



Jemima's wrongs: Reading the female body in Mary Wollstonecraft's prostitute biography

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ABSTRACT

A popular eighteenth-century genre, the prostitute's biography portrayed the lives of harlots for an avid audience. These stories capitalized on the prostitute's body, exposing its allure and degradation, and directing their censure towards the fallen woman or the cruel society that condemned her. At the same time, they revealed the complex realities of prostitution in the gender, moral and economic politics of their time. In the tradition of the 'whore biography,' yet departing from simplistic approaches, Mary Wollstonecraft included the story of a redeemed prostitute, Jemima, as one of the inset narratives of her last work, *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798). The present article discusses how the prostitute's story enables Wollstonecraft to expose the control over women's bodies within an endemically unjust society, regulating their role as mothers, sexual beings and workers, advancing contemporary discussions on women's function as (re)producers and the ways in which their bodies are still circumscribed.

KEYWORDS: Wollstonecraft, wrongs of woman, prostitute biography, female body, otherness, commodification.

1. REFLECTIONS ON THE FEMALE BODY: WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE WHORE BIOGRAPHY

A popular genre in the eighteenth century, the prostitute biography revolved around the lives of anonymous or well-known harlots. At this time, writers turned to these figures "to condemn the irrational passions raised by commodity culture, erotically to charge their narra-

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tives, or to police female sexuality, but perhaps most grippingly to explore the transformation of identity demanded by the social, economic, and the political changes in the period” (Rosenthal, 2006: 34). The latter motive would explain the visible influence these narratives had on what are now considered canonical works, such as Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724). One of the most relevant of these prostitute stories appears, in fact, in Mary Wollstonecraft’s last work, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria. A Fragment* (1798). Within her gallery of wronged women, Wollstonecraft employs the popular genre of the whore biography to expose the control over women’s bodies within an endemically unjust society, hence illustrating her own philosophy on the body-mind dualism and the rights of women. Therefore, her use of this genre moves beyond a relish for scandal or entertainment: in her hands it becomes a powerful instrument to convey her radical thoughts on the matters of motherhood, prostitution and labour, anticipating current debates on these issues and highlighting the relevance of her work in the present day.

In her extensive body of work, Wollstonecraft recurrently addressed the ambiguous position the female body held in the increasingly commercial society of her time, in which it was a valued commodity that generated desire and enabled reproduction, while it also became its most degraded subject (Keane, 2000: 121). In Halldenus words, in this society all but the male owners were placed in a state of dependence, blending together “servant, wife, worker, thing” (2014: 952), all relevant and related categories in Wollstonecraft’s body of work and especially in *Wrongs*. Wollstonecraft’s last novel revolves around Maria, a young wife who has been secluded in a mental institution and separated from her daughter by her husband, who is trying to control her fortune. Framed within Maria’s narrative and reflections on women’s lack of power and freedom, chapter five is devoted to Jemima’s story. The space and agency given to the former prostitute signifies Wollstonecraft’s intention to give visibility to the consequences the oppression of women has on their lives, as well as to dignify the voice of those women who, having ‘fallen’ because of societal flaws, are then rejected and abused by that same society. In *The Wrongs of Woman*, then, both Maria, the wife and mother, and Jemima, the (sex) worker, must escape their corporeal entrapment and the oppression they suffer at the hands of a patriarchal system embodied in marriage, stultifying labour and institutions of control. If conservative discourses claimed that the oppressed were or must learn to be content (Wollstonecraft, 2007: 103), returning the voice to them so that they could represent their lives in their own terms is a political act in itself, hence, the relevance of Maria and Jemima’s first-person tales.

Moreover, Jemima’s first-person narrative enabled Wollstonecraft to counteract the use of the prostitute as merely a textual commodity, a show to be displayed for the viewers. The popular whore biographies of the eighteenth century offer a rich tapestry of prostitution performances that escape easy categorizations, as they highlight societal fascination and repulsion towards the ambiguous figure of the prostitute. The voyeuristic pleasure people

would have experienced in pursuing William Hogarth's very popular *A Harlot's Progress* (1732), which depicts a bawd's entrapment of a young country girl and her descent into prostitution, imprisonment, disease and death, serves as illustration of that duality. In contrast, Wollstonecraft's character will be seen to control her narrative, as well as her appeal to her audience, escaping the mediation of a male narrator.

