

Property, Passions, and Manners
Political Economy and the Vindications

sophistical arguments ... in the questionable shape of natural feelings¹

Human passions, and their expression in writing, are central concerns for Wollstonecraft as she resists the would-be orthodoxies of late eighteenth-century political economic thinking. In the previous chapter, we saw how Wollstonecraft's critique of Burkean political economy involved an attempt to reclaim form, writing, and representation from their specious deployment by Burke. She rejected a textual practice which attempted to inculcate artificial feeling in its readers, exposing how such 'questionable ... natural feelings' were also deployed to assure readerly approval of, and complicity in, a political economy understood as the 'natural course of things' despite its costs in human lives and human happiness. This chapter discusses Wollstonecraft's concern with human passions further: by exploring her understanding of how they are deeply imbricated in existing social and political structures, and how they are key to its reform. Human feeling, in other words, is both central to the social order that political economy would construct, and to the work of challenging it. As we will see, in the *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft accuses the property order which Burke defends of corrupting human feeling by encouraging immorality, indolence, and libertinism. And her denouncement of the so-called 'manners' of commercial society is followed, in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, by a call for a 'revolution in manners': a moral revolution by which women will save commercial society from itself, and save themselves from it.

Wollstonecraft's central critique of Burke's defence of property society in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is that his rationality has become separated from human feeling. It is appropriate, then, that the story of her response to the *Reflections*, given in the Advertisement at the start of her *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, tells of writing produced – impelled – by feeling. Wollstonecraft takes a bare twelve lines to offer a

mini-history of her authorship: the 'rousing' of her 'indignation' by the 'devious' and 'sophistical' *Reflections*, her 'effusions of the moment' finding expression on paper, and then in print. William Godwin's account, in his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, similarly describes how, having read *Reflections*, Wollstonecraft 'seized her pen' in 'the full burst of indignation' and 'full of sentiments of liberty', sending early pages to the press even before the work was complete.² In these accounts, Wollstonecraft's authorship is almost an automatic, unwilling event, an inevitable expression of her sentiments. Feeling authorises the writer, in the fullest sense of the verb. Authorship is also, notably, something for which she has little time or space: she has no 'leisure' and no 'patience', for what must thus be a necessarily 'confined' writing. All of this is in stark contrast with the leisured production of Burke's text, which occupied most of the year preceding publication in November 1790, during which he also shared his work-in-progress with a few friends.³

The origin story of Wollstonecraft's first major work is appropriate to the ways in which the *Vindication* would level feeling against property. Enacting (if not announcing) her identity as a woman professional writer, 'the first of a new genus', the Advertisement is also notable for the terms in which Wollstonecraft narrates her entrance into the public sphere of contemporary print culture: into what remained, in the 1790s, of the Enlightenment republic of letters.⁴ Those terms operate fiercely to contest and recast such a public print culture, including its nature, identity, and formation. In Jürgen Habermas's much-referenced account, the eighteenth-century public sphere was characterised by the use of critical reason in public debate and exchange, including print media, by private individuals, whose participation was enabled by the property ownership which, among other things, gave them leisure for such activity.⁵ As Terry Eagleton notes, the public sphere was thus the expressive mode of property society, 'articulable only by those with the social interests which property generates', even if such interests were discussed through a veneer of apparent disinterest.⁶ Although the eighteenth-century public sphere described by Habermas was undergoing significant transformation, even fragmentation, by the end of the century, Eagleton's terms illuminate the ideological nature of Burke's *Reflections*, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, sought to promote, in occluded fashion, the interests of property and property owners: the 'gentlemen' for attending to whose interests Burke was thanked by George III.⁷ Burke's decision to pass his work off in what Wollstonecraft might term the 'specious garb' of a private letter from one gentleman to another only underlines, despite disavowing, his

desire to intervene in the public sphere of critical reason.⁸ For her part, Wollstonecraft asserted that she knew ‘not of any common nature or common relation amongst men but what results from reason’, but her understanding of the ‘reason’ which binds human community was founded not on property, but on ‘affections and passions’: it is only the ‘continuity of those relations that entitles us to the denomination of rational creatures’.⁹ Reflecting on, and reasoning from, our passions and feelings is what differentiates mankind from beasts; this, properly, should provide the foundation for human community. Wollstonecraftian reason, as her Advertisement makes clear, originates in human feeling; the rationality of Burke’s *Reflections*, as the previous chapter showed, turns on, and serves, property. Wollstonecraft’s emphasis, in the *Vindication*’s origin story, on the motive power of feeling to mobilise and authorise her pen, thus constitutes a powerful attack on the very basis of the rationality which, according to Eagleton, was property society’s expressive mode.

