasized by a number of critics. As Johnson notes, “[a]ll of [Wollstonecraft’s] works are of a piece in their very diversity, blending overlapping discourses of education, political commentary, travel literature, autobiography, moral philosophy, and fiction” (“Wollstonecraft’s Novels” 189). The blending of different genres

is even expressed in the double title *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria*. The first half of the title emphasizes the text's general implications and political dimensions, while the second half puts the fictional heroine centre stage, with the conjunction "or" providing the – rather unstable – connection between the two. The title, in fact, performs in a nutshell the joining together of fiction and politics characteristic of the Jacobin novel. As Anna Wilson emphasizes, *The Wrongs of Woman* is profoundly influenced by the "intense politicization of the novel in the 1790s" and can be read as "the last jacobin novel published" (31).³ Indeed, in the preface to *The Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft explicitly claims that her text – which she labels a "novel" – is based on a political agenda and is, as a result, much more than "the abortion of a distempered fancy, or the strong delineations of a wounded heart" (67). Her "main object," she continues, is "the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society" (67). The personal here fuses with the political in multiple ways. As Diane Hoeveler asserts, *The Wrongs of Woman* is an attempt to "merge deeply felt personal experiences of pain – wounding, a series of psychic trauma – with a more just social, legal, and political agenda for women" (388). According to Gary Kelly, the text's autobiographical resonances function as a way of expressing political ideas with "greater rhetorical force" and as a means of "convey[ing] a sense of autobiographical authenticity and hence authority" ("Introduction" xxviii).⁴ Elizabeth Dolan takes this idea even further by reading Wollstonecraft's merging of personal experiences and political vision as an "ethnographic" project: "Offering the reader autobiographical resonances, Wollstonecraft becomes a participant observer, and ethnographer who situates her own experience within the social structures or culture she describes" (196). In this reading, the voice of personal experience becomes the voice of political authority.

From a political perspective, *The Wrongs of Woman* pursues the goal of "making women's suffering visible" (Dolan 199), and it does so by means of an analytical gaze that scans society across its different classes. This socially panoramic gesture manifests itself in the choice of the two female protagonists: while Jemima's life-story chronicles the sufferings of a female servant faced with a series of adversities that toss her around the lower regions of society, Maria's story illustrates the misfortunes and misery of a woman much better positioned in society. The shorter

3 For a more extensive discussion of *The Wrongs of Woman* in relation to the Jacobin novel, see for example Kelly's *Revolutionary Feminism*.

4 According to Rajan, Godwin's memoirs of Wollstonecraft also significantly contributed to the view that her life and her writings are closely interrelated. As Rajan puts it, Godwin "read[s] Wollstonecraft's texts as part of her life" (2) and represents her as "the archetype of those Jacobin women (such as Mary Hays) who lived fiction and ideas as life, while rethinking life through fiction" ("Framing" 517).

portrayals of women that are dispersed throughout Jemima's and Maria's narratives as inset tales also cut across different social classes.⁵ What all these stories have in common, however, is the dark depiction of lovers, husbands, and parents characterized by irresponsibility and callousness, by abusiveness and cruelty. Parent-child and marital relationships are poisoned by indifference, hatred, or greed; at the same time, they are lacking in care, warmth, and affection. While the life-stories scattered throughout the novel do not explore in detail the impact of these traumas experienced in the family or marriage, their dense texture nevertheless conveys their devastating, often fatal consequences. And each story – as short as it may be – reinforces the significance of the preceding and succeeding ones and contributes to the overall picture of a society in which women's and children's traumas are omnipresent. This case-study architecture, so to speak, forms the cornerstone of the text's feminist politics.

It is through its eponymous heroine Maria that *The Wrongs of Woman* articulates its critique of patriarchy most explicitly and forcefully. Maria is not only the woman wronged and wounded by men *par excellence*, but she also functions as the mouthpiece of the author's feminist politics.⁶ Barbara Taylor identifies Maria, like Jemima, as an example of the "polemical constructs" typical of the Jacobin novel; she is a figure "whose feminist ideals arise at the extremes of female experience" (236). Indeed, the novel stages Maria's marriage to Venables, a gambler and an unfaithful and ruthless husband, as generating a domestic space that is increasingly determined by extremities of suffering. When Venables forces her to wring money from her uncle and even attempts to prostitute her to his friend, Maria decides to escape from the prison of marriage. Living her life in secrecy, Maria is soon discovered by her tyrannical husband, who, as a particularly drastic step, cruelly separates her from her child and imprisons her in an asylum. In depicting Maria's imprison-

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- 5 The servant class is represented, for example, by the girl who is impregnated by the same tradesman that Jemima desires; when he expels her from his house, the girl faces such an unbearable situation that she commits suicide (104). Another example is the country girl who is seduced and abandoned by Venables and subsequently forced into prostitution and driven into death (133). The narratives of Maria's first and second landladies (both emotionally, physically, and financially abused by their husbands) and the stories of Maria's sisters (with their desolate and lonely lives as governesses, which eventually lead to the decline and death of the younger of the two) are some of the most striking examples of disrupted female existence further up the social ladder.
 - 6 Kelly also points out the different layers of meaning and allusion that the name of the eponymous heroine might contain: "Maria's name could allude to other historical prisoners of sex, such as Mary Queen of Scots and Marie Roland, victims of their own sensibility and Revolutionary anti-feminism; Maria could also stand for her author" (*Revolutionary Feminism* 209).

ment in a madhouse, the text combines a feminist critique with a critique of mental institutions, engaging with two burning issues of the time. As Roy Porter emphasizes in *Mind-Forg'd Manacles*, throughout the eighteenth century, the reputation of private asylums was tainted by accusations of corrupt practices. He asserts that “[e]arly on the prime grievance was wrong confinement. It became almost proverbial that keepers were sharks, and the sane were improperly sequestered in private asylums” (148).⁷ Through such institutions, an actual “trade in lunacy” flourished, and abusive practices were hidden beneath the “business of preserving discreet silences” (137, 142). Maria, then, is a victim both of her husband’s ruthlessness and the corrupt system of mental institutions.⁸ Being locked up in the asylum marks the moment she experiences most powerfully her helpless subjection to her husband’s tyranny.

The text clearly conveys that Maria’s traumatic experiences and the female suffering she witnesses constitute the basis of her growing feminist awareness. Accordingly, Wollstonecraft has Maria express herself in increasingly powerful and polemical terms in her account of her husband’s abuses. Maria uses a rhetoric of animality (“I was hunted, like an infected beast” 157), criminality (“I was hunted like a felon” 152) and, echoing a recurring trope in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, slavery (“the rigid laws which enslave women” 171). It is at this point that, through the harsh criticism of English marriage law, “which allowed men to abuse, rob, rape and neglect their wives” (Dolan 199), the text’s coupling of trauma and feminist politics culminates. Not only does it highlight the pervasiveness and the severity of injuries that women suffer at the hands of men, *The Wrongs of Woman* also calls attention to the way in which these injuries are, in fact, sanctioned by the legal system, which defends the institution of marriage at all costs, thereby making it almost impossible for female trauma victims to separate from their oppressors – their abusive, tyrannical husbands.

7 Porter observes that while the *Act for Regulating Private Madhouses* (1774), through which private madhouses finally became licensed, constituted a “legislative landmark,” it is doubtful to what extent this Act actually “provided real safeguards” (*Manacles* 152).

8 While the text certainly calls attention to the corruption within private asylums, it should also be noted that, as Kelly asserts, “by the standards of the time, the madhouse in which Maria is confined seems unusually well run and safe” (“Notes” 188).

DISRUPTED FAMILIES AND HOMELESSNESS: A FEMINIST VIEW OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

While women's traumatic experiences are depicted throughout *The Wrongs of Woman* and are a significant part of its feminist politics, it is crucial to note the extent to which the novel also highlights childhood trauma. Wollstonecraft has all three of her protagonists, Maria, Jemima, and Henry Darnford (who is also imprisoned in the asylum and later becomes Maria's lover), begin their narratives with an account of their childhood and familial background. In their life histories, childhood functions not merely as the first chapter of their narratives but as the genesis of the individual's character. Influenced by associationist philosophy, the belief that childhood experiences have a deeply formative effect was prominent at the time. As Alan Richardson emphasizes, "nearly every important writer on education in Wollstonecraft's time" subscribed to the idea that "childhood was the crucial period for the formation of individuals" ("Mary Wollstonecraft" 24), an idea that also plays a pivotal role in the writings of her husband Godwin and her daughter Mary Shelley.⁹ Wollstonecraft's profound interest in childhood and education permeates several of her works, notably *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, *Original Stories* (a book written for children),¹⁰ and, in different ways, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *The Wrongs of Woman*.

The vision of childhood outlined in *The Wrongs of Woman* is not one of a blissful time of innocence and joy but one of intense struggle and misery. The most extensive and, simultaneously, the most harrowing depiction of childhood in the novel is Jemima's account of her early life. Jemima records how her father "began to hate, as well as despise" her even before she was born (92), how her mother died a few days after her birth, and how she was looked after by the cheapest nurse available. Lack of care and affection emerge as the determining factors in her life from infancy on. As Jemima puts it, "[t]he chicken has a wing to shelter under; but I had no bosom to nestle in, no kindred warmth to foster me" (92). When Jemima's father

9 This emphasis on the formative power of education was also a typical characteristic of the Jacobin novel. As Richardson writes, "the radical or 'Jacobin' novel of the 1790s offers a fleshed-out version of the Lockean constructivist approach, showing in vivid detail how, as Mary Hays writes in *Emma Courtney*, 'We are all the creatures of education'" (*British Romanticism* 96).

10 As Richardson stresses, *Original Stories* is significantly influenced by Rousseau's *Émile*, which in the late eighteenth century was almost as influential as Locke's *Some Thoughts on Education* ("Mary Wollstonecraft" 28-29). For a detailed discussion of how Wollstonecraft's philosophy of education relates to the ideas of other educational thinkers of her time, see Richardson's *Literature, Education, and Romanticism*.

marries again, her stepmother's house, which might have functioned as a substitute home for her, turns out to be a locus of enslavement. Neglected, beaten, and forced to work "with the servility of a slave" for the "darling of the house" (93), Jemima incessantly serves her stepsister's every need.

Jemima not only anticipates Maria's rhetoric of slavery, but she also uses animal comparisons extensively to convey the degrading and dehumanizing treatment she suffered at the hands of her stepmother: "I was the filching cat, the ravenous dog, the dumb brute, who must bear all" (95). Under the reign of this female tyrant, Jemima is systematically stigmatized as a "bastard" and an embodiment of vice, first within her family and then within the larger social frame: "I was sent to the neighbouring shops with Glutton, Liar or Thief, written on my forehead" (95). Jemima's narrative here emphatically illustrates the psychosocial dynamics of stigmatization processes. As Jemima conjectures, her stepmother's malice made it almost impossible for her stepsister to love her, deprived her of the little affection her father might have had left for her and created an insuperable barrier between her and her social environment.