In addition, Wollstonecraft's fiction will be seen to reject previous explanations for prostitution in which women's disorderly sexual appetite was blamed for their fall from grace, adopting a sentimental rather than a libertine approach, the former allowing to transform the prostitute "from a criminal to a victim, from an agent of sin to an object of compassion" (Ellis & Lewis, 2012: 11). This was so because sentimental prostitution narratives were as much about the "social forces" that conspire to degrade women, as they were "about individual choices" (Rosenthal, 2008: xx), which fits Wollstonecraft's political and social agenda. Like Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), the story of Jemima is one of survival. However, rather than the comic tone and implied threats of Defoe's fictional autobiography, Wollstonecraft employs a tone of urgency in her gallery of women's sufferings and her condemnation of prostitution is more evident than in previous texts. Finally, Wollstonecraft's ending also differs from other fictional autobiographies, including the relevant *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen-House* (1759/60): Jemima does not conclude her narrative institutionalized or entrapped in a different patriarchal narrative of control, but rather becomes a powerful agent in her story and in Maria's destiny.

Wollstonecraft, then, creates a more challenging and complex whore biography. An analysis of chapter five proves that by juxtaposing Jemima's life story with a gallery of wronged women's narratives –the wife, the mother–, the figure of the prostitute becomes everywoman's tale (Jones, 1997: 211). Jemima's story indeed fulfils all the common places of female oppression that Wollstonecraft had denounced. Born from a seduced maid who dies only days after her birth, Jemima experiences lack of love and nurture in her early childhood, first from the poor nurse to which she is entrusted and then from her father's family. She is exploited as a worker by her subsequent employers, until, recurrently raped and then impregnated by her master, she is blamed and expelled from service. Compelled to abort, her distress and poverty lead to street-walking, working in a brothel and, finally, becoming a gentleman's mistress. Mirroring Defoe's prostitutes' upward mobility, Jemima becomes educated and aspires for more; however, her limited options given her sex and past mean a life of hard labour and poor conditions, with none of the intellectual improvement to which she had become accustomed. Injured and unfit to work, she resorts to crime until, now a convicted felon, she is once more "branded with shame" (2007: 105). Her final position, a hardened ward at the lunatic asylum, numbs her feeling and intellect even further.

Throughout her narrative it is evident that Jemima's body is treated as a commodity. It is abandoned, exploited, battered, raped, sold and branded, quite literally, as a felon; it is her means of subsistence as a prostitute or a wash-woman, but it is given little value by her employers or clients. While Moll conceived it as an asset in their trade, Jemima does not come across as a businesswoman: she describes herself as "a slave, a bastard, a common property" (2007: 98). Her liminality within society also becomes apparent in this corporeity. On the one hand, her physicality is too obvious: her experience marks her body as a child (93); her youthful body attracts her master (96), while she can place her rags to her advantage to attract her clients (98); her injury as a wash-woman and the traces of her body –when she cannot afford to wash her linen at the hospital and is expelled (105)– again mark her descent into crime and her imprisonment. On the other hand, she becomes a cypher, one more in the mass of the "filth of society" (103) in which she includes herself. She is no longer an individual; when she begs for bread, she is told that enough is being done for the poor (106), understood as an abstraction. Jemima concludes stating that no one ever acknowledged her "to be a fellow-creature" (107), thus denying her basic humanity. In addition, she loses what she believes her better self: after her gentleman dies, she is cut off from the society of which she had become a part. The fact that she becomes a no-body is emphasized by her use of the word ghost: losing that social status condemns her to wander "a ghost among the living" (101), not dead, but not yet alive.

This in-between state was often associated with prostitution and the image of the fallen woman, in her narrative of descent, disease and death. However, in Wollstonecraft's fiction prostitutes, working classes, and women in general conflate as bodies that can be invisibilized –easily locked in a madhouse, killed or erased from public discourse–, controlled –by abusive laws or violence–, or exploited –dehumanized as mere machines that produce babies or goods. In particular, Jemima's story serves to illustrate these attempts to subjugate women's bodies; it emphasises Maria's own predicament as a woman, a wife and a mother; and it embodies Wollstonecraft's claims on social and gender oppression in eighteenth-century society. The different wrongs that women's bodies experience in her fiction could then be classified within the categories of morphing mother, sexual monster and working machine, which will be subsequently analysed in relation to the story. These apparently diverse categories are not clearly distinguishable from one another in Wollstonecraft's text; rather, they overlap, falling together as a manifestation of the recurrent reduction of women to their physiques, while they speak of the *otherness* and fluidity of the female body, notions that also shape present-day discussions on women's function as (re)producers and the ways in which their bodies are circumscribed.¹