The insistence in the *Vindication*’s Advertisement that its author writes despite not having the time to write – despite having no leisure, and no patience – could not signal more clearly their exclusion from a property order of leisured gentlemen who dispassionately exercise reason in the public sphere. Wollstonecraft’s disqualification by gender from that order was even clearer in the work’s second edition, of December 1790, which bore her full name. Explicitly stated as not originating in leisure, her writing must therefore be understood as a form of work, a professional activity in some sense, announcing not disinterestedness but its opposite: the situated interestedness of the author, enacting some form of specialised knowledge and expertise.¹⁰ In line with the Advertisement’s emphasis on the authority of Wollstonecraft’s feelings, one form of expert knowledge asserted in the first few pages of the *Vindication* is knowledge of human nature itself, demonstrated in the character analysis Wollstonecraft performs on Burke. Against the disinterested rationality of the property order, Wollstonecraft asserts knowledge of human character, behaviour, and virtue, and finds Burke to fall short. A fully developed philosophy of human nature – of the ‘man’ of her title – will be deployed in both her *Vindications* to counter a political economic discourse which Wollstonecraft reveals is in hock to property. This chapter shows how Wollstonecraft uses her account of human nature – of the roles of, and relationships between, passion and reason, enthusiasm and imagination – to challenge a Burkean (and Smithian) political economy whose view of human nature is simply to put it to work. The expertise in human nature which at one level informs her personal attack on Burke, at another enables a fully worked out critique of the

culture, social behaviour, personal values, and psychological formations of commercial society: its so-called 'manners'.

Wollstonecraft's decision to open the first *Vindication* with a description of the context from which her writing was produced is thus in keeping with her concern with the manners of commercial society, as newly described and theorised by political economy. So too is her decision to foreground her writing as work, in addition to its emotional labour, in contrast to Burke, who would have the readers of his gentlemanly 'letter' believe that his writing was extrinsic to the world of work, even whilst that writing describes what he asserts are the laws conditioning the labour for others. Engaging as she does with Burke's account of political economy, the discourse of labour, it is only fitting that Wollstonecraft shows how writing participates in the world of work: how, rather than transcending it, writing is itself a form of labour, and one originating in, as well as recording and reflecting, the experience of the passions. As we shall see, in the first *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft wields her expertise in a reason founded on feeling to interrogate the values, culture, and manners of a property order defended by the leisured gentleman. This chapter shows how Wollstonecraft's critique of the contemporary property order in the first *Vindication* attacks property as a source of inequality, oppression, and injustice; it also shows how that analysis is continued in more detailed form in her second *Vindication*, the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which the claims and values of political economic discourse are assessed not least by considering their implications for women. We begin by exploring how *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* responds to one of the most obvious manifestations of the political economy of Burke's *Reflections*: in Wollstonecraft's attack on Burke's veneration of property, and her unpacking of the multiple ills consequent on property's current forms.

A Vindication of the Rights of Men and the 'Sacred Majesty of Property'

Given her concern with property, the architectural metaphor with which Wollstonecraft asserts, early in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, that she will attack the 'foundation', not the 'superstructure', of Burke's opinions is wholly appropriate. We saw in the last chapter that the political economic argument in Burke's *Reflections* defends the existing Whig property regime in Britain, and attacks the French National Assembly's confiscation of church property to back its revolutionary currency, the assignats. But, unlike Catharine Macaulay, whose *Observations on the Reflections*

of the *Right Hon. Edmund Burke* (1790) offered an extended critique of Burke's economic argument, Wollstonecraft discusses neither the question of French national debt nor the establishment of the assignats nor the system of credit in general. Instead, the 'foundation' of her attack on Burke lies in identifying him as 'the champion of property, the adorer of the golden image which power has set up'.¹¹ And if Burke's outrage at the confiscation of church property chimes with his desire to defend property in general, so Wollstonecraft attacks an oppressive culture of property and power embodied by the French church. Where Burke sees French clergy as victims, Wollstonecraft depicts them as 'idle tyrants', indolent occupants of property which has been wrongfully seized in the past. Ecclesiastical property thus manifests the historical 'rapacity' of those who are also corruptly deferential to the nobility and court, whilst enjoying tithes which are a 'corner-stone of despotism'.¹² Wollstonecraft's institutional critique of the church is thus part of a wider assault on the injustices which all too frequently accrue to the existing property order, which underpins her discussion just as thoroughly as its defence motivates Burke's. Property, which sits at the heart of eighteenth-century political economy, and its social, moral, cultural, and psychological consequences, is thus central to Wollstonecraft's thinking from the very first pages of her *Vindication*.