Wollstonecraft has Jemima record all of these harrowing experiences in a forthright and graphic way, in the mode of "documentary realism" (Jones 211). Her focus is more on the events and less on her subjective responses, and unlike Maria's narrative, Jemima's is almost entirely devoid of the trope of trauma as the unspeakable. Yet the text suggests that her sober, unruffled way of narrating her traumatic past is a result of the intensity of her suffering, and it reveals just how much Jemima was hardened by her victimization. The way in which the narrator introduces Jemima is telling: "An insulated being, from the misfortune of her birth, she despised and preyed on the society by which she had been oppressed, and loved not her fellow-creatures, because she had never been beloved" (75). Evoking a clear cause-effect model, the text resonates powerfully with the psychological and sociological ideas that Wollstonecraft expresses in *A Vindication*, where she repeatedly stresses the formative role of the environment. Her belief in the profound impact of the individual's immediate social environment leads her to conclude, rather pessimistically, that "men of the greatest abilities have seldom had sufficient strength to rise above the surrounding atmosphere" (111). Furthermore, *A Vindication* explicitly identifies infancy as the defining stage of character formation. Criticizing how ignorant mothers bring up their children, Wollstonecraft stresses the powerful impact education has on young children. She asserts, "so early do they catch a character, that the base of the moral character, experience leads to infer, is fixed before their seventh year" (262). The narrator's brief synopsis of Jemima's biography encapsulates these and related ideas from *A Vindication*, thereby exemplifying the "politicization of childhood" that Richardson associates with the 1790s (*Literature* 126).

It is not only the extradiegetic narrator, however, who identifies Jemima as a victim profoundly shaped by her multiple childhood traumas; Wollstonecraft has

Jemima herself interpret her life-story along similar lines. Jemima repeatedly interrupts her sober and rather unemotional narrative with short interludes of retrospective, critical analysis of her life and development. In such moments of self-analysis, Jemima highlights how she "detested mankind, and abhorred [her]self" (97). In other words, Wollstonecraft has Jemima diagnose herself as suffering from a persistent estrangement from her fellow beings and a profound sense of self-alienation, both typical long-term effects of childhood trauma (Herman, *Recovery* 119-21). In retrospect, Jemima claims, more specifically, that the sense of homelessness – "for a home I never knew" (93) – and the lack of maternal affection that determined her existence from the very beginning inevitably shaped the course of her life:

Now I look back, I cannot help attributing the greater part of my misery, to the misfortune of having been thrown into the world without the grand support of life – a mother's affection. I had no one to love me; or to make me respected, to enable me to acquire respect. I was an egg dropped on the sand. (95)

In this passage, Jemima conceptualizes the lack of maternal love – rather than the absence of a parent's or caregiver's affection in general – as the origin of the misery of her life. The untimely loss of her mother emerges as the primary trauma that, henceforth, overshadows her existence. The novel, thus, represents the mother as the child's first and foremost connection to the world and ascribes paramount importance to traumatic childhood experiences, demonstrating how Jemima's childhood trauma exposes her to a lasting condition of vulnerability.

The theme of mother-daughter relationships runs throughout *The Wrongs of Woman*. In Jemima's case, the crucial impact of maternal affection – or rather the lack thereof – is emphasized through the radical failure of her two potential substitute mothers to provide this affection: Jemima's nurse, whose heart is so hardened that "the office of a mother did not awaken the tenderness of a woman" (92), and Jemima's stepmother, who epitomizes the distortion and perversion of motherhood and maternal duty. Moreover, this theme is played out in a number of inset tales of women's lives, which similarly testify to the devastating effects of unhealthy mother-child relationships. Jemima outlines several women's stories that are "thematically linked, each depicting a different sort of violation of the relationship between mothers and daughters" (Dolan 203). *The Wrongs of Woman* thus echoes Wollstonecraft's grim exclamation in *A Vindication*, "how many children are absolutely murdered by the ignorance of women!" (262). But how is this negative portrayal of mother figures to be explained? On the one hand, it exemplifies that, despite her powerful depiction of male tyranny and oppression, Wollstonecraft refrains from idealizing her sex. On the other hand, the charge directed at women in general and mothers in particular may also be interpreted as an indirect accusation

of men.¹¹ *The Wrongs of Woman* implies what *A Vindication* argues explicitly, namely, that the male-dominated educational system is corrupted to such an extent that it renders women incapable of fulfilling their role as nurturing, caring mothers. Through its powerful critique of both fathers and mothers, Wollstonecraft's texts call for the acknowledgement of parental responsibility and the child's right to protection.¹²

The topos of unhealthy and destructive parent-child relationships also plays a prominent role in both Maria's and Darnford's accounts of their childhood. Darnford's few sentences about his family background are revealing, portraying both mother and father as incapable of parental affection: "He was fond of the turf, she of the card-table. I, and two or three other children since dead, were kept at home till we became intolerable" (85). The fact that Darnford does not seem to remember the precise number of his siblings is as disturbing as the implication that his parents, who "had a visible dislike to each other," perceived their children as wearisome burdens (85). Although Darnford, the only man in the trio of sufferers in the asylum-prison, is depicted as having an equally dreary childhood, the novel suggests that it was easier for Darnford than for the two women to move into adulthood; rather than being confined to a claustrophobic domestic space or lost in the social underworld, he made free use of the liberties made possible by his inheritance and seized the opportunities for travel that military life offered. The consequences of childhood trauma are, in other words, depicted as less severe in his case than in Jemima's and Maria's.

Maria's story of her childhood expresses a powerful critique of patriarchal authority, portraying her father and her eldest brother as tyrants. Maria describes her father as a "man of war" who, after leaving the navy, imposes a military-style system of command and control, of "absolute authority" and "passive obedience," on the private, domestic sphere (111). Favoured by his parents over the other siblings, her eldest brother Robert assumes the role of "deputy tyrant," taking "a peculiar

11 For a similar reading of Wollstonecraft's negative and highly critical depiction of women, see for example Taylor's *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. Discussing the alleged paradoxes in Wollstonecraft's feminist thought and what has been labelled her "anti-womanism," Taylor argues that Wollstonecraft perceived the negative qualities of women as "men's handiwork," representing women as "the debilitated products of male tyranny" (16). Yet Taylor acknowledges that it is impossible to resolve all the tensions in Wollstonecraft's feminist thought, emphasizing that "all her life Wollstonecraft was to display strongly ambivalent attitudes towards women" (18).

12 As Charlene Bunnell emphasizes, the notion of parental accountability become prominent during the Romantic period, and Wollstonecraft played an active role in the educational discourses propagating this idea ("Parents and Children").

pleasure in tormenting and humbling" her (111, 114).¹³ The pain caused by the numerous emotional injuries inflicted on her by her tyrannical father and brother was, as Maria implies, exacerbated by the lack of maternal affection: having elected Robert as her "darling," Maria's mother "might be said not to love the rest of her children" (111-12).¹⁴ It is important to note, however, that Maria largely refrains from criticizing her mother; instead, she represents her as another victim of her father: "[I]t is necessary to notice, that it [the father's tyranny] undermined my mother's health; and that her temper, continually irritated by domestic bickering, became intolerably peevish" (114). Moreover, as in Jemima's case, Maria's potential substitute mother, her father's mistress, whom he takes into the house soon after his wife's death, tyrannizes the children once their care is entrusted to her. Maria's childhood is marked by emotional rather than physical violence, exemplifying how much psychological injuries can shatter a child's stability and wellbeing. Her life-story also resonates with psychologists' claim that early traumas tend to increase the risk of experiencing further traumas (see Comer 141). The novel emphasizes how ardently Maria desires to escape her unbearable family situation, her home that has never felt like home, and, as a result, blindly rushes into a marriage with the young squire Venables. As Maria highlights, "[h]ad my home been more comfortable, or my previous acquaintance more numerous, I should not probably have been so eager to open my heart to new affections" (115).¹⁵ Like Jemima, Maria here explicitly establishes a connection between the adversities of her childhood and the traumatic experiences of her adulthood; in the attempt to escape parental tyranny, she exposes herself to another form of oppression, marital tyranny. Like Jemima, Maria is

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- 13 Echoing important points of criticism articulated in *A Vindication*, Maria also stresses the unjust system of education reigning in their family, where education was reserved for boys and denied to girls: "Such indeed is the force of prejudice, that what was called spirit and wit in him, was cruelly repressed as forwardness in me" (112). Later on, she records that, in the home of her father's mistress, her books are taken away from her, "on the pretext that they made [her] idle" (121).
- 14 Maria's family constellation closely resembles Mary's in Wollstonecraft's *Mary*: Mary's mother is indifferent and neglectful, caring only about her dogs and cards, and she suffers not only from poor health, but, like her children, from the violence of her husband, who is "very tyrannical and passionate" and "very easily irritated when inebriated" (8). It should also be emphasized that the depiction of the father's "drunken violence" and the "uncaring mother" resonates with Wollstonecraft's own childhood (Taylor 5).
- 15 The novel also highlights Maria's longing for a healthy parent-child relationship through her attempt to find a substitute father in her uncle, whom she labels her "more than father!" (138) and "the dear parent of [her] mind" (155). In fact, her claim that she felt "widowed by the death of [her] uncle" (159) suggests that he simultaneously functions as a substitute for her heartless father and her tyrannical husband.

scarred for life by childhood trauma and remains particularly vulnerable to further traumatization.

The theme of a sad, disturbing childhood is not only developed through Maria's retrospective life-story but also present throughout the text in relation to the uncertain fate of her daughter, whom Venables cruelly snatched away. Jemima's harrowing story reminds Maria of all the dangers that a helpless, unprotected child might be exposed to:

Thinking of Jemima's peculiar fate and her own, she was led to consider the oppressed state of women, and to lament that she had given birth to a daughter. Sleep fled from her eyelids, while she dwelt on the wretchedness of unprotected infancy, till sympathy with Jemima changed to agony, when it seemed probable that her own babe might even now be in the very state she so forcibly described. (107)

As this passage illustrates, Maria is terrified by the idea of her daughter's present and future sufferings. Recollecting her own loveless home and Jemima's deeply disturbing experiences of both emotional and physical homelessness, Maria is agonized by the impossibility of providing a loving and safe home for her child. Thus, trauma is present in the text not only as a dreary reality documented by various experiential trauma narratives but also as powerful threat, evoked by Maria's fear of her daughter's potential sufferings.

The Wrongs of Woman, then, exposes the bleak state of the nuclear family in Romantic-era England, depicting gender and family politics as closely interrelated. The novel not only contains a powerful accusation of patriarchal oppression, but it also offers critiques of education and family relationships. Incapable, unloving mothers or stepmothers are as much part of this critical vision as violent, tyrannical fathers. The novel illustrates how women may internalize male violence and abusiveness to such an extent that they, in turn, victimize other women, triggering cycles of injury, abuse, and violence. *The Wrongs of Woman* repeatedly highlights the crucial importance of the mother and the devastating effects of a lack of maternal affection. More generally, the novel offers, especially through the female protagonists Maria and Jemima, a testimony of the crucial importance of childhood and the lasting, formative effects of emotional injuries suffered from infancy to adolescence. Foregrounding the powerful after-effects of growing up in a home devoid of affection, the novel repeatedly suggests a close connection between childhood trauma and women's later traumas as well as between disrupted parent-child relationships and disturbed marital relationships. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, the family figures as the site of multiple traumas.