2. JEMIMA'S STORY: MOTHERHOOD, (SEX) EXPLOITATION AND HOPE

Wollstonecraft's whole biography opens by presenting the maternal body as a contested site of women's commodification. While other relevant narratives, such as Defoe's *Moll*, barely address this issue, Wollstonecraft's emphasis on motherhood is evident, for Jemima's story starts with a mother's narrative: an anonymous woman transformed into a nameless mother, only matter, a generic maternal body. She serves the purpose of emphasizing the endemic nature of the wrongs of women, tracing the causes that will determine Jemima's fate, by means of a sentimental tale of seduction, abandonment and death. In three short paragraphs, Wollstonecraft comprises the destiny of poor women under the double standards and appalling working conditions of her century. She shows how their body is exposed, chastised and ultimately erased. The female body is desired and then subjected to the "natural" yet "dreaded" change that comes with pregnancy (92). This will "ruin" her –and while she is referring to moral ruin, her pregnancy will also cause her physical decay. Her condition, and the demands she now makes to 'sanctify' her body's change through marriage, lead her seducer to find "her very person" distasteful (92). The mother's body is rejected, no longer the site of desire but of reproduction.

Wollstonecraft subsequently emphasises how this now despised body experiences exploitation and agony during pregnancy and childbirth. The mother starves her body in order to die and injures her health; she hides her body, adopting what are assumed to be extreme methods "to conceal her condition, still doing the work of a house-maid" (92). This will have an irreversible "effect on her constitution" and she will die in a "wretched garret," where her mistress had "forced her to take refuge in the very pangs of labour" (92). The pregnant body is thus hidden away, condemned as something to be ashamed of, while the father "after a slight reproof, was allowed to remain in his place –allowed by the mother of six children, who, scarcely permitting a footstep to be heard, during her month's indulgence, felt no sympathy for the poor wretch, denied every comfort required by her situation" (92). This sentence exposes a gender and a class bias. Only the female body, transformed by the consequences of the seduction, will be considered shameful and punishable; only the mistress is allowed to take care of her body during and after birth, given a month's repose. In this sense, Wollstonecraft's attention to class division and the intersectionality that informs women's oppression would also anticipate contemporary approaches to how status affects the experience and construction of motherhood.²

Even more harrowing is Jemima's predicament when she is raped and consequently impregnated by her master. Her physical transformation is not chosen; it is imposed on her. Having threatened, beaten and forced himself on Jemima, her master's first reaction to the pregnancy is to consider the consequences her body's revelation will have for him. He then assumes control over her body once more and suggests an abortion. Later, Jemima must hide her shameful body, so as not to reveal her "altered shape" (96), her polymorphous body.

However, her body is finally exposed by the wife's entrance while she is "the prey of [her master's] brutal appetite" (96). Again, this leads to hatred directed at Jemima's body, expressed in strong physical violence against herself and not her master. In an all too familiar narrative, it is the female victim of rape who is blamed and accused. Moreover, her body is branded as conditioned by nature to become a sexual object, as her mistress accuses her of having been born a whore given her mother's inheritance (97). Thrown out, her body becomes part of the "refuse of society" (97), having finally lost its individuality. In desperation, Jemima turns against her own body as her mother had done, to erase the trace of her alteration and her own self as well in the process. Her maternal body is then forced to a violent transformation, but it proves too strong to completely disappear.

What seems to have been erased, nevertheless, is her capacity –or willingness– to bear children. In her experience as a prostitute and mistress, she is never again pregnant. In the eighteenth century, there were concerns about prostitutes' barrenness and what it meant for society as a whole. Defoe's *Some Considerations on Street-walkers* (1726) addressed their "failure to engage in (re)productive labour," and their transformation into "parasites" given their subversion of women's sole use in their community (Batchelor & Hiatt, 2007: xi). Unable to become a mother, Jemima is a liminal creature: a bastard and an orphan, she has lost the entitlement to a sense of belonging –she has no family name, she only has "a claim to a Christian name, which had not procured her any Christian privileges" (73)–, while her apparent barrenness thwarts gaining value as a producer of citizens. She is a no-body, her womanhood is negated as she does not fulfil the patriarchal requirement, first, of physical purity and, secondly, of (re)production.

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft seems to envision a form of social redemption by reinstating Jemima in a female line of non-corporeal motherhood. After listening to Maria's plight as a mother separated from her child, "the woman awoke in a bosom long estranged from feminine emotions," and with the woman there awakens in Jemima an instinct to protect the "wretched mother" (73). As a consequence, Maria promises her that she will teach her daughter to see Jemima as a second mother; and, in one of the possible endings, Jemima concludes the narrative as a motherly figure both for Maria and her child. Not emphasising her physicality over her intellectual powers, Jemima's motherhood is based on sentiment and the challenge to established male authority: it is her initial empathy which triggers her subversion of the rules and Maria's final escape. It is an intellectual and spiritual form of maternity, detached from the physical and emotional agonies of actual motherhood. This ending, then, rejects Jemima's reduction to mere corporeity, while it also emphasises the fact that she had been "estranged" from her own self, from her emotions. Thus it reclaims her humanity beyond her reading as a reproducer, a sexual object, or an unfeeling being by a society on which the blame now falls for branding her parasitical, a refuse, and, therefore,

actually preventing her integration and reform. In Wollstonecraft's whole biography it is clear that only society is to blame for creating its own monsters.