Wollstonecraft's attack on property and its role in determining the 'order of society as it is at present regulated', as she puts it in her second *Vindication*, is wide-ranging and uncompromising.¹³ As it is currently organised, she claims, the property order which Burke defends encapsulates everything which is on the wrong side of humanity, reflection, and reason. In particular, property and its veneration impedes liberty and virtue, and is oppressive and enslaving. Concern for property precedes and eclipses concern for freedom: 'Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty'.¹⁴ The defences offered by the 'champion' of property amount to a 'tyrant's plea', as numerous examples show.¹⁵ Resistance to the abolishing of the slave trade demonstrates how laws protect or 'fence' property against justice. The pressing of working men into naval service means that the 'liberty of an honest mechanic ... is often sacrificed to secure the property of the rich'. And farmers' property and crops are ruined by aristocratic hunters, protected by the game laws: thus 'industry [is] laid waste by unfeeling luxury'.¹⁶ Such arguments, linking property to exploitation and oppression, counter Burke's claim that 'the great masses of property' form 'a natural rampart about the lesser properties in all their gradations'. They also mount a more radical argument than Macaulay, whose observation that all property owners have a shared

interest in the law which secures wealth lacks the sense of searing injustice at the heart of Wollstonecraft's property vision.¹⁷

Wollstonecraft's attack on the Burkean property system also addresses its 'foundation' in the corruption of feeling. As she will explore in the second *Vindication*, a revolution in, and of, feeling is needed to restore society and put it 'on a more enlarged plan', but the social divisions currently enacted by the 'rampart' of property work against this, separating the classes by a 'wall' of envy and burying the 'sympathies of humanity' in 'the servile appellation of master'.¹⁸ Such affective failings are identifiable in Burke himself. His sensibility is 'pampered'; his reason is the 'dupe' of his 'imagination'; and his heart is so 'sophisticated' that it is difficult for him to 'feel like a man': the National Assembly knows more of the human heart than he does.¹⁹ Because Burke cannot participate in the 'common feelings of humanity', he views the poor simply as 'livestock' on an estate; the 'narrow circle' of his benevolence seeks only to perpetuate property in families, and indeed the rich in general step aside to 'avoid the loathsome sight of human misery'.²⁰ Lacking the 'natural feelings of humanity', Burke expounds instead an artificial aesthetico-sentimental order which takes the place of real pleasure and happiness. This is associated with specific property forms, and a preference for 'ideal regions of taste and elegance' such as the rich man's estate, built, as we saw in the previous chapter, to shield himself from seeing the poor.²¹ This image of the enclosed landscape garden, offered at the end of the *Vindication*, picks up Wollstonecraft's depiction, at the beginning of the text, of Burke's writing itself as an 'airy edifice', a pagoda-like 'Chinese erection' or folly.²² Both exhibit taste without purpose and without humanity, 'venerated', like property on its 'pedestal', without regard to moral virtues or political circumstances: aesthetic beauty in a moral vacuum. Had the French constitution been 'new modelled ... by the lovers of elegance and beauty', it would have 'erected a fragile temporary building', instead of the possibility now offered of 'more virtue and happiness'.²³ Against Burke's 'spurious, sensual beauty', offered under the 'specious form of natural feeling', Wollstonecraft asserts an alternative moral order, founded on virtue, reason, and strength, to yield 'rational satisfaction'.²⁴ And as only liberty can provide the conditions in which virtue can flourish, Wollstonecraft returns a discussion often phrased by Burke in aesthetic terms back to a political argument, to reveal what is at stake in the property order which Burke would treat as an 'idol'.