THE BOND OF SHARED SUFFERING

While the pervasiveness of women's and children's traumas across different social classes constitutes an important element of the feminist critique expressed in *The Wrongs of Woman*, the novel also displays a tendency to keep trauma contained, to keep its force within limits. On the whole, *The Wrongs of Woman* refrains from depicting women as weak and indulging in their misery; instead, it emphasizes their resistance, emotional strength, and resourcefulness – another element of the novel's feminist politics. Rather than representing women who suffer from the lasting effects of trauma as shattered and paralyzed subjects, the novel depicts, in the words of Julie Carlson, "women whose reactions to suffering are dignified" (39). The novel, as Daniella Mallinick similarly asserts, abounds with "displays of mental strength in the face of domestic or social adversity" (20), which are dramatized in different ways through the two female protagonists, Maria and Jemima.

In her memoirs, Maria reports how, at the discovery of her husband's severe breach of faith (i.e., attempting to prostitute her to a friend), she decided to take action and fight for herself rather than submissively endure his tyranny. And Jemima, while deeply marked and hardened by her traumas, is depicted as not entirely broken either. Her life-story is constructed as an illustration of resourcefulness, chronicling how she fights her way through "the desert of human society" (100) as a washerwoman, thief, prostitute, and so forth. Though Jemima does come perilously close to committing suicide once, she persists and adapts to the most harrowing circumstances. It is significant too that the female protagonists are also depicted as physically strong. The narrator describes Maria as having a "well-proportioned, and even almost voluptuous figure" (89), and Jemima's "firm, deliberate step" also indicates (though less explicitly) physical strength (71). Moreover, the theme of women's capacity for resistance and adaptation is taken up in some of the shorter portrayals of women, but not always to positive effect. For example, Maria's first landlady asserts that "when a woman was once married, she must bear every thing" (100), and Maria characterizes her as "of the true Russian breed of wives," who through passive endurance and submission yields blindly to the yoke of her despotic husband. While this portrait exemplifies a negative dimension of adaptation – submissive acceptance of the status quo – Jemima's and Maria's resourcefulness is depicted in a far more positive light; it functions not only as tool for survival, but also as a potential catalyst for change.

In terms of coping strategies, *The Wrongs of Woman* repeatedly mentions the distracting and uplifting powers of literature and music. Carlson's assertion that "[t]he only bright spots in any of the women's personal stories involve moments of reading or literary converse" (32) is telling in this context. Jemima records how, as a child, she was deeply fascinated by a ballad singer in the streets and how, later,

she developed a passion for literature, especially through her master's literary conversations with his friends (100-01). Similarly, Maria describes books and literary society as well as theatre as important sources of pleasure and diversion within a dreary existence. Locked up in the asylum-prison, she perceives the few books that Jemima secretly brings her as a "mine of treasure" (78).

While the novel represents literature as a survival tool, it also suggests that, in the hands of these women, narrative can forge emotional bonds and facilitate personal and political change. During her first encounters with Maria, Jemima is depicted as wavering between "interest and suspicion" (75), between longing for interchange with another human being and profound misanthropy. Yet Wollstonecraft has Jemima gradually overcome her distrust until she finally confides her tale to Maria and Darnford. The novel here evokes the healing powers of narration in the context of trauma. It is important to emphasize, however, that in Jemima's case, narration does not take the form of solitary self-expression and self-therapy. The novel makes clear that Jemima's type of self-narration is not primarily expressive and cathartic – unlike the narration of the eponymous heroine of Wollstonecraft's 1788 novel *Mary: A Fiction*, who tries to cope with a series of traumatic losses by writing "a rhapsody on sensibility" and a series of fragments in the "little book that was now her only confidant" (49). Furthermore, in contrast to many postmodern trauma novels, the primary importance of narration for Jemima does not lie in the act of shaping her traumatic past into a coherent narrative or in the search for lost memories as well as for words to embody those memories; rather, what seems to matter most for Jemima is telling her tale in front of an audience, that is, finding a kind, understanding, and sympathetic listener.

Through Jemima, then, *The Wrongs of Woman* demonstrates that autobiographical remembering is not a solitary and secluded activity but one that vitally depends on communication and social interaction. As social psychologists Harald Welzer and Hans Markowitsch assert, autobiographical narratives are, while intimately related to the individual and the self, also strongly embedded in interpersonal relationships, in societal and cultural frames (64, 69).¹⁶ In *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis*, Welzer shows how the individual is involved in a continuous process of synthesizing and synchronizing, striving to make his or her stories, beliefs, and feelings about the past compatible with others' narratives of the past as well as their feelings and judgments. *The Wrongs of Woman* shows that for an outcast like Jemima, who has always suffered from a lack of positive social interaction, it is particularly important to find somebody who will not only listen to her narrative but

16 The social and cultural foundations of individual memory have, of course, been emphasized by many memory theorists from Maurice Halbwachs to Aleida Assmann. For recent investigations of collective and cultural dimensions of memory in relation to literature and culture see for example Michael Frank and Gabriele Rippl's *Arbeit am Gedächtnis*.

also believe and accept it. At the end of her narrative, which resembles "the popular eighteenth-century criminal biography" (Kelly, "Notes" 193), Jemima expresses her ardent desire for understanding and sympathy through an implicit appeal to her listeners: "Who ever acknowledged me to be a fellow creature?" (107). And when Maria takes her hand as a gesture of sympathy, her response is equally telling: "Jemima, more overcome by kindness than she had ever been by cruelty, hastened out of the room to conceal her emotions" (107). This scene demonstrates how much it means for Jemima to find an empathetic listener. Furthermore, this key moment, an experience of fellowship for Jemima, can also be read as a moment of recognition: through Maria's gesture, Jemima seems to recognize her trauma as trauma, to recognize her lack of interpersonal connections as a deprivation rather than as a mere fact, as something that, if it could have been avoided, would have significantly altered the course of her life.

Taking this theme of interpersonal connections further, I argue that what enables Jemima to overcome her alienation from all human interaction is her entry into what Iwona Irwin-Zarecka calls a "community of suffering" (*Frames of Remembrance*). While Irwin-Zarecka primarily uses the term to refer to larger collectives bound together by historical traumas, *The Wrongs of Woman* stages the emergence of a smaller, more intimate "community of suffering." What connects Jemima, Maria, and Darnford is their awareness that they have all undergone hardship and that they are all entrapped in the enclosed, heterotopic space of the asylum – Maria and Darnford as prisoners and Jemima as a prison guard without alternative options for employment. In this community of suffering, the bond created by shared affliction (and even more through the process of sharing affliction) transcends differences of social class. Within the community, Jemima acquires the status of a fellow-sufferer and, thus, of an equal to her social superiors. The narrator highlights the crucial importance of this sense of community for Jemima: "She seemed indeed to breathe more freely; the cloud of suspicion cleared away from her brow; she felt herself, for once in her life, treated like a fellow-creature" (91). Within the shelter of the community, Jemima finds a space where she can speak and be heard: "And Jemima, after again controlling the passage, was so softened by the air of confidence which breathed around her, that she voluntarily began an account of herself" (91).

In its depiction of trauma victims connecting with each other, *The Wrongs of Woman* echoes Rousseau's ideas about the importance of sharing suffering. As Dolan emphasizes, "[f]or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, learning to bear suffering and learning to see the suffering of others were essential elements in the education of a human being"; in fact, according to his philosophy, it is by sharing each other's sufferings that "human beings know each other" and "begin to understand one another's

subjectivity” (11).¹⁷ Using Rousseau as a starting point, Dolan reads *The Wrongs of Woman* as an example of how women writers of the time “articulate models of seeing therapeutically that move the individual from a sense of isolated suffering to forms of healing social interaction or expression” (16). While Dolan is right to highlight the novel’s emphasis on “social interaction” rather than solitary suffering, I interpret the novel less as a testimonial to the importance of “seeing suffering,” as Dolan suggests, and more as a testimony to the importance of *telling* suffering. *The Wrongs of Woman* especially emphasizes language and narrative, thereby focusing on a more interactive, responsive medium than the unilateral gaze. The visual, as I will discuss later in this chapter, is here mainly associated with solitary suffering and the intrusiveness of the traumatic past, while the verbal provides a space of interaction.

The novel also highlights the trauma victim’s desire for verbal reciprocity through its repeated emphasis on the importance of the addressee. Like a number of Romantic novels – for example, Mme de Staël’s *Corinne*, Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy*, and Shelley’s *Mathilda* and *Frankenstein* – *The Wrongs of Woman* highlights individuals’ powerful need to have an addressee who is either physically or imaginatively present during the act of self-narration. All the stories of suffering in Wollstonecraft’s novel are told to or written for a specific listener or reader, and it is the sufferer’s hope for a sympathetic and responsive addressee and the longing for a reciprocal relationship that form the basis for a community of suffering. Narration, then, is evoked as a means of connecting with others and a possible pathway to recovery. The novel illustrates, to speak with Elaine Scarry, “the passage of pain into speech,” that is, the process of verbalizing injuries (here, mainly emotional injuries) that “enables pain to enter into a realm of shared discourse” (9).

FINDING A MISSION: FEMALE RESILIENCE AND RESOURCEFULNESS

The dynamics of this community of suffering in the asylum-prison also demonstrate how the “personal relevance of the traumatic memory” (Irwin-Zarecka 49) plays a central role in forging bonds among sufferers. Maria’s account of how her child was snatched away strikes a chord in Jemima, who (until then) seems frozen in her “misanthropy of despair” (75): the idea of a daughter deprived of maternal affection touches the core of Jemima’s own traumatic past. In turn, Jemima’s story deeply af-

17 Rousseau discusses the importance of learning to cope with one’s own and others’ sufferings in his 1762 novel *Émile*. The narrator asserts: “To bear pain is his first and most useful lesson” (49).

fects Maria because it conjures up visions of her lost daughter's fate. Hence, "[i]n each case, the infant daughter is the catalyst to personal transformation and female bonding" (Conger, *Mary Wollstonecraft* 163). In the words of Johnson, "Jemima and Maria repair their injuries in their relations to one another and in their joint relation to Maria's daughter" ("Wollstonecraft's Novels" 206). The novel suggests throughout that the bond between these two women is more powerful, lasting, and valuable than the romantic bond that forms between Maria and Darnford.

Not only do Jemima and Maria emotionally connect with each other, but they also help each other use their psychological resources. In the language of contemporary traumatic stress studies, Jemima and Maria embody (albeit to a different extent) "resilience," that is, the capacity to adapt to or recover from adverse experiences and to resist the negative effects of stressors. According to Stephen Lepore and Tracey Revenson, "resilience, in the broadest sense, refers to dynamic processes that lead to adaptive outcomes in the face of adversity" (28-29). These processes, as Lepore and Revenson further point out, include "reconfiguration" or "transformation": individuals "reconfigure their thoughts, beliefs and behaviors to adjust to ongoing and changing demands" (27). Wollstonecraft depicts both female protagonists as "resilient" and shows them undergoing processes of "reconfiguration" or even "posttraumatic growth." The notion of "posttraumatic growth" revolves around the idea that the crisis caused by trauma may act as a catalyst for personal growth, leading, for example, to "individual development, personal benefits, new life priorities, a deepened sense of meaning, or a deepened sense of connection with others" (Maercker and Zoellner 334).¹⁸ Both Maria and Jemima try to transform their traumatic past into sources of personal development; they do not remain passively caught up in cycles of suffering. The novel stages their struggle to move from the position of helpless victim to active survivor.