For as a sexually alluring woman and a criminal, Jemima was indeed seen as monstrous to society in her condition of sex worker and thief. The eighteenth-century discourse connected prostitutes with disease and destruction. Sexually transmitted maladies could horribly disfigure their bodies, rendering them monstrous in their appearance and their destructive power. Much like contemporary zombies in popular culture, prostitutes could corrupt others physically –and also morally. From moral treatises to *Harris's List* (in)famous advertising of sick girls to avoid or those to enjoy for their particular physical qualities or sexual talents,³ the body of the prostitute was presented as monstrous, abnormal and dangerous. Therefore, it had to be branded, controlled or erased. The eighteenth-century saw different attempts to warn against or regulate the prostitute's body. Prostitution was not explicitly criminalized, but the Disorderly Houses Act (1751) made it possible to fine, whip or transport bawds, pimps or brothel owners. The bodies of these bawds, often former prostitutes, were marked and sometimes removed from British society. This might also expose the bodies of the prostitutes themselves, as it could force them to resort to the street, to face violence, starvation or hypothermia. As Jemima claims, she renounced her independence as a street-walker for the security and stability provided by a brothel (99), which could be taken away from her by force of the law.

In addition, prostitutes' bodies had to be controlled for the public good, as would be stated throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Different regulations, such as the later Contagious Disease Acts (1864, 1866, and 1869), would enable the prostitute's body, instead of her clients', to be inspected and criminalized. It was forcibly penetrated in the examinations, and then 'erased' by means of its seclusion in hospitals. It was not only a matter of health, but of economy: prostitute's bodies had to be regulated to prevent the impact of prostitution on trade. Bernard Mandeville's *Modest Defence of Publick Stews* (1724), for instance, advocated for state-regulated brothels. He viewed prostitution as "a public, government-regulated enterprise that would disallow competition from private bawds or independent prostitutes" (Smith, 2015: 36). Those prostitutes who, as Jemima (100) or Moll, could earn enough money to enable their social mobility. This would allow their bodies to be undistinguishable from more respectable women, one of the great fears at the time (Attwood, 2011: 6). Hence, successful prostitutes could destabilize social strata, but also the licit/illicit female body dichotomy on which gendered morals were based.

Moreover, the rhetoric of reformers started to differentiate between types of prostitutes. A dichotomy was drawn between the preys or outcasts, the hapless victims eager to be reformed, and those that entered prostitution voluntarily, the shameless outcasts (Attwood, 2011: 73, 80). While Jemima clearly responds to the former sentimental construction of the prostitute driven by necessity and hoping to abandon her ignoble activity, at times she

willingly seeks to continue under the protection granted by sexual favours. This is seen in her attachment to a tradesman: she exerts her “power over him” to occupy the place of his present pregnant mistress and so to escape “hard labour” (104). This second seduced –an unnamed– girl consequently drowns herself. She then becomes only a body, a “stiff, cold corpse,” prey to the gaze and judgements of the “spectators” (104), a commodity in the hands of men as she was in life.

This act highlights another form of monstrosity: lack of empathy. Jemima is placed with other monstrous women in her story: the unfeeling “virtuous mistress” and mother of six, who denies Jemima’s mother some “sympathy” (92); her step-mother, step-sister, or mistress, in their inhumane treatment of her; or the wife to her gentleman’s heir, who, in her inability to see the mistress as a human being, makes Jemima question her very nature as a woman (101). These women are ‘different,’ monstrous, in that they deny the ‘natural’ sensibility that was attributed to women; they are not feeling enough and hence they eradicate all trace of the necessary sympathy towards others. Jemima’s reading of her lover’s pregnant mistress as an obstacle denotes thus the same lack of empathy: she objectifies her nemesis as Jemima herself had been, and triggers her final reduction to a lifeless body. Nevertheless, it is precisely by an identification with the other woman that she reacts against her unnatural callousness. She realizes that the dead woman was not so much a nemesis, as a double: the projection of what her own fate and her mother’s was. Such an epiphanic moment also triggers a strong physical reaction: she is brought down with a fever, and suffers “both in body and mind” (104). Her physical or nervous reaction also answers to the discourse on female sensibility. In Jemima’s case, the sensibility that had been numbed by need is awakened by her act of sympathetic reading of her situation into the drowned mistress’.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft had already warned that economic necessity could turn people against each other. If Hobbes saw man as a wolf to man, Wollstonecraft uses the same analogy when Jemima exclaims that her circumstances turned her into a “wolf” (104) who destroyed another woman in order to survive. It is her ruthlessness towards a woman in similar circumstances which makes her question her own nature: “I thought of my own state, and wondered how I could be such a monster!” (104). In contradistinction to this Hobbesian view of man, Wollstonecraft develops the notion of Smithean sympathy as a form to counteract such reading of others. However, she also poses the question of how a creature who had not experienced sympathy could ever feel it herself: her inner self had not been nurtured, so necessity made her body the predominant force, hence transforming her into a wolf. Contrary to her mistress’s claim that she is “born a strumpet” and that it ran in her blood (97), Jemima voices Wollstonecraft’s support of the weight of nurture against nature. The answer to Jemima’s situation and character lies clearly in her life story, in how society has shaped her to become what it now condemns.