Wollstonecraft traces the effects of the 'demon of property' not only in associated social and political injustices, but in the corruption of morals

and (in the terminology of her time) manners.²⁵ Such corrosive effects are especially evident in families, where children are treated like slaves and ‘demanded due homage’ for the expected transferral of property through marriage or inheritance. Forced and arranged marriages, neglect of younger children and preference for older, a disinclination for early marriage, and hence harm to both male and female morals: all this is governed by the existing property order.²⁶ Wollstonecraft’s early fiction, *Mary* (1788), offered a similar picture: its heroine is neglected until the death of her brother makes her heir to the family property, at which point she is hastily forced into a disastrous marriage arranged by her father ‘over a bottle’, whose chief aim is to nullify a counter-claim to the family estate. That the wedding ceremony takes place at the death-bed of her mother only underlines the ritual sacrifice of female lives to a male property order.²⁷ Property corrupts morals at another level too: closely linked to ‘hereditary honours’, it encourages excessive attention to rank, so that virtue is ‘crushed by the iron hand of property’ and substituted with class aspiration, as with the aping of the upper by the middle classes, who aim ‘to procure respect on account of their property’.²⁸ Here, Wollstonecraft’s sense that the attention given to rank and property has ‘benumbed’ the moral faculties like the ‘torpedo’s touch’ counters the argument of Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which contended that respect given to reputation upholds moral standards in commercial modernity.²⁹ By contrast, Wollstonecraft suggests that ‘an immoderate desire to please ... immerses ... the soul in matter, till it becomes unable to mount on the wing of contemplation’.³⁰ This is why Europe’s much-vaunted ‘civilisation’ – the ‘golden age’ mourned by Burke – is described as ‘partial’: because of the impediment posed to virtue, and hence to human potential and happiness, by hereditary property.

Attacking the ‘foundation’ of Burke’s argument requires not only an assault on property, the ‘idol’ of Burke’s text, but also the mobilising of a counter-discourse. Wollstonecraft enacts this in part through substituting alternative images for the Burkean idolisation of property on its ‘pedestal’, contrasting the fixity of idols with redistributive dissolution, and the solidity of property with more abstract and immaterial totems: labour, reason, effort, and mind.³¹ Something of this is signalled in Wollstonecraft’s revisiting of the metaphor of channels which runs through political economic writing from Adam Smith onwards, to recast the containment of wealth in the ‘narrow channels’ of church property into an image of natural redistribution: ‘Can posterity be injured by individuals losing the chance of obtaining great wealth, without meriting it, by its being diverted from a narrow channel, and disembogued into the sea that affords clouds to water

all the land?'. Must we 'preserve the sacred majesty of Property inviolate'?³² The 'mighty revolution in property' which Burke decries so vehemently is thus a natural dissolution; the National Assembly's appropriation of church property is simply a climactic 'disemboguing', which will redistribute wealth to all, just as clouds produce rain. A similar move beyond the negative confinement of physical property to something more abstract and transcendent appears in Wollstonecraft's depiction of the need for exercise of a human mind which too often 'gladly lets the spirit lie quiet in its gross tenement'; it is better improved through 'restless enquiries that hover on the boundary, or stretch over the dark abyss of uncertainty'. Such 'lively conjectures are the breezes that preserve the still lake from stagnating'.³³ Thought, the sign of our 'natural immortality' and 'the faint type of an immaterial energy', needs stimulation, otherwise, 'no longer bounding it knows not where, [it] is confined to the tenement'.³⁴ Property here is restricting and enervating, and opposed by more mobile and effortful, if immaterial and inchoate impulses. Such passages look back to the exhortative and enthusiastic 'effusions' of genius in *Mary*, and forward to the more explicit exposition of the virtues of self-exertion and self-improvement of the second *Vindication*. They also resist the confinement of value to the limits of property, as political economic discourse would have it, as well as disinterring and challenging an association of property with idleness and moral vacuity embedded deeply in political economic thought.

Property and Idleness in Political Economy

Wollstonecraft's critique of an aestheticised, feminised, and sexualised idleness in the eighteenth-century gender system – present both in her attack on Burke's idolisation of the passive, idle female body in *Reflections*, and in her second *Vindication*'s denouncement of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's depiction of female sexual passivity in his novel *Emile* (1762) – is well recognised by critics.³⁵ Sexualised notions of female indolence and languor were deeply embedded in eighteenth-century cultural discourse, including in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and The Beautiful* (1757). Wollstonecraft's depiction of such scenes as 'libertine' encapsulated her accusation of their political nihilism: the supposed natural weakness of the female body seemingly inevitably invited male predation, beyond any possibility of the social compact of consent.³⁶ Wollstonecraft's concern with idleness in a political economic context is much less recognised, however. In political economic thought, the supposedly originary idleness in human nature presents a foundational

problem, concerned as it is with theorising the motivation for human effort and labour. Political economy was also troubled by the instance of the rentier or landlord, who lived idly, without working, and profiting from the labour of others. Wollstonecraft identified idleness as the pre-eminent moral failing of late eighteenth-century commercial society, and countered this by elaborating a moral economy of effort in the connected spheres of mind, manners, and morals, a valoration of individual exertion to counter the dangerous lassitude encouraged by the contemporary property system.³⁷