A stronger sense of connection with other sufferers and "finding a mission" are essential aspects of trauma victims' processes of recovery and personal development (Maercker 30). The sense of having a personal mission helps victims perceive new meaning in their future and, as a result, reactivate their emotional resources. This applies to Jemima and Maria when they embrace the mission of helping each other: Maria vows to prove to Jemima that she "merit[s] a better fate" (108), while Jemima "determine[s] to alleviate all in her power, without hazarding the loss of her place, the sufferings of a wretched mother" (73). *The Wrongs of Woman* makes clear that this relationship differs significantly from the homoerotic attachment be-

18 According to Lepore and Revenson, while resistance and recovery are forms of resilience that imply the "maintaining or returning to normal functioning," reconfiguration, as a third form of resilience, includes change and transformation. In contrast to "posttraumatic growth," however, which is conceptualized as purely positive, reconfiguration may include both positive and negative aspects of change (27).

tween Mary and Ann in Wollstonecraft's earlier text *Mary*. In contrast to Mary and Ann's "romantic friendship" (Johnson, *Equivocal Beings* 53), the relationship between Maria and Jemima is built on female solidarity and a sense of community. It is also interesting to see that, in moments of doubt, each forcibly appeals to the other's sense of responsibility. Jemima insists, "on you it depends to reconcile me with the human race" (166), while Maria exclaims in an urgent, slightly manipulative tone of voice: "With your heart, and such dreadful experience, can you lend your aid to deprive my babe of a mother's tenderness, a mother's care?" (108). Hence, the two women mutually reinforce each other's sense of duty and responsibility. Furthermore, the relationship between Maria and Jemima also carries undertones of a mother-daughter relationship. Maria's farewell words to Jemima, who leaves to gather information on Maria's daughter, consist of an emotional "Adieu" and a "God bless you!" – which, as the narrator states, "seemed to include a maternal benediction" (109). The text suggests that this relationship might offer consolation and comfort to both women, functioning as a substitute relationship for Jemima, who has never had a mother, and for Maria, who has lost her daughter. The novel's emphasis on the idea that women gain strength by helping other women is an important feminist statement that resonates throughout the text.

The Wrongs of Woman implies, however, that Maria's sense of mission goes beyond Jemima. In fact, I want to show that Wollstonecraft constructs a threefold sense of mission for Maria: to assist Jemima in moving on to a better life, to rescue her own daughter from a helpless existence, and to fight against the oppression of the female sex in general. The common denominator in these three goals is female bonding – connecting with and helping other women. The second aspect, Maria's desire to help her lost daughter, is one of the main forces driving her to write her memoirs. She opens them with an appeal to her child and a description of her main purpose in writing these memoirs:

Addressing these memoirs to you, my child, uncertain whether I shall ever have an opportunity of instructing you, many observations will probably flow from my heart, which only a mother – a mother schooled in misery, could make. [...]

From my narrative, my dear girl, you may gather the instruction, the counsel, which is meant rather to exercise than influence your mind. (110-11)

Maria here emphasizes the didactic, educative function of her memoirs: they are intended as a guide for her daughter, preparing her for the challenges of a hostile, male-dominated world. Once again highlighting the importance of maternal support, the novel signals that Maria views these memoirs as a means of partially fulfilling her role as a mother, if not in person then at least in her mind. Wollstonecraft has Maria envision the sphere of writing and reading as a substitute for the domestic

sphere of home and the family.¹⁹ Maria's occasional short addresses to her child remind readers of the text's didactic intention, of how the episodes are meant to function as warnings.²⁰ Furthermore, Maria hopes that her narrative will simultaneously serve a memorializing and self-vindicating function; she attempts to ensure that she stays alive in her daughter's memory and preventing her daughter from preserving a distorted image of her: "[I]t is necessary, my dearest child, that you should know the character of your father, to prevent your despising your mother" (115). The aim of creating a bond with her lost daughter as a loving, caring, and responsible mother is, then, at the heart of Maria's memoirs.

Maria's memoirs, however, serve a double function. It is crucial that her first impulse to write originates from the intolerableness of her distress and her hope that writing might function as a space of escape:

The books she had obtained, were soon devoured, by one who had no other resources to escape from sorrow, and the feverish dreams of ideal wretchedness or felicity, which equally weaken the intoxicated sensibility. Writing was then the only alternative, and she wrote some rhapsodies descriptive of the state of her mind; but the events of her past life pressing on her, she resolved circumstantially to relate them, with the sentiments that experience, and more matured reason, would naturally suggest. They might perhaps instruct her daughter, and shield her from the misery, the tyranny, her mother knew not how to avoid. (75)

As this passage reveals, the didactic function of her memoirs is only Maria's second thought. Although the urge to teach, as the narrator highlights, "gave life to her diction" and inspired her to such an extent that "her soul flowed into it" (75), her initial

19 As Dolan emphasizes, Maria's memoirs to her child parallel Wollstonecraft's unfinished primer for her child entitled *Lessons*, which uses an epistolary format (204). A further parallel can be identified between the educative motivation of Maria's memoirs and Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories*: "Maria records her narrative on paper with the hope that her daughter will 'gain instruction' from it [...] just as Wollstonecraft wrote *Original Stories* for her pupils, the Kingsborough girls" (Dolan 204). In all three texts, education is closely tied to processes of writing and reading.

20 Based on the memoirs' emphasis on education and their characterization as a textual substitute for a mother, Leigh Matthews situates *The Wrongs of Woman* in the generic context of conduct or advice books: "The memoirs are an active appropriation by Wollstonecraft of the very popular conduct and advice books of the period, which were often written to orphaned girls and which, like Maria's narrative, were meant to constitute textual presences to replace the absent mother" (95). Labelling Maria's memoirs a "Revolutionary feminist conduct book," Kelly also acknowledges this generic context (*Revolutionary Feminism* 212), which once again demonstrates Wollstonecraft's profound interest in education.

motivation was to find an outlet at a moment of profound despair and emotional turmoil. In fact, she initially writes “rhapsodies,” an expressive and emotional form of writing, instead of narratives. Maria, then, first turns to writing because of her need to find a means of coping with the burden of her painful past.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the trauma victim’s urge to verbalize the past and to (re)construct it as a narrative is a recurrent topos in both Romantic and postmodern trauma fiction, and it resonates with the findings of contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists. Processes of verbalization and narration play key roles in exposure therapy and cognitive therapy, two prominent therapeutic approaches to PTSD. As David Johnson, Mooli Lahad, and Amber Gray emphasize, “[t]he use of journaling, writing and storytelling are common narrative techniques” that are currently used with increasing frequency and variety (480-81). The main goals of such processes of “restorying” are “the detailed and repeated exposure to traumatic information,” which is supposed to help victims reintegrate their traumatic experiences into their life-stories, as well as “the modification of maladaptive beliefs about events, behaviors, or symptoms” (Brewin, *Posttraumatic* 193). Numerous clinical studies have shown that trauma victims tend to feel that the process of retrospectively retelling or rewriting the past helps them regain a sense of control over their lives and selves.

From a metaperspective, then, Maria’s writing of her memoirs, which she primarily perceives as a means of fulfilling her maternal mission, can also be read as an attempt at self-therapy or “scriptotherapy,” in the terminology of Suzette Henke, an attempt at writing through the “events of her past life pressing on her” (Wollstonecraft 75). Indeed, elements of re-confronting and remembering her past, as well as of reviewing and reassessing that past, appear in her memoirs. Maria both pieces together fragments of her autobiographical past (including “almost obliterated impressions”) into a life-story spanning early childhood to the present and re-evaluates the wounds and wrongs she has suffered in the light of “experience and more matured reason” (75). Her impulse to ease the burden of the past through writing parallels, to some extent, the impulses of the heroine in *Mary*, who regularly vents her emotions by writing short, impulsive, and expressive fragments. However, there is a crucial difference: while Mary writes, in the words of Syndy Conger “intensely introspective, non-assertive and diffuse reflections” (*Mary Wollstonecraft* 164), Maria quickly abandons her “rhapsodies” and begins to write with a specific addressee and purpose in mind. In other words, Mary’s writing mainly remains in the mode of acting out, while Maria’s contains elements of both acting out and working through. Once again, the novel stages the act of self-narration as a potential means of recovery.

Maria’s third mission, to fight not only for Jemima and for her daughter’s future but also for women in general, is intimately connected to her discovery of feminist ideas. The growth of Maria’s feminist consciousness is signalled by the increase in

the number of general statements about the state of women she makes in her memoirs, which culminates in her written address to the court in chapter 17.²¹ Maria's text suggests throughout that she is not only pleading her own case but also the case of women in general. The novel is here in line with Terry Eagleton's claim that one has to fight for one's humanity precisely in the place where that "humanity is wounded and refused" ("Nationalism" 24). Wounded repeatedly in her womanhood, Maria fights against injustice and tyranny precisely from her position as a woman. Functioning as the mouthpiece for the author's feminist ideas, Maria uses a powerful rhetoric ("I claim"; "I appeal to"; "I will not"; "I declare") to protest against the "false morality" directed at women and against the law "made by the strong to oppress the weak" (173). In this highly political and polemic paper, Wollstonecraft has Maria talk about the wrongs and wounds that she has suffered in a much more determined, resolute, and self-assured tone of voice than in large sections of her memoirs. The novel presents her paper, which reads like a feminist manifesto, as the culmination of Maria's mission to use her resources to help all women. Through the depiction of Maria's gradual adoption of a feminist mission, *The Wrongs of Woman* illustrates Kirby Farrell's claim that the patterns of interpretation applied to traumatic injuries determine the weight and the effects of those injuries: "the interpretation of injury" is "affected by shifting frames of reference" and by "cultural values" (*Post-Traumatic* 12). Trauma, according to Farrell, may be invoked as "a cry of protest as well as distress and a tool grasped in hopes of some redress" (24). Once Maria begins to notice the striking similarities between individual women's lives, she no longer perceives herself and her suffering as an exception – she is one among many who have shared a similar fate. This recognition gives her the courage to voice her "cry of protest" publicly. The novel, then, depicts an important instance of "reconfiguration" and posttraumatic growth. Through Maria, it traces the process from "the declamation of sentimental self-absorption into the rhetoric of radical social protest" (Conger, *Mary Wollstonecraft* 161). Maria's ability to adopt an empowering rhetoric and to shift her frame of interpretation suggests that traumatic injury can lead to a heightened political awareness and, eventually, become a source of power and action. The act of telling and sharing stories of suffering has, then, powerful psychological *and* political dimensions.²²

21 As Kelly emphasizes, due to the legal situation at the time, such a written document is the only way for Maria to make herself heard in court: "[S]he could not appear in court in her own behalf, since, according to the law at that time, her legal 'personality' was 'covered' by that of her husband, that is, a husband was empowered to speak for his wife in any matter concerning the law" ("Notes" 207).

22 Virginia Sapiro argues that *The Wrongs of Woman* anticipates the political strategy that came to be called "consciousness-raising" in the 1960s: "In the nineteenth century and even more, in the late twentieth century, one of the most powerful means by which femi-

An important motif connected to Maria's acting and reacting against the pervasive oppression she encounters is that of anger and indignation. Right from the second paragraph of chapter one, the narrator stresses that Maria's despair and "keen sense of anguish" are interrupted by moments of acute anger in which "a whirlwind of rage and indignation roused her torpid pulse" (69). Moreover, when writing her memoirs, she is repeatedly seized by fits of fury: "But I must have done – on this subject, my indignation continually runs away with me" (141). She also openly displays her indignation for her husband's despotic actions on several occasions; for example, she labels him an "oppressor" and a "tyrant" in her court document. In contrast to Mary in *Mary* and to Shelley's heroine in *Mathilda*, Maria is a female trauma victim who strives to transform the destructive power of her suffering into fuel for political change instead of remaining absorbed in her misery.