Interestingly, Jemima explicitly uses arguments that would later find echo in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's famous *Frankenstein* (1818). Wollstonecraft's heroine claims:

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 gran 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; a pauper by nature, hunted from family to family, who belonged to nobody –and nobody cared for me. I was despised from my birth, and denied the chance of obtaining a footing for myself in society. Yes; I had not even the chance of being considered as a fellow-creature –yet all the people with whom I lived, brutalized as they were by the low cunning of trade, and the despicable shifts of poverty, were not without bowels, though they never yearned for me. I was, in fact, born a slave, and chained by infamy to slavery during the whole of my existence, without having any companions to alleviate it by sympathy, or teach me how to rise above it by their example. (95-6)

Shelley read her mother's work and the similarities are striking. Jemima, the monstrous female, is a creature shaped by lack of humanity and love, especially in the absence of a mother-figure. Her rejection, her solitude and her *otherness* anticipate the parliament of Frankenstein with his creature in their first encounter in volume two, in which the latter also states his innate benevolence, love and humanity, which are destroyed by loneliness, rejection and hate, placing himself as an *other* to Frankenstein and his "fellow creatures" (Shelley, 2012: 68-9). He later rejects the chains of slavery and demands a companion in order to experience redemptive sympathy. Jemima is equally treated as a "creature of another species" (93) who never had a "taste of human kindness" (94). She is hunted and mistreated by others. As Shelley's creature, Jemima improves by reading, but this still does not grant her a place in society for she is marked by her abnormal bastard birth and early life –motherless and rejected by her father, as Frankenstein's creature–, as well as by her later monstrous threat to others as a prostitute. Jemima, as Shelley's creation, wishes to become a "fellow-creature," to partake of society, but they both remain in its margins. A monstrous and unfeeling society hence creates new monsters, which they later fear and wish to eradicate.

This is made explicit in Frankenstein's treatment of his female creature, which is equally revealing of Wollstonecraft's influence on subsequent discourses on the commodification of the (monstrous) female body. Afraid of her unruliness, her desire and her power to procreate, the scientist destroys "the thing" on which he is working (Shelley, 2012: 118-9). Proving the present relevance of these narratives' approach to the female body, in a contemporary rewriting of Shelley's masterpiece Danny Boyle and Nick Dear highlighted this implied reading of the female creature as a sex toy, a machine in the hands of the scientist and the male creature. First dreaming of her, the creature commands and admires her, while she does not have a voice: she cannot speak, only dance for him. Later, as the real

female creature comes to life, the implications of procreation are made explicit by Frankenstein's concern about the power of her womb: "Will they breed? How quickly will they breed? How fast is the cycle? How many in a litter? Fifty? A hundred? A thousand? And if the children breed with the children?" (Dear, 2011: 58.). Finally, they both admire the naked body of the female 'thing,' they both desire and objectify her, speaking about her body, her breasts, and her 'belonging' to the creature (2011: 60), before Frankenstein's fear leads him to destroy her already complete and functioning body, which he had not animated with a 'soul.' At no point in Shelley's novel or Boyle's play was she yet fully human. And as her body pieces remain scattered on stage, the creature leaves to subsequently destroy another body, another potential lover and mother: Elizabeth.