We saw in the previous chapter how idleness unexpectedly accompanies Burke's defence of landed property in his assertion that the 'idleness' of the landed proprietor is 'itself the spring of labour; this repose the spur to industry'.³⁸ Although the context of Burke's remark makes clear that he is referring to surplus product or profit, this is presented as a characteristic or attribute of the proprietor himself, as the action (or inaction) of idleness and 'repose' which supposedly causes the labour of others. Burke's rhetoric collapses the difference between profit and proprietor, personalising a political economic discourse which otherwise tends to the abstract and reified. It also links the indolence of the proprietor and the labour of the worker in relations of cause and effect which offers a narrative of economic productivity seemingly as natural and inevitable as Rousseau's sexual scene of female passivity and male predation. Burke's naturalised economic narrative reinscribes on the economic front the familiar sexual binaries of passivity and activity, albeit at the expense of hinting at a feminine lassitude in the proprietor.

Burke's placement of idleness at the heart of economic production, as the supposed 'spring of labour', stems from his desire to defend landed property. The provocative oddness of his claim can be read as a mark of the contortions into which he is led in his attempt to reconcile the defence of landed property with an economic 'natural course of things' based on the production and circulation of mobile goods. But it is also symptomatic of the way in which the problem of idleness recurs within political economic thought itself. Burke's defence of the idle proprietor runs very close to David Hume's attack on the uselessness and inactivity of those living on public stock, in his 1752 essay denouncing the British system of public credit. Those who live on the profits of their stock, without any need to work, without any connection to society, and living in any part of the globe are depicted as sinking into 'the lethargy of a stupid and pampered luxury, without spirit, ambition or enjoyment'.³⁹ Idle, without social identity or responsibility, they undermine the natural bonds and activities which hold

the state together, and thus encapsulate Hume's sense of the danger posed to the nation by public credit. Burke himself later weaponised idleness in an attack on the Duke of Bedford in his *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796), in which he accrued to himself a language of labour and effort in contrast with the aristocratic idleness imputed to the Duke. The peculiar mobility of idleness in Burkean discourse, where it is deployed both defensively and pejoratively, illustrates how Burke is 'caught in a vise' (*sic*) between loyalty to aristocratic rank and the desire to see his own labour recognised and rewarded; it illuminates too the strains placed on a Whig alliance of aristocratic landed property and commercial society, with growing recognition that commercial society was outgrowing the aristocratic context which had given it birth.⁴⁰ Such a perception lies behind the Burkean lament in *Reflections* at what he saw as a 'revolution in manners' – a phrase which Wollstonecraft picks up and repurposes in her second *Vindication*.

That idleness, as a supposed fundamental characteristic of human nature, posed a problem which political economy sought to resolve becomes clear if we backtrack briefly to the origins of political economic discourse in the Scottish science of man of the first half of the eighteenth century. This attempt to emulate the Newtonian science of nature through a philosophical investigation of human nature included investigations into the psychology of motivation. Thus, Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* rejected the received philosophical wisdom that '[e]very rational creature ... regulate[s] his actions by reason' and asserted that 'reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will', opening the field to an exploration of the myriad ways in which passions inform and motivate human behaviour.⁴¹ For a political economy which understands wealth as produced by labour, idleness and inactivity could not be countenanced: Hume's essay, 'The Stoic', argued that man must not allow his 'noble faculties to lie lethargic or idle', but is urged 'by necessity, to employ, on every emergence his utmost *art* and *industry*'.⁴² Exactly how such a 'necessary' compulsion is impelled by the passions was theorised by Smith who, in a domestic tale of voluntary labour in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, suggested that a desire for 'conveniency' motivates effort in the present for benefits in the future:

When a person comes into his chamber, and finds the chairs all standing in the middle of the room, he is angry with his servant, and rather than see them continue in that disorder, perhaps takes the trouble himself to set them all in their places with their backs to the wall. The whole propriety of this new situation arises from its superior conveniency in leaving the floor free and disengaged. To attain this conveniency he voluntarily puts himself to more trouble than all he could have suffered from the want of it; since

nothing was more easy, than to have set himself down upon one of them, which is probably what he does when his labour is over. What he wanted therefore, it seems, was not so much this conveniency, as that arrangement of things which promotes it. Yet it is this conveniency which ultimately recommends that arrangement, and bestows upon it the whole of its propriety and beauty.⁴³

Smith's story about voluntary labour – a labour which is 'more trouble' than all we might suffer from 'the want of it' – demonstrates a thesis about the relationship between effort, convenience, and beauty which is capable of banishing the spectre of human idleness. Smith's chairs solve political economy's need to motivate a potentially idle humanity by positing a desire for 'convenience', a quality which resonates especially strongly with us, Smith suggests, because, more than simply being useful, it is beautiful. A similar appreciation of the conveniences presented by all manner of consumer objects – from watches to 'trinkets', 'toys', and 'baubles' – produces a culture of property with which we are essentially at one: even to the extent of suffering the inconveniences (such as the labour of having to tidy our furniture) which possession might entail.⁴⁴ The culture of property which the labour of commercial society produces and sustains – the world of goods sustained by the productive labour and the 'wheel of circulation' later extolled by Burke as the 'natural course of things' – is thus, in this story, an extension of our desire for convenience, a meeting through economic productivity of humanity's capacity to be connoisseurs. Later, in *Wealth of Nations*, Smith offered a broader version of this motivational principle, identifying a 'constant desire for self-betterment' as compelling labour.⁴⁵ Both accounts, however, illuminate how a narrative of motivation which is strong enough to overcome the pleasures of idleness is fundamental to political economic discourse.

The care with which Smith theorises the motivational passions which override idleness and underpin economic activity only underlines the oddness of Burke's attempt to reconcile the idleness of the landed proprietor with an otherwise mobile economy of productive labour. Wollstonecraft's attack on the late eighteenth-century property order turns all this on its head, however, by setting out a new relationship between property and idleness, and by critiquing the consequences for women of society founded on property. For Wollstonecraft, property occludes activity, industry, and virtue; idleness and indolence are not passive states which commercial modernity has overcome, but consequences of its economic and social organisation. And the argument is turned in women's direction, too, as we shall see, in Wollstonecraft's assertion that their desire to possess the

‘property’ of beauty draws them into a voluptuous, exotic world, where the business of pleasure replaces the industry of virtue.

A Vindication of the Nature of ‘Man’: Labour, Effort, Imagination

In identifying idleness as the fatal flaw in the social and moral order produced by the economic structures of her time, Wollstonecraft challenged contemporary political economic thought, and especially its account of economic value yoked to productive labour. In mounting such an attack on the contemporary property order, she writes large a moral anxiety about a political economy founded on property ownership which had accompanied the theorisation of commercial society from the first half of the eighteenth century. In Wollstonecraft, Hume’s worries about the morally and socially corrosive nature of individuals living on the profits of public credit are generalised: the entire system of ‘riches and hereditary honours’ which is founded not merely on credit, but on property, is deemed socially, politically, and morally corrupt.⁴⁶ This fundamental element of Wollstonecraftian critique occurs repeatedly and in many forms through the pages of both *Vindications*. It is present, for instance, in her observation that the House of Commons is full of men of rank but not merit; the idleness of rank means that they lack the talents, virtue, and self-knowledge which are only ‘unfolded by industry’.⁴⁷ The social effects of idleness are also thoroughly traced in her attention to manners in the second *Vindication*, where she notes how the idleness enabled by property plays itself out in sexualised powerplay in personal relations and in families: ‘idleness has produced a mixture of gallantry and despotism into society’, and men are ‘slaves’ of their mistresses whilst they ‘tyrannize over their ‘sisters, wives and daughters’.⁴⁸ The resonant picture of Mary’s mother, in Wollstonecraft’s pre-*Vindications* novel *Mary*, who sits idle on a sofa, a ‘mere machine’, gradually declining to death, crystallises the corrosive effects of idleness on women. Wollstonecraft returns to this image in her account of a ‘weak woman of fashion’ in the second *Vindication*, and it is difficult not to see her also informing the depiction of another indolent female perennial sofa-dweller and moral bystander, Lady Bertram in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), that later fictional exploration of the moral vacuity of property owners, their progeny, and their system of manners.⁴⁹ As we will see, it is precisely because women encapsulate the problem of idleness induced by the existing property system that they are so well positioned, in Wollstonecraft’s eyes, to carry out the ‘revolution in manners’ to which she urges them.