Farrell's description of the different patterns of response to trauma is helpful in thinking about these female characters: "There are three principal modes of coping with traumatic stress: social adaptation and relearning, depressive withdrawal or numbing, and impulsive force (berserking)" (*Post-Traumatic* 7). Jemima, whose narrative testifies to her ability to adapt to and fight through different adversities, exemplifies the first mode of responding to trauma: her past can be characterized as a continuous cycle of affliction and adaptation; her present, determined by her relationship with Maria, is staged as a process of "relearning."²³ While *Mathilda*, and to a lesser extent *Mary*, portray the second mode through their heroines, *The Wrongs of Woman* depicts the third mode through Maria. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, *Mathilda*'s response to her traumatic experiences is determined by a melancholic withdrawal from the world and a near-obsessive absorption with her grief and pain. Wollstonecraft's Mary remains more connected to others and, to some extent, also pursues a mission (mainly a mission of charity) but she also displays a strong tendency to lose herself in solitary suffering and depression. As Conger observes, "the idea of social activism never occurs to Mary" (*Mary Wollstonecraft* 161).²⁴ In con-

nism as ideology and practice developed was through the process of women sharing their common personal stories. [...] In Wollstonecraft's writing we see the glimmerings of the idea of a political practice that later became instrumental in the development of feminist politics" (43).

- 23 Yet Jemima's story depicts one striking incident that can be read as "berserking": the moment she convinces a tradesman to turn out the girl that is pregnant with his child and, thus, becomes partly responsible for her suicide. Jemima describes how, through all her suffering, she "became a wolf," a "monster" that turned on an innocent fellow-sufferer (104). In retrospect, she represents her fatal act of selfishness as an act of mad fury and frenzy.
- 24 Mary's sense of mission is centred on nursing her sick friend Ann and, later, her lover Henry, who eventually dies in her arms. As a loving nurse and a nurse/lover and as a

trast, Maria's passionate struggle for her freedom from the prison of marriage and her battle against the oppressive legal system illustrate that she acts with "impulsive force" rather than "depressive withdrawal."

However, Farrell's term "berserking" carries connotations of uncontrollability, ferocity, and "beastlike" frenzy (*Berserk Style* viii, 1-2), which seem at odds with Maria's determined pursuit of a threefold mission. Yet the notion of "berserking" is relevant to male reactions to Maria's anger and self-determined actions. The male figures in *The Wrongs of Woman* perceive Maria's uninhibited expression of female will and anger as a threat. Consequently, patriarchal discourse categorizes Maria's anger – rendered more threatening through her insistence on her feelings and her rights – as madness. In the words of Leigh Matthews, "it is precisely Maria's daring to express her anger and her indignation about her experiences of injustice in a patriarchal culture that results in that culture labelling her as insane; she does not take refuge in madness but is, rather, labelled as mad because of her active disdain for patriarchal authority" (88). Locking her up in a private asylum, Venables stigmatizes Maria as mad. He claims that she suffers from a hereditary malady and warns the guard that she has irregular "fits" and recurring "paroxysm[s] of frenzy" (72) that render her particularly "mischievous" (72). Venables here misrepresents Maria's acts of justified indignation as mad anger, as going berserk.

In its depiction of how Venables constructs Maria's "madness," the text evokes notions about madness prominent at the time, especially the idea that the mentally ill may at times appear deceptively sane. In *Observations on Madness and Melancholy*, John Haslam writes:

[I]nsane people will often, for a short time, conduct themselves, both in conversation and behaviour, with such propriety, that they appear to have the just exercise and direction of their faculties: but let the examiner protract the discourse until the favourite subject shall have got afloat in the mad man's brain, and he will be convinced of the hastiness of his decision. (47-48)

Hence, Wollstonecraft has Venables deliberately instrumentalize and exploit a shift in the discourses on madness that occurred as psychiatry became increasingly professionalized, namely, the "conviction that insanity could be fearsomely latent, biding its time, and visible only to the expert diagnostic gaze of the alienist" (Porter, *Manacles* 35). This historical context might explain why Jemima initially reacts

charitable benefactress to the poor, Mary's virtues are mainly "self-sacrificial," as Conger rightly asserts (*Mary Wollstonecraft* 161). Thus, they differ significantly from Maria's fighting for women's rights. Furthermore, like Mathilda, Mary is, in the end, absorbed with the idea of death, with "that world *where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage,*" and where her only "gleam of joy" and hope seems to reside (62).

with suspicion to Maria's appearance of sanity. And yet it is striking that the judge corroborates Venables' assessment, even more because, in his verdict, he denounces Maria's "violation of the marriage vow" as proof of her insanity (174). Here, Wollstonecraft is responding critically to contemporary ideas about anger's proximity to madness, as expressed, for example, by Haslam: "There is so great a resemblance between anger and violent madness, that there is nothing which could more probably have led to the adoption of the term" (*Observations* 4).²⁵ Instead of supporting the idea of a "great [...] resemblance," *The Wrongs of Woman* insists on the crucial importance of distinguishing between the two. The text stages a clash of perspectives on female anger: while the patriarchal viewpoint condemns her conduct as madness and as a type of "berserking," the novel's feminist vision suggests that Maria uses "impulsive force" in a positive and productive way as a means of fighting for her own and women's rights. What both perspectives have in common, however, is that they ascribe to the female subject considerable vigour and force. It is fitting, then, that besides being denounced as madness, Maria's escape from the marital bond is also conceived as a kind of revolutionary act. The judge emphasizes the importance of fighting the "French principles" that Maria's case allegedly exemplifies (174), and Maria herself declares: "Marriage has bastilled me for life" (154). With this analogy between the storming of the Bastille and Maria's breaking out of her domestic prison, the novel underlines the force and threatening potential of her actions.

Thus, *The Wrongs of Woman* emphasizes women's strength, resilience, and resourcefulness, especially by highlighting how the two female protagonists adopt a personal mission and fight actively – or even angrily – for specific goals. The novel repeatedly shows the empowering potential of a clear aim or goal; in Maria's words, "[n]othing calms the mind like a fixed purpose" (145). *The Wrongs of Woman* suggests that these female characters fight against being absorbed and destroyed by their traumatic past, by the many wounds inflicted on them by tyrannical fathers and husbands as well as callous mothers and substitute mothers. In other words, the novel stresses the presence of trauma, revealing the injuries many children and women suffer in the domestic space of the family, while at the same time – through its emphasis on oral and written self-narration, female bonding, and the adoption of a sense of mission – it represents the protagonists' responses to their traumas as a way of highlighting female power.

25 Haslam investigates the etymological roots of the term "madness" as follows: "The word is originally Gothic, and meant anger, rage, [...] (Mod). It is true that we have now converted the o, into a, and write the word mad: but mod was anciently employed" (*Observations* 3).

MADNESS AND THE SUBLIME

Does *The Wrongs of Woman* indeed stage a process of recovering from trauma? Does it show how its protagonists overcome the crises caused by trauma and, as Conger contends, “forget their past in their struggle for liberation” (*Mary Wollstonecraft* 163)? I want to suggest that despite the persistent emphasis on trauma victims’ strength and resilience, the forces of trauma break forth a number of times throughout the narrative. The uncontrollable, uncontainable, and pathological dimensions of trauma mainly manifest themselves through Maria, who is portrayed as decidedly more vulnerable than Jemima.²⁶ Wollstonecraft’s depiction of the uncontrollability of the pathological, moreover, also needs to be contextualized within eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century discourses on mental illness.

A key issue in this context is the novel’s setting and the protagonist-narrator’s response to it. Although the focus of the narrative is on childhood and family trauma, the action is not set in a domestic space but in the secluded cell of a private asylum. The novel’s opening paragraph immediately focuses on this “mansion of despair,” which is contrasted with the “abodes of horror” that typically feature in Gothic fiction: “castles, filled with spectres and chimeras, conjured up by the magic spell of genius to harrow the soul, and absorb the wondering mind” (69). This emphatic contrasting of Gothic castles, “formed of such stuff as dreams are made of,” with the real horror that pervades Maria’s asylum-prison, marks a departure from Gothic conventions and sets the scene for the ensuing dramas of family trauma.²⁷ As Anne Mellor observes, “[t]he true horror of Wollstonecraft’s story is that the terrors previously identified with the supernatural manifestations of the Gothic romance or the ‘astonishment’ of the romantic sublime literally exist within the average domestic household in England” (“Righting” 419). Furthermore, while Gothic fiction is typically characterized by ambivalent emotions – “[t]hreats are spiced with thrills, terrors with delights, horrors with pleasures” (Botting 9) – the opening of *The Wrongs of Woman* evokes threats, terrors, and horrors that lack elevating, thrilling impulses.²⁸ From the beginning, trauma overwrites the Gothic.

26 Janet Todd also calls attention to this difference in vulnerability and asserts that Jemima embodies “excessive reason,” while Maria embodies “excessive sensibility” (“Reason and Sensibility” 19).

27 It is interesting to note that Wollstonecraft’s depiction of the asylum is, to some extent, motivated by a desire for authenticity. As Kelly asserts, “to achieve accuracy in her novel’s madhouse scenes Wollstonecraft visited Bedlam Hospital in February 1797 with Godwin and Johnson” (*Revolutionary Feminism* 211).

28 In a similar vein, Mallinck argues that Wollstonecraft seems particularly “interested in the fact that – for the great majority of human beings – most terrifying encounters have

Even more than Maria's response to the asylum, the text highlights her response to madness itself. As the narrator stresses, the sound and sight of madness deeply affect Maria. She does not experience the lunatics' "groans and shrieks" moderated and "modulated by a romantic fancy"; rather, she feels them with painful intensity, as "tones of misery as carry a dreadful certainty directly to the heart" (69). When encountering a madman face-to-face, Maria "shrunk back with more horror and affright than if she had stumbled over a mangled corpse" (77). The text here evokes the horror of madness, the fear of the vulnerability of reason that, as Michel Foucault outlines in *Madness and Civilization*, dominated the classical period. According to Foucault, the classical period was a time when the prevailing approach to madness was that of confinement, of attempting to establish clear boundaries between madness and reason:

During the classical period, madness was shown, but on the other side of bars; if present, it was at a distance, under the eyes of reason that no longer felt any relation to it and that would not compromise itself by too close a resemblance. Madness had become a thing to look at: no longer a monster inside oneself, but an animal with strange mechanisms, a bestiality from which man had long since been suppressed. (70)

Maria's reaction of shrinking back with horror from the inmates at the asylum may reflect these attitudes of the eighteenth century, an age that, as Allan Ingram and Michelle Faubert highlight, "found the idea of insanity compelling, the reality of insanity terrifying" (7).