Frankenstein's words and actions replicate what Wollstonecraft and her daughter identified as their age's fear about female sexuality and (pro)creative powers, and the desire to regulate them. As seen in Defoe's aforementioned conception of women, a certain mechanization or industrialization of motherhood is present, anticipating contemporary discussions on the same patriarchal fear of women's polymorphous body and the wish to control its reproductive powers.⁴ In eighteenth-century discourses, the importance of providing human 'goods,' in order to increase both productivity and consumption, runs parallel to the need for those children to be adequate commodities that would be British, healthy, and, above all, legitimate. Fundamental in Wollstonecraft's writings, the well-established 'family-politic' trope gained momentum at the turn of the century, as foreign forces threatened Britain's identity and wealth (Mellor, 1993: 84), and women were placed at the centre of the political, economic, and moral debates. Hence the increased discourse of control over women's bodies: their virtue, their moral property, was holding the nation, and its transmission of material property, together (Kelly, 2001: 5-6).

The same importance would be attributed to the prostitute's body, albeit under a negative reading: she was the origin of both illegitimate children and diseases that, as mentioned earlier, affected tradesmen, army men, and, worse of all, their clients' own wives and children as they transmitted those diseases at home. The prostitute's diseased body is a link in the chain transmission of these maladies, in the quick spreading of it, which can be seen to echo the industrialised era which Britain lived, and the accessibility to forms of consumption that had previously been reserved for the rich. The prostitute's body was an equalizing link in that chain of destruction; she reached noblemen and workers alike.

However, prostitutes' bodies were also read as serving a public function: belonging to nobody and anybody, they made sure men could find relief to their urges, and not direct them at themselves, other men –especially in the army–, or innocent women (Evans, 1979: 94). Similar to the role performed by sex dolls today, the prostitute's body played surrogate to the respectable woman's body, while the intercourse with her replaced rape. Jemima equates her experience as a prostitute with this rape surrogate: she "*yielded* to the desires of the brutes

[she] met, with the *same detestation* that [she] had felt for [her] still more brutal master” (emphasis added, 98). Her use of “yield” signals her unwillingness, while she equates her intercourse with her clients with the multiple rapes she suffered from her master. In addition, her experience as a mistress also proves that she is acting as a wife-surrogate: “I was therefore prevailed on, though I felt a horror of men, to accept an offer of a gentleman...to keep his house,” however, he was a “worn-out votary of voluptuousness, his desires became fastidious...the native tenderness of his heart was undermined by a vitiated imagination. ... whatever pleasure his conversation afforded me...the being his mistress was purchasing it at a very dear rate” (99). Jemima’s choice of words again emphasises her reluctance at placing her body under the control of another man, and what her body must bear in their sexual intercourse. Contemporary cases had shown that husbands would, in fact, impose their vitiated imaginations on their wives or even prostitute them, as Maria’s husband attempted to do (143), because she was his “property” (140).⁵ However, it was considered better to use their mistresses so, and hence to preserve their legitimate spouses and children from that degradation. When her lover dies, Jemima is left destitute as many wives were; she has no legal claim on his property. She can only fight to obtain her “arrears of wages” (101), the money he owed her, but she can claim no respect from the heirs.

This lack of humanity and the importance of her wages again refer to the reading of her body as a machine, not only as a sex worker, but also as a low class labourer. At times these two categories conflated: it was considered that “rehabilitated prostitutes could boost the economy by working in various manufacturing and service trades,” and, in fact, the Magdalen house made sure their sixteen-hour daily routine included plenty of work to reform both “bodies and minds” (Batchelor & Hyatt, 2007: xii). The reformed prostitute is no longer a sexual monster, she is a potential worker and mother: she is a machine. It is in the context of hard and underpaid work that Jemima acknowledges her final relinquishing of humanity: she was hired to “wash from one in the morning till eight at night, for eighteen or twenty-pence a day;” “condemned to labour, like a *machine*, only to earn bread, and scarcely that, [she] became melancholy and desperate” (emphasis added, 103-4), consequently becoming a Hobbesian wolf.

Wollstonecraft’s description of dehumanising labour also employs the language of coeval abolitionists. Jemima must serve her step-sister with the “servility of a slave” (93); as a sex worker she experiences the “yoke of service” at the brothel (99); she defines herself as a slave and as property (98). This parallel between slavery and the oppression of the working class, as well as of women, is recurrent in radical discourse, and it also emphasises Jemima’s physicality. The slaves’ physical attributes were emphasized; their bodies were constantly probed, raped and abused. They were seen as brutes and theirs was the hardest, most physical labour. Jemima draws attention to this: for her masters, she was the “dumb brute who must bear it all” (95); hers was hard physical work as a washer, which does not enable intellectual

development (103). Moreover, her nature as a woman only emphasises the corporeal nature of her work more: in order to survive women “must submit to the most menial bodily labour” or hard labour, as long as their reputation is intact (102). While a man with her abilities would have fared better, Jemima is denied equal pay and chances for “the rational” (103). Again, the duality mind/body, male/female is exposed by Wollstonecraft, while she criticises the endemic injustices of society.