The opposite of idleness, in both Wollstonecraft's *Vindications*, is virtue, associated with reason, duty, and the struggle of self-realisation. Talents, virtue, and knowledge are 'unfolded by industry', not inherited, as the Burkean property system would imply.⁵⁰ In a claim which chimes with Smithian political economy's founding of value on labour, and which clarifies that her attack on property is specifically on hereditary property and its associated rank and wealth, Wollstonecraft asserts that property in labour is the only property which 'nature' recognises: '[t]he only security of property that nature authorizes ... is, the right a man has to enjoy the acquisitions which his talents and industry have acquired'.⁵¹ A nation or polity organised on such meritocratic principles, she suggests, would value ambition, not gaming, and love, not gallantry. Although she doesn't make the point, the principle of property in labour would have significant ramifications for women if, for instance, recognition of maternal labour, including breastfeeding, gave mothers legal ownership of their children; it would thus counter the existing legal right of fathers to remove children from their mothers, as Venables does in *The Wrongs of Woman*. The valuation of labour and the virtues which follow from it are also explicit in Wollstonecraft's remark that the poor don't need alms but 'employments calculated to give them habits of virtue' and her attack on the 'brown waste' of unused land when men want 'work'.⁵²

Effort is valued by Wollstonecraft not because it generates wealth, but for its moral and social effects. In her motivational story, the 'springs which govern activity' place labour and effort at the heart of a moral economy of exertion, and her account of human nature is consistently preoccupied with its capacity for virtue, and the larger political and social conditions in which virtue might flourish.⁵³ For Burke, labour is hardly appealing: 'pestiferous' and 'unwholesome', it is a necessary burden carried out by the miserable majority in order to turn the 'great wheel of circulation'; its only value is economic, gained at the cost of human happiness and lives.⁵⁴ The mental and moral effort to which Wollstonecraft repeatedly exhorts her readers recasts labour in a different direction, to become an on-going effort to develop reason, knowledge, and virtue, and thus to contribute both to the improvement of the individual, and more broadly to the progress of civilisation itself. Countering Burke's 'natural course of things' thus necessitates resisting the confining of effort to a political economic category. Against a Burkean depiction of labour as abject and depersonalised, valued only for its economic effects, Wollstonecraft mobilises an expansive and wide-ranging exhortation of the activity of self-improvement, whose effects will range across the personal and social, moral, and political spheres.

Wollstonecraft's exposition of the need for, and nature of, this effort brings with it an account of her sense of the proper make-up of human nature, and the relations of its different capacities for feeling, reason, and imagination: part of an unapologetically 'metaphysical enquiry' that she ironically fears might 'derange' Burke's 'nervous system'.⁵⁵ It is a strategy which brings back into the heart of political philosophical discourse the human identity and personhood which is expunged or flattened in economic writing, where the reduction of 'labour' to an abstraction also reduces individuals to mere performers of operations, or labour functionaries. The labour or energy which Wollstonecraft values above all else is the immaterial activity of reason, which impels humankind beyond supine states of stasis and pleasure. Here, Wollstonecraft's argument about human nature is very different from the theories of labour motivation offered by Hume and Smith. Our very constitution, she asserts, once the 'first law' of self-preservation has been met, impels us beyond mere pleasure, to the 'exercise of our faculties' as 'the great end'. Our passions are 'necessary auxiliaries' of 'reason': they provide the motivating 'impulse', and enable us to gain 'not only ... many ideas, but a habit of thinking'.⁵⁶ Without such impulses from our passions, thought, which is 'the faint type of an immaterial energy', is 'confined to the tenement'.⁵⁷ Property figures here as material constraint, as it does when Wollstonecraft reflects on the tendency of the human mind to too readily 'take opinions on trust' and 'gladly let the spirit lie quiet in its gross tenement'.⁵⁸ In contrast, mind is imaged in almost Biblical terms as a spirit hovering over the water when Wollstonecraft asserts that 'the most improving exercise of the mind ... is the restless enquiries that hover on the boundary, or stretch over the dark abyss of uncertainty'.⁵⁹ Such rhetoric takes flight as Wollstonecraft asserts that her 'passions pursue objects that the imagination enlarges, till they become only a sublime idea that shrinks from the enquiry of sense, and mocks the experimental philosophers who would confine this spiritual phlogiston in their material crucibles'.⁶⁰ In such rhapsodic passages, rationality gives way to something transcendent, guided by the imagination to higher realms of perception, to grasp truths or insights akin to divine fire. Such a sublime endpoint to the efforts of passion to mobilise body and mind is in stark contrast to the submission of human nature to the world of work in political economic accounts of the 'springs of action'.