However, a closer look at Maria's response to madness reveals that the text performs a clear departure from the typical eighteenth-century practices of shunning the mad, and as the phenomenon of Bethlehem demonstrated, staging madness as a spectacle, "putting the Other on display in a human zoo or freak show" (Porter, *Madness* 70).²⁹ *The Wrongs of Woman* enacts a different kind of encounter with madness. Forced to observe the madmen from her claustrophobic cell, Maria watches them face to face, as if she were one of them, rather than from the safe distance of a visitor. It is this proximity, the position of a profoundly involved rather than detached viewer, that transforms madness from a spectacle and "visual entertainment" (Ingram 76) into an intense emotional experience; boundaries between self and other threaten to collapse. Confronted with the sights and sounds of madness around her, Maria begins to meditate on the fragility of reason: "[W]e fearfully ask on what ground we ourselves stand" (76).

no sublime effect"; in fact, Mallinick reads the novel as a critical response to the Burkean sublime (4).

29 For a discussion of Bethlehem hospital, see Porter's *Mind-Forg'd Manacles*, 121-29.

Maria's encounter with madness is represented as an awe-inspiring experience, associated explicitly with the sublime:

What is the view of the fallen column, the mouldering arch, of the most exquisite workmanship, when compared with this living memento of the fragility, the instability, of reason, and the wild luxuriandy of noxious passions? Enthusiasm turned adrift, like some rich stream overflowing its banks, rushes forward with destructive velocity, inspiring a sublime concentration of thought. (76)

The experience of encountering a mind disrupted by madness, "the most terrific of ruins," is compared to the effect of an earthquake, which "throws all the elements of thought and imagination into confusion, makes contemplation giddy" (76). With Richardson, I read Maria's response to madness as an instance of a "disturbing, negative sublime" (*Neural Sublime* 28). This kind of sublime, which Richardson calls the "neural sublime," describes the overwhelming impact that the encounter with a "mental breakdown" or "cognitive collapse" can have on a subject: "[T]he subject is left not marvelling at the power of Reason but rather stunned by the capacity and complexity of the human brain" (29). Maria's experience of the neural sublime demonstrates that *The Wrongs of Woman* departs from an Enlightenment horror of madness and, instead, exhibits a Romantic fascination with mental illness as revealing the dark, pathological dimensions of the mind and the labyrinthine depths of the brain.

Maria not only embodies a Romantic fascination with the complexity and disruptions of the mind but also a Romantic tendency to allow proximity to madness rather than maintain a strict distance from it. When the "lovely maniac" is brought to an adjacent chamber, Maria is thrilled by the sound of the lunatic's voice, by her singing "the pathetic ballad of old Robin Gray, with the most heartmelting pauses and falls" (80). She perceives her "exquisitely sweet and passionately wild" song as beautiful and dignified and experiences, as Dolan puts it, a momentary "sentimental identification" with the singer (202). Interestingly, the act of mentally connecting with the madwoman happens through listening rather than seeing – which ties in with the novel's overall emphasis on the verbal over the visual in creating emotional bonds. However, this sense of connection does not last; the song soon breaks off abruptly and a "torrent of unconnected exclamations and questions" interspersed with "[horrid] fits of laughter" bursts forth (80). While this unexpected outburst leaves Maria shocked and deeply disturbed, what prevails for her is not a sense of horror but a profound feeling of sympathy for the woman's condition. One of the first subjects of the mini-portraits of wronged women, the "lovely maniac" stands in marked contrast to the majority of women figures in the novel, who exhibit strength and resourcefulness. She is the embodiment of the broken woman, whose sufferings have destroyed her reason. Meditating on her fate, Maria sorrowfully reflects:

“Woman, fragile flower! why were you suffered to adorn a world exposed to the inroad of such stormy elements?” (80). Through her feeling of connection to the “lovely maniac” and her mingled reaction of awe and sympathy, Maria embodies a decidedly Romantic response to madness.

In addition, *The Wrongs of Woman* expresses a Romantic approach to madness at the textual level, putting readers into close proximity with the experience of mental illness. While Maria is not depicted as mad in the narrow sense that the protagonist-narrator in Godwin’s *Mandeville* is mad, the novel signals clearly that Maria is pushed to the verge of madness by the circumstances of her imprisonment and the impact of trauma. In the opening paragraphs, the narrator describes Maria’s state as follows:

Surprise, astonishment, that bordered on distraction, seemed to have suspended her faculties, till, waking by degrees to a keen sense of anguish, a whirlwind of rage and indignation roused her torpid pulse. One recollection with frightful velocity following another, threatened to fire her brain, and make her a fit companion for the terrific inhabitants. (68)

The narrator suggests a certain likeness between Maria, with her severe traumas that threaten to overthrow her reason, and the shrieking, raging madmen in the asylum. Moreover, by highlighting Maria’s identification with the “lovely maniac” and the extent to which she is affected by her story and the dreadful sound of her suffering, the text also invites us to reflect on the similarities between these two characters and implies that the boundaries between sanity and madness may be fluid. In the approach that the text narratively enacts overall, Maria’s mental disturbance alerts us to the vulnerability of the human mind, which Maria herself perceives as awe-inspiring.

The novel, then, expresses the shift from watching madness from a distance to engaging with it face to face. It registers the crucial transition from eighteenth-century to Romantic discourses on the mind by repeatedly signalling the importance of interacting with suffering and mental illness rather than merely watching them from a distance. Thus, the text narratively enacts the paradigm shift that happened at the time, which was driven by the emergence of new psychiatric approaches and asylum politics. As Porter emphasizes, in connection with revolutionary ideals and their “socio-political optimism,” “[p]rogressives wished to sweep away the relics of the ancien régime madhouse. As citadels of repression, mindless coercion, and hopeless confinement, benighted bastilles like Bethlem must be purged” (*Madness* 107). The novel performs the cultural shift away from *confining* madness to *allowing contact* with the disrupted mind by fostering the reader’s close engagement with an individual’s mental disturbances and suffering. The text plays with readers’ fascination with the psychopathological, while also encouraging our willingness to try to understand, sympathize, or even identify with victims of disrupted minds.

THE PERSISTENCE OF TRAUMA

The novel offers detailed insight into Maria's "wounded mind" (74), conveying the powerful impact of her traumatic experiences. Throughout the novel, there are repeated indications that the forces and after-effects of trauma refuse to be controlled, that they transcend the text's feminist trajectory. It is especially through Maria's complex psychology that the text expresses a profound interest in and fascination with the unconscious, uncontrollable, and pathological effects of trauma. In the opening sequence of the novel, Maria is depicted as almost being driven mad by the rapid succession of painful memories that rush down on her: "[O]ne recollection with frightful velocity following another, threatened to fire her brain" (69). Maria is here shown to suffer from the "intrusive memories" typically observed in trauma victims that appear with striking immediacy and intensity and are beyond the individual's control (Ehlers and Clark 324). The narrative also literalizes the metaphor of being haunted by the past: "The retreating shadows of former sorrows rushed back in a gloomy train, and seemed to be pictured on the walls of her prison, magnified by the state of mind in which they were viewed" (69). The image of Maria's memories being projected onto the prison wall, enlarged in size and heightened in intensity, also foregrounds the primarily visual nature of trauma memory, a phenomenon that contemporary trauma psychologists such as van der Kolk have described (see "Intrusive Past"). The most striking examples of the novel's depiction of sensual (especially visual) memories are Maria's intrusive memories of her abducted daughter: "Her infant's image was continually floating on Maria's sight. [...] She heard her speaking half cooing, and felt the little twinkling fingers on her burning bosom" (69). In contrast to the dark, nightmarish intrusions of her painful past, however, the visions of her child have a dreamlike quality, in the mode of Freudian wish-fulfilment (see *Interpretation* II 550-72), giving her the illusion of seeing, hearing, and feeling her lost child. Both kinds of intrusions introduce a cluster of motifs around visions, dreams, and nightmares that occur throughout the novel and dominate a number of moments related to trauma.

While the opening section of the novel is haunted by Maria's traumatic past and suffused with the gloomy atmosphere of the madhouse, it should also be acknowledged that, according to the narrator, the climax of Maria's crisis is over after two days: "After being two days the prey of impetuous, varying emotions, Maria began to reflect more calmly on her present situation, for she actually had been rendered incapable of sober reflection" (69-70). Maria had been "stunned by an unexpected blow," that is, by her husband taking away her daughter and locking her up in the asylum, but she then begins to "endeavour [...] to brace her mind to fortitude" (70). Maria's effort to "brace her mind" is the first instance in the novel of a woman striving to resist. However, what I have not addressed so far is that there are a num-

ber of powerful moments when the narrative signals how difficult it is for the female heroine to fight against the destructive forces of her past. In other words, the feminist emphasis on women's resourcefulness and resilience is repeatedly undercut by eruptions of the power of trauma. Both the diegetic narrative and Maria's hypodiegetic retrospective narrative record such moments of intense posttraumatic crisis.

Despite Maria's attempt to conquer her tumultuous emotions, she is, as the narrator reports, still far from emotionally and mentally stable: "Indulged sorrow, she perceived, must blunt or sharpen the faculties to the two opposite extremes; producing stupidity, the moping melancholy of indolence; or the restless activity of a disturbed imagination. She sunk into one state, after being fatigued by the other" (73). Wollstonecraft has Maria experience an uncontrollable fluctuation of mental states, oscillating between melancholy and restlessness, between what contemporary psychiatry calls "numbing" and "hyperarousal" (DSM-IV 464, 468). This passage suggests that Maria's struggles to regain mental stability and emotional balance often do not succeed. Furthermore, the emotional damage of her past continually manifests itself in nightmares and recurring dreams, which are today recognized as among the most common symptoms trauma victims suffer from (Barrett 2). The "petrified figures" of the madmen in the asylum haunt Maria so relentlessly in her dreams that they "made her wish to sleep no more" (77). She also repeatedly dreams of her child and, in her memoirs, describes her recurring nightmares of her husband. The novel's emphasis on Maria's dreams illustrates that, as Deirdre Barrett asserts, dreams "constitute a unique window on trauma and its effects" (1), revealing how much the individual is affected by the traumatic past. Maria's nightmares of her husband, furthermore, exemplify Barrett's claim that this "window is not clear, however, but prismatic, showing us a changed version of events that is frequently distorted" (1). Maria describes her nightmares of Venables as follows: "I seldom closed my eyes without being haunted by Mr Venables' image, who seemed to assume terrific or hateful forms to torment me, wherever I turned. – Sometimes a wild cat, roaring bull, or hideous assassin" (158). It is precisely through mechanisms of distortion that this dream imagery conveys Venables' repulsive and brutish features and intimates the extent of Maria's fear. Throughout, the novel signals that in the realm of dreams, the horrors of the past reappear with particular force, thereby evoking the Freudian idea that the ego cannot control and censor dreams the way it can conscious thoughts (see *Interpretation* II 608). Time and again, the novel stages eruptions of the traumatic past in the form of nightmares, intrusions, and related posttraumatic symptoms, foregrounding the primarily visual nature and uncontrollable quality of these different forms of re-experiencing trauma.

Regarding the protagonist's psychology of trauma, it is also crucial to emphasize that Maria tends to respond to harrowing experiences with avoidance and denial – with repression, in psychoanalytical terms, or even escapism. It is telling that

Maria repeatedly shies away from giving too much detail when her life-story approaches a painful subject. She announces, for example, "I shall pass over the tyranny of my father, much as I suffered from it" (114). Similarly, she states, "I shall not dwell on the dead-bed scene, lively as is the remembrance, or the emotion produced by the last grasp of my mother's cold hand" (121). Yet while she avoids dwelling on moments of agony, these memories and emotions often seem to enter her narration through the backdoor; for example, she involuntarily returns to her father's tyrannical behaviour several times.