Jemima concludes her narrative stating the final effects of years of brutish labour and dehumanization: she has become hardened to the suffering of others, a true machine in the fulfilment of her duties at the madhouse. It takes Maria’s kindness, her acknowledgement of Jemima as a “fellow-creature,” to awaken her “emotions” once more (107). Sympathy humanizes her, sensibility marks her superior being, and Jemima no longer remains a machine.

Wollstonecraft’s prostitute narrative thus ends with hope, as her character’s name anticipated. Meaning ‘dove,’ Jemima was one of the daughters of Job, born after his misfortunes, and participated in the inheritance together with her brothers (Job 42: 14-15), hence sharing their birth rights. Jemima now has encountered human contact and fellowship, her mind and feeling can expand, and she has become an important part of a female community of friendship and support. In an interesting reversal, the lower class woman, the prostitute, has not been saved, but has become the hope for Maria in her incarceration. Jemima is no longer a dangerous body, but an agent in the development of their destinies. This agency also defies her previous commodification. While in the several endings that Wollstonecraft drafted Maria re-enacts her passive role and submits herself to Darnford, in the most developed of them Jemima finds Maria’s daughter and saves her from an attempted suicide after Darnford’s betrayal. Maria endeavoured to commit suicide by ingesting laudanum and Jemima’s intervention saves her from death. By this Maria is not only physically, but also emotionally “restored to life” (177). In this conclusion, Jemima is indeed the symbol of revival and new prosperity, without the immediate oppression of men. As her Biblical counterpart, Jemima represents the hope for women to become citizens, full members of society, no longer slaves to it.

Jemima then responds to the sentimental narrative of the redeemed prostitute, but she is different from other protagonists of eighteenth-century seduction fiction. As she states, she only knows of the “blandishments of seduction” by reading novels, for she “had not even the pleasure of being enticed into vice” (98). She is not sensuous, she is not tempted by her own nature or even by avarice; she experiences “detestation” for her “nightly occupation” (98) and wishes to find another form of employment. In the end, she leaves with Maria on the condition of working for her for a stipend, “insisting on a properly financial rather than merely a sentimental contract,” on justice rather than charity (Jones, 1997: 216). Jemima rescues herself by hard work and by showing compassion to other women, which in her

hardness she had forgotten. She then overcomes gender stereotypes, as Moll, by showing skill and resources, but also by emphasising the sisterhood that disappears in Defoe's narrative with the death of the Governess. Moll conforms to the system much more than Jemima, and her success is a solitary one, while Wollstonecraft creates a community of women which "makes a very particular polemical point against the most punitive versions of prostitution reform in the 1790s" (Jones, 1997: 215). That is, she refuses to conclude her prostitute's story within another patriarchal institution of control in which Jemima will be branded with shame and exposed to labour exploitation. However, this female community remains liminal: as women it seems they will only have control over their bodies as long as they remain outcasts, outside a society that gives women the chance to either "be owned" or "be infamous:" "the only other option, and the only way out for women, is to exit altogether" (Halldenius, 2014: 952).

In this way, Jemima's story becomes paradigmatic of women's liminality in eighteenth-century society and, in fact, includes all the landmarks of Wollstonecraft's radical and proto-feminist agenda. In particular, it serves as a powerful illustration for the author's claims on the legal responsibility of seducers and the priorities for social reformers. In that sense, Jemima's appeal to her audience mirrors Wollstonecraft's address to her implied readers: while Defoe's preface explained the need to gloss over Moll's narrative for propriety's sake, Jemima controls her narrative and is less concerned with her audience's sensibility than with avoiding becoming merely a morbid object of scrutiny. Whilst she intends to "conceal nothing," she nevertheless refuses to "lead [their] imagination into all the scenes of wretchedness and depravity... or mark the different stages of [her] debasing misery" (98). She is not Hogarth's harlot. In her address to her listeners/readers, Jemima regulates her distance from them: "I will not attempt to give you an adequate idea of my situation, lest you, who probably have never been drenched with the dregs of human misery, should think I exaggerate" (95). But she also entreats them to experience sympathy: "Consider, dear Madam, I was famishing: wonder not that I became a wolf!" (104). She expresses true anger at injustice, and also sincere repentance; in fact, her penitence and honesty, springing not from affluence but from an awakening of humanity, seems sincerer than Moll's. The narrator intrudes to describe the effect of Jemima's tale on her countenance and voice, and confirms this impression: "the remorse Jemima spoke of, seemed to be stinging her to the soul, as she proceeded" (104). Her body is a trustworthy text. In contradistinction to Moll's biography, Jemima's story is not an entertaining tale and a religious moral: it is a social commentary for the benefit of her audience who must open their eyes to her reality – "behold me then in the street, utterly destitute!" (97), Jemima vehemently and pathetically requests. More evidently than in Defoe's narratives, Wollstonecraft's interest lies in the causes and consequences of her situation, rather than the adventures in which she is involved.