There is a danger, in these images, that mental effort disappears into the intangible or uncertain – the 'boundary', uncertainty's 'dark abyss', the inarticulate 'sublime idea' – towards which it is strongly compelled. Imagination, indeed, has a double-edged presence in the *Vindication*,

where it is as just as likely to be object of attack – as in the denigration of Burke’s ‘lively imagination’, the dangers of the ‘vagaries of imagination’, or the warning that a ‘lively imagination is ever in danger of being betrayed into error by favourite opinions’ – as it is to accompany reason.⁶¹ It is therefore all the more important that, rather than being approached as separate functions, attention is paid to the correct relation which should exist between the elements of the human person: passion, reason, imagination.⁶² Here, the proper combination is all. Thus, in the ‘feelings of humanity’ which distinguish ‘active exertions of virtue’ from ‘vague declamation of sensibility’, reason is presented as intimately connected with feeling, as deepening emotion and producing virtue.⁶³ Elsewhere, a sexual metaphor presents the ‘feelings of the heart’ as the ‘sun of life’ which impregnates an otherwise passive reason to create virtue.⁶⁴ Reason and reflection should thus motivate and accompany the ‘auxiliary’ of feeling, preventing against the dual dangers of vacuous and untested feeling, or unfeeling reason. The same balance is expressed in Wollstonecraft’s characteristically wide-ranging style, which oscillates between sharp political critique and invective, and more effusive passages. Thus, a paean to the ‘sublime ideas’ pursued by the imagination follows quickly in the wake of an assertion that her ‘fancy’ never created ‘a heaven on earth’, in the same paragraph as the straight-forward assertion of the need to recognise the ‘*native* unalienable rights of men’.⁶⁵ The mixed economy of the human person, in which reason is informed by feeling and vice versa, is thus exemplified in the varied and flexible style of Wollstonecraft’s writing.

The ‘nervous exertions of morality’ should properly be the output of this exertive human economy, but such efforts need to be made in a context where virtue is rewarded: that is, where merit, not rank, is recognised, a ‘glorious change’ which liberty might produce.⁶⁶ Such larger political questions are the context of Wollstonecraft’s philosophy of human nature, and connect her work to the ongoing radical demand for liberty which, as we saw in the previous chapter, she shares with Richard Price, Catharine Macaulay, and others. Wollstonecraft’s attention to the economy of the human person thus connects a radical tradition calling for political liberty with the analysis of human nature and individual subjectivity, whilst anticipating the further pursuit of liberty through the psychologised aesthetics of Romanticism. Liberty, the periodic rallying call of the *Vindication*, emerges as the definition of a context where human efforts towards virtue might flourish. It is illustrative of quite how closely integrated these different elements of Wollstonecraft’s thinking are, that her account of thought as the ‘faint type of an immaterial energy’ occurs as part of an argument

attacking the practice of pressing men into naval service.⁶⁷ These apparently digressive trains of argument can make Wollstonecraft's text at times difficult to follow, but such moves show her repeatedly interrogating the claims of Burke's text and putting them through the machine of her own thinking. Wollstonecraft's account of human nature, and its valoration of mental and moral labour and effort, thus founds a politics which yokes together reason, improvement, and liberty to resist political economy's depredation of the human: her vindication of 'Rights' is firmly grounded on a developed theory of 'Man'. As the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* will assert, society must be founded on the 'nature of man', not on prejudices; if political economy was similarly to be founded on the 'nature of man', Wollstonecraft suggests that it too should begin with knowledge of the human heart: with the motivation and effort which give virtue.⁶⁸

Wollstonecraft's philosophy of human nature, and especially her mobilisation of an immaterial and transcendent imagination, is part of a fundamental challenge to Burkean discourse, which includes but reaches beyond a mere moral critique of political economy