Even more than her method of narrating the past, her conduct in the asylum reveals patterns of avoidance and escape. The narrator records how readily Maria forms a romantic attachment with her fellow inmate Darnford, how easily she lets herself be absorbed by her romantic feelings, apparently welcoming and enjoying them as a source of distraction. However, given the setting in the asylum and the intensity of Maria's suffering, the description of the lovers' bliss seems unnatural, even hyperbolic: "So much of heaven did they enjoy, that paradise bloomed around them; or they, by a powerful spell, had been transported into Armida's garden. Love, the grand enchanter, 'lapt them in Elysium, and every sense was harmonized to joy and social extacy" (91). The lovers are portrayed as charmed by "Love, the grand enchanter," and Maria's idea of Darnford as her romantic hero is described as the product of "fancy, treacherous fancy" (78). These phrases, especially the adjective "treacherous," alert us to the fact that this romantic idyll may not be so perfect after all. Like Mellor, who asserts that Wollstonecraft is here "writing a parody of the stylistic excesses of the romantic fiction of her day" ("Righting" 417), I read the depiction of the lovers' paradise as ironic. It is also crucial to acknowledge how much *The Wrongs of Woman* foregrounds "the textual and literary dimensions of heterosexual love" that Carlson identifies in a number of Wollstonecraft's and Godwin's texts (29). Maria and Darnford's first encounters are not physical; they take place in a textual and mental space, through marginal notes written in books they both read. Based on these notes, Maria, with the "creative power [...] of an affectionate heart," begins to "sketch a character, congenial to her own" (78). The novel here performs a conjunction between literature – evoking "feverish dreams of ideal wretchedness or felicity" (75) – the imagination, and delusions of romantic feelings, which are reinforced by implied parallels between Maria's reaction to Darnford and her earlier response to Venables. As Johnson observes, "Maria, after all, is a prisoner to her marriage but is also in a larger sense a prisoner to the delusoriness of love that chained her to Venables in marriage to begin with, a love that enchains her to Darnford as well" ("Wollstonecraft's Novels" 201).

Highlighting the dangers of the imagination, *The Wrongs of Woman* suggests that, for Maria, the fancies of romantic love function as an escape from the bleak world of trauma. The interlacing of what I call the "trauma plot" (focused on Maria's traumatic past and her lost daughter) and the "romance plot" (centred on

her romantic attachment to Darnford) is crucial in this context. The text repeatedly performs the transition from one plot to the other in an abrupt, ruptured way, and it is precisely through these disjunctions that the novel signals trauma's haunting impact. Jemima's harrowing story, for example, which almost comically interrupts the intimacy of the lovers' tête-à-tête, abruptly rekindles Maria's anxiety about her daughter. Similarly, news of the alleged death of her child throws her back into a state of agonizing pain, and the trauma plot forcefully overrides the romance plot: "Plunged in the deepest melancholy, she would not admit Darnford's visits" (110). In contrast, after her escape from the madhouse, Maria tries to push away the tormenting thoughts of her child and strives to embrace love and re-enter the world of romance: "Darnford was arrived, and she wished to be only alive to love; she wished to forget the anguish she felt whenever she thought of her child" (167). Soon afterwards, however, the romance plot breaks off abruptly. As Johnson notes, "Maria's relationship with Darnford breaks off with a violence attesting to an investment so intense as to be unnarratable" (*Equivocal Beings* 65). With these abrupt interruptions, the text signals how avoidance and denial of trauma cause particularly intense moments of posttraumatic crisis; the attempt to escape from trauma into the dream of romance violently stirs up its forces.³⁰

A particularly powerful eruption of the traumatic past into Maria's consciousness occurs during the escape scene. Right at the moment she is about to pass through the asylum's garden gate, that is, when she stands at the threshold between the confined space of the madhouse and the outer world, she is seized by a "being, with a visage that would have suited one possessed by a devil" (166). With its "scarcely human" appearance, its "ghastly eyes" and "sepulchral voice" (166), the being, who threatens to detain Maria, bears ghost-like features. In fact, the whole scene is heavily coloured in Gothic shades, merging trauma with the Gothic. The ghostly figure of the maniac, who embodies the horror rather than the sublimity of madness, triggers an outbreak of intense posttraumatic crisis in Maria: "[H]er child was ever before her; and all that had passed during her confinement, appeared to be a dream" (167). Like Anna Battigelli, I read this scene as a symbolic expression of Maria's ongoing confinement, even after "the escape from the physical confine-

30 From a psychoanalytical perspective, this dynamic could be read in terms of repression and what Freud calls the "return of the repressed" (see for example "The Uncanny" 241-43). It is also interesting to note that contemporary trauma experts who use the concept of dissociation rather than repression similarly emphasize that higher levels of avoidance as well as unintentional dissociative responses lead to an increase in symptoms or particularly severe symptoms (see Brewin, "Remembering" 127). In her memoirs, Maria also records out-of-body experiences, which are commonly regarded as one form of dissociation: "My mind, during the few past days, seemed, as it were, disengaged from my body" (151).

ments of the prison walls" (71), and, more specifically, as indicating the impossibility of escaping her traumatic past. The haunting impact of trauma takes over and threatens to erase the love story, which is reduced to the unreal status of a dream (and is, thus, once again revealed to have an unnatural, delusory quality). It is crucial to note that, in contrast to the opening of the novel, the Gothic and trauma do not function in opposition in this scene. Staging an excess of emotions and a threat to reason as well as creating a mood of gloomy, nightmarish horrors, the scene's power hinges on the intersections between trauma and the Gothic; the Gothic here underscores and intensifies the eruption of trauma.

The Gothic escape scene also knits together a cluster of images and themes that, throughout the text, are connected to trauma: dreams and nightmares, intrusions and hallucinations, visions and delusions. Trauma not only manifests itself symptomatically through dreams, but it also erupts in the shape of dreamlike states that highlight its emotional intensity and its overwhelming, potentially maddening powers. With this exploration of vision and dreams, which occupied a pivotal place in the cultural imagination of the time,³¹ *The Wrongs of Woman* offers a powerful Romantic version of a posttraumatic symptomatology. At the same time, the text's depiction of the relationship between dreams and trauma exemplifies how literature reveals aspects of trauma that tend to be eclipsed by psychiatric and psychological approaches. As Barrett emphasizes, despite the fact that nightmares and recurring dreams are recognized to be "among the most common symptoms of PTSD," dreams have not received a lot of attention in the field of traumatic stress studies (1).³² In much literary trauma writing, in contrast, dreams play a central role, which applies not only to *The Wrongs of Woman* but also to Shelley's *Mathilda* and *Frankenstein*.

In *The Wrongs of Woman*, the protagonist's posttraumatic symptoms and the moments when the past breaks forth undermine and destabilize the feminist emphasis on female strength and resilience; calling attention to the powers of the uncon-

31 As Christian La Cassagnère emphasizes, the Romantic fascination with dreams is related to the "general context of the Romantic quest for new frontiers of consciousness and for an expansion of human experience into 'unknown modes of being'" (98). *The Wrongs of Woman* can be seen as an example of how Romantic writers explore the "dream world" as "a fascinating virgin territory" – a fascination that was to take centre stage in writings of, for example, Shelley, Keats, and De Quincey (La Cassagnère 97-102).

32 According to Barrett, as the "formal Western disciplines of psychology and psychiatry developed, they to some extent lost touch with this awareness of trauma's impact on dreaming" (1-2). Lutz Wittmann, Michael Schredl, and Milton Kramer similarly maintain that researchers have so far tended to neglect issues of dreaming and have instead focused on PTSD and sleep (25).

scious,³³ they convey the uncontrollable forces that persist despite Maria's attempts to overcome her crisis, including her dream of romance with Darnford. Through these eruptions of trauma, the text creates fissures in what Conger calls the "drama of resistance" and punches holes in the seemingly hopeful scenario of "sisterhood, redemption and social protest" (*Mary Wollstonecraft* 165-66). The feminist vision of a woman's increasing liberation and freedom is undercut by the presence of the past, which threatens to keep the individual confined.

FRAGMENTS AND DISRUPTIONS: THE LIMITATIONS OF (SELF-)NARRATION

Like Shelley's *Mathilda*, *The Wrongs of Woman* can be characterized as a "performative" trauma narrative because it enacts or performs trauma on the textual level in a number of ways. One way it enacts trauma is through the structural relationship it builds between the romance plot and the trauma plot: the two are interlaced in such a way that they continually rupture one another. In addition, the persistent power of trauma is reinforced and reflected through the narrative's complex, fragmentary nature, through different kinds of gaps, disruptions, and displacements. This poetics of disruption and fragmentation not only performs the forces of trauma, but it also traces the intricate interrelations between trauma and narration, signalling the limitations of the medium of language.

The difficulty of putting a traumatic experience into words manifests itself with intensity at crucial moments in both Maria's and Jemima's self-narration. For most of her narrative, Jemima seems to be in control of her language, but words almost fail her when she confesses how she became another woman's victimizer: "The only reason for not taking me home immediately, was the having a girl in the house, with child by him – and this girl – I advised him – yes, I did! would I could forget it! – to turn out of doors" (104). The guilt is so severe that her command of language collapses into elliptical fragments. Likewise, Maria's memoirs contain several instances where she experiences difficulties in narrating her harrowing past. As with Jemima, the unspeakability of trauma appears with particular force when Maria tries to articulate one of her most intense traumatic experiences, namely, the moment her child was cruelly taken away from her: "I was already in the snare – I never reached the packet – I never saw thee more. – I grow breathless. I have scarcely patience to write down the details" (161). Language threatens to break

33 Among others, Fritz Breithaupt highlights the emerging importance of the unconscious at the time: "[D]uring the last third of the eighteenth century the understanding of memory rapidly changes, making memory the precursor of the unconscious" (82).

down; verbalization and narration become exceedingly difficult. As with Jemima, this moment of near-unspeakability is expressed through an excessive use of dashes, which punctuate the flow of the narrative with gaps.³⁴ As Johnson highlights, "sometimes the very gaps in Wollstonecraft's prose seem to open up and afford space to the unspeakable, and as such have an uncanny brilliance all their own" ("Wollstonecraft's Novels" 195). In *The Wrongs of Woman*, then, gaps in the text's larger narrative structure and in the characters' language are important elements in the novel's poetics of trauma.

Wollstonecraft's novel, as Carlson emphasizes, is "composed almost entirely of scenes of reading, writing, or storytelling" (31). However, the novel's representation of these processes of narration, transmission, and reception involves a number of ruptures and disconnections. While Jemima tells her autobiographical story – from childhood up to the present day – in oral form, Maria's life-story is broken up into several fragments: her short, urgent account to Jemima; her memoirs addressed to her daughter; and her statement for the court. In contrast to both Darnford and Jemima, Maria's most extensive form of self-narration is not oral but written and involves a significant displacement in terms of communication and reception. The first reader of Maria's memoirs is her lover Darnford, while the intended reader and addressee, her lost daughter, may never get the chance to read them. Moreover, Maria's memoirs do not come to an end; they simply break off. It is telling that the ending Maria seems to have intended – her romance with Darnford – appears only in a few lines that are "crossed out" (162). Thus, the memoirs perform, both through the distance between their intended and actual readers as well as through their abrupt ending, further disruptions between the trauma and the romance plot.