In the train of other prostitute biographies, this brief narrative was to be shortly after singled out and published independently, as a sensational chapbook entitled *Life of Jemima; or, The Confessions of an Unfortunate Bastard, Who, by the Antipathy of Her Parents, Was Driven to Every Scene of Vice and Prostitution!* (1800). It proves the appeal that this form of biographies had for the general public, as well as the strong voice that was given to these liminal characters. Moreover, as Maria asserts, Jemima's narrative "gives rise to the most painful reflections on the present state of society" (103), which seems to be indeed Wollstonecraft's intentions. In her narrative, the prostitute, her body, her story, becomes a political self that epitomises the oppression of women and the poor, and illuminates the flaws of society from her position on the threshold. As Jemima looks back, her story inspires Maria and the readers with visions of the future and what could be done to ameliorate the conditions under which she withered, prompting a debate on prostitution –and women's bodies– that still informs fiction and society today.⁶

The current applicability of Wollstonecraft's vindications proves the relevance of the present study, as well as the need for feminist history to be understood as *multilinear* and *multidirectional*, engaging in fruitful conversations between past and present feminisms (Browne, 2014: 2), orienting itself backwards –exploring narratives of the past– and forwards –using that past trace which irrupts in the present to write the future (2014: 70-1), and hopefully rejecting the temporal distancing by which certain feminisms emerge as "current" and others as "outmoded" (2014: 46). Exploring Wollstonecraft's prostitute biography is not conceived as an exercise in pessimism to highlight recurrent concerns, but rather as an attempt to "recollect forward," to engage with past voices as part of a feminist "*mechanism of change*" (Browne, 2013: 12).

For as Wollstonecraft departs from condescending or voyeuristic whore biographies, her prostitute's account of controlled motherhood, sex exploitation and hard labour becomes a call for women to escape narratives of entrapment. A call that has been inherited by twenty-first-century scholars and is as relevant today as it was two hundred years ago.

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Notes

1. Wollstonecraft's categories have particular relevance for contemporary feminist studies, as seen in Rosi Braidotti's influential essay "Mothers, Monsters and Machines" (1994). Read as a sign of

difference, for centuries woman's body has been branded monstrous, blending fascination and fear, with the subsequent desire to gaze at and control it. Its mutability has added to the "male fears and anxieties surrounding the female transformation from innocent virgin to sexually initiated (and empowered) women to the pregnant body" (Santos, 2017: 60): the madonna, the whore, the matron, which still inhabit popular culture. In this context, the maternal body, in particular, has become one of the more contested sites of women's commodification and control (DiQuinzo, 1999; Francus, 2017: 37), while her reading as a (re)productive 'machine' also addresses the dehumanization of women by means of the exploitation of their bodies through surrogacy, more menial labour, or their constant objectification as prostitutes, a means for sexual submission and the exertion of patriarchal power (Díez Gutiérrez, 2014: 97-8).

2. See Littler's (2013) address of this class divide and her analysis of a construction of aspirational maternity established on the difference with the working class mother or 'pramface' mother.

3. *Harris's List of Covent Garden Girls* (1757-1795) was a catalogue of prostitutes available in London with a description of their characteristics. It was published annually and is thought to have sold some 250000 copies.

4. See, for instance, Braidotti (1994) and Santos (2017) for an analysis of woman's body as a sign of difference that blends fascination and fear, with the subsequent desire to gaze at and control it. Braidotti in particular addresses an increased patriarchal power over the maternal body of women, with the "possibility of mechanizing the maternal function" (1994: 78) in our current post-human, technologically-advanced society.

5. Lady Worsley was the protagonist of, probably, one of the greatest scandals of the eighteenth century. Her husband requested she had intercourse with his friends while he watched. Having eloped with one of them, Lady Worsley faced public scandal when her husband, unwilling to file for divorce, accused her lover of criminal conversation. This was possible because his wife was considered his property. He demanded 20000 pounds in compensation. Lady Worsley then used the testimony of all the lovers he forced on her to 'reduce' her price –for her body as a possession was devalued. In the end, the judge awarded only one shilling in damages.

6. See, among others, Díez Gutiérrez (2014) and Walkowitz (2017).

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