Maria's statement for the trial does reach its intended addressee, but it fails to elicit the intended response. What Wollstonecraft depicts here is "the feminist nightmare – the lone woman crying for justice within an institution where her voice can never be heard" (Wilson 34). Wilson is right, then, to emphasize the novel's fundamentally ambivalent approach to narrative: "In *Wrongs*, narrative is always communication and miscommunication, source of truth and source of misrepresentation" (38). On the one hand, the novel powerfully evokes (especially with regard to Jemima) the positive effects of self-narration and the sharing of life-stories, resonating with psychologists' vision of the healing and connecting power of words. On the other hand, its emphasis on disruptions in narration and communication also expresses a profound scepticism. Tilottama Rajan goes as far as to claim that *The*

34 Many of the features that contribute to a poetics of trauma are at the same time features that Kelly identifies as characteristic of a "sentimental poetics": "a 'lyrical' and expressive style – using dashes, exclamations, rhetorical questions, disrupted phrases, and broken sentences to achieve an effect of immediacy, to suggest strong feelings, and to mimic the vicissitudes of emotion, engaging the reader" ("Introduction" xix).

Wrongs of Woman “thematizes writing and speech as ill-fitting prostheses” (“Dis-Figuring” 215). Through ruptures in narration and displacements in reception, the novel points to trauma’s intricate position in the symbolic order and its resistance to processes of verbalization and narration. While evoking the positive potential of narrating trauma from psychological and political perspectives, the novel also – perhaps more insistently – conveys the *limitations* of narrative both as a means of working through trauma and as a means of feminist action.

From a political perspective, the novel gestures towards the limitations of narrating trauma in the way it refrains from performing “the turn from writing revolutionary consciousness to taking revolutionary action” (Kelly, *Revolutionary Feminism* 214). According to Wilson, the novel even demonstrates a “dichotomous relationship between narrative and agency: to write or read is almost by definition not to act” (33). Indeed, the novel’s final section, which the editor Godwin labelled “Conclusion,” performs an inward turn from the heroine’s feminist consciousness to private suffering. Rajan reads the fragments of the “Conclusion” as follows: “Turning from public courage – the defiance of Maria’s speech in court – to private fears, they return from rights to wrongs, and from revolutionary solidarity to the wound of gender” (“Framing” 517). The “Conclusion,” then, powerfully shows that the forces of trauma persist. These textual fragments especially enact the novel’s scepticism towards the idea that narrating trauma is a way of healing the “wounded mind.”

The “Conclusion,” which contains a series of short sketches and one longer text passage that outline possible endings of the novel, once again enacts the disruptive power of trauma through fragmentation and ruptures. While the fragmentary nature of the “Conclusion” is largely the result of the text’s unfinished status, a closer look at the different fragments and their interrelations is, nevertheless, revealing.³⁵ As Godwin rightly observes, there is a gap between the short sketches consisting solely of key words – the “scattered heads,” as Godwin terms them – and the final longer fragment: while the “scattered heads” depict various bleak endings for Maria’s and Darnford’s love story, circling around terms such as “discovery” (of Darnford’s unfaithfulness), “miscarriage,” and “suicide,” the longer fragment performs a significant shift in focus by eclipsing the romance and focusing on Maria’s relationship with Jemima and her daughter (175-77). Many critics read the longer fragment in a positive light, as depicting “an arena for kindred affection and community” based on the idea of female bonding and “comaternity” (Johnson, *Equivocal Beings* 68-

35 It is also interesting to note that Godwin’s editing, as Rajan highlights, served to underscore the text’s fragmentary nature (“Framing” 4). In “Dis-Figuring Reproduction,” Rajan elaborates her claim as follows: “Godwin further unworks this work in his editing by foregrounding breaks in its writing and characters that do not quite work” (215-16).

69).³⁶ Several critics also support their positive reading by referring to Janet Todd's claim that Maria's history is marked by two movements, "one circular and repetitive, and the other linear and developmental." According to Todd, "[t]he circular binds her to male relationships, [...] the linear tends towards freedom and maturity" (*Women's Friendship* 211). Yet is the dominant note of the fragment as optimistic and hopeful as these readings imply? Does it indeed suggest, as Conger maintains, that the female protagonists over the course of the novel "undergo a metamorphosis from victims to victors" (*Mary Wollstonecraft* 161)?

While the linear movement linked to women-women relationships and to the "dramatic progress from self-absorption to sisterhood" (Conger 163) is important to the novel, I argue that this linear movement is, until the very end, checked and restrained by circular movements – not only by the circular movement that Todd identifies in relation to male relationships but also by the circular structure centred on the traumatic and posttraumatic. And this circular movement pervades both the "scattered heads" and the longer fragment, not with regard to Jemima, but with regard to Maria. In other words, it is essential to distinguish once again between the positive depiction of Jemima's progress and her "restoration of self" (Mallinick 18) and the complexity of Maria's development. Although the novel depicts Maria undergoing a process of growth, showing how she finds her missions, the "Conclusion" refrains from depicting Maria as a happy "victor": her feminist voice has fallen on barren ground, and her separation from Darnford seems far from voluntary. In fact, the "scattered heads" stage a tragic repetition of the protagonist's traumatic experiences: Venables' tyranny repeats itself in Darnford's betrayal, and the loss of her daughter repeats itself in the miscarriage of her second child. The "Conclusion" highlights that Maria's wounds are far from healed, or in the words of the narrator in *Mary*, that her new wounds "opened all her old wounds, and made them bleed afresh" (35) – with such intensity that suicide seems the only way out.

Furthermore, the longer fragment also conveys the circularity of trauma through intrusions in which Maria relives particularly painful moments of her life: "[O]ne remembrance with frightful velocity followed another – All the incidents of her life were in arms, embodied to assail her" (176). These intrusions illustrate how trauma collapses temporality; past and present merge in a timeless moment. Trauma tends to be remembered not as a "sequence" but as a "simultaneity"; it "stops the chronological clock and fixes the moment permanently in memory and imagination, immune to the vicissitudes of time" (Langer 95, 175). Maria's pre-suicidal vision closely resembles Mary's vision at the end of *Mary*, where the protagonist similarly

36 Mellor similarly stresses Jemima's role as a "co-mother" and reads the ending in a positive light: "This ending posits an alternative to the prison of bourgeois marriage for women, the formation of a new family unit based on choice rather than on law or blood, a family composed of a community of women" ("Righting" 420).

experiences an atemporal fusion of her various traumas. Maria's intrusions and her suicide attempt highlight how deeply she is shaped by her traumatic past. Her traumatic experiences as a daughter ("she thought of her mother"; "may I find a father where I am going!") and as a mother ("Her murdered child appeared to her, mourning for the babe of which she was a tomb") erupt and fuse in this moment between life and death (176). The fragment depicts Maria in a state of profound agitation and despair, suggesting that her wounds seem too numerous and too painful to endure any longer.

However, this bleak suicidal scene is interrupted by the sudden appearance of Jemima with Maria's lost daughter, who utters the word "Mamma." The unexpected reappearance of her daughter seems to result in a positive turn of events, leading to Maria's decision – following her "agonizing struggle of her soul" (177) – to live for her child. While many critics read this final scene literally as a hopeful new beginning in an all-women family-like community, I want to suggest, with Rajan, that the child's reappearance "may be only a hallucination" ("Dis-Figuring" 212). Introduced with the words "a new vision swam before Maria's eyes" (177), the appearance of the allegedly dead child is situated at the edge of dream and reality. Following the nightmarish intrusions of Maria's gloomy past, the child's "phantasmatic" appearance (Rajan 212) carries undertones of a Freudian dream of wish-fulfilment. Even if one reads the shift from character-focalization to narrator-focalization after the child's appearance ("Maria gazed wildly at her, her whole frame was convulsed with emotion" 177) as signalling a shift from the realm of visions and dreams to reality, it is crucial that the final fragment stages a last violent eruption of trauma, which clearly undercuts the alleged optimism of the novel's feminist vision. Besides the dreamlike quality of the scene, the fact that three of the four "scattered heads" end with Maria's suicide should equally lead us away from a hopeful reading of the fragment.

Thus, the "Conclusion" brings together a number of the novel's key themes and features connected to trauma. For one, it embodies the novel's fragmentariness and its poetics of disruption: each of the fragmentary endings opens up gaps, and the interrelations between the fragments are full of disjunctions. In addition, Maria's act of swallowing laudanum is depicted as the culmination of her tendency towards avoidance and escapism: "[N]othing remained but an eager longing to forget herself – to fly from the anguish she endured to escape from thought – from this hell of disappointment" (176). Once again, the conscious attempt to forget her painful past and to escape her nightmare of suffering is followed by an intense moment of post-traumatic crisis, during which she is assailed by the most painful memories of her life. The fragment labelled "The End" exemplifies how the novel stages eruptions of the traumatic past in visual ways, embedding them in a cluster of images that originate in visions and intrusive memories, dreams and nightmares. Hence, the final scene resonates with the previous scenes that depict Maria's frenzied state, in-

cluding the novel's opening and the escape from the asylum. Even if we read the ending of the final scene literally rather than as a vision, the intensity of Maria's suffering, her suicide attempt, and her struggle even after recognizing her child all testify to the profound impact of trauma that persists until the very end, despite Maria's development and her continual endeavour to fight the destructive forces of trauma.

The "Conclusion" is a powerful testimonial to the persistent impact of trauma. It depicts the eponymous heroine as unable to escape the cycles of trauma and suffering, cycles that have their roots in childhood and are perpetuated in the domestic sphere of marriage, revealing the nuclear family to be a space of severely disrupted relationships. As the most prominent of the many wronged and wounded women that populate the novel's dreary social landscapes, Maria acts as the mouthpiece for the author's feminist agenda of exposing male tyranny. However, in contrast to Jemima – who embodies female resilience, appears to succeed in overcoming her crisis, and finds a new identity as a survivor rather than a victim – Maria remains oppressed by the burden of her traumatic past until the very end. Her attempts at avoidance, denial, or escape backfire; the means of recovery evoked throughout the novel, self-narration, female bonding, and finding a personal or political mission, have their limitations for Maria, which challenges the novel's allegedly optimistic feminist vision. In its depiction of the divergent development of the two female protagonists, then, the novel raises crucial questions about processes of narrating and sharing traumatic experiences and about the potential for recovery inherent in a sense of community among trauma victims. On the one hand, *The Wrongs of Woman* evokes the empowering potential of narration from both psychological and political perspectives; on the other hand, it uses visions and dreams as well as fragmentation and disruption as devices for performing the uncontainable forces of trauma that seem to elude and escape words. The emphasis on the psychopathological as uncontrollable can also be read as symptomatic of the text's more general Romantic fascination with the workings of the human mind. At the same time, the novel, through its detailed exploration of an individual's mind as well as through its exploration of how trauma victims might talk and listen to each other, both textually and diegetically voices a plea for the importance of engaging and interacting with psychic injuries and mental disturbances. Situated at the intersections of the private and the social, of psychology and politics, of trauma and feminist discourses, the novel oscillates between celebrations of communication and community and anxiety about the disruptive powers of trauma that reveal the limitations of language and interpersonal connections. Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman*, then, expresses an ambivalent and increasingly sceptical attitude towards processes of verbalizing and narrating trauma, suggesting that the painful, intrusive visions of a "wounded mind" are ultimately too powerful to be contained by words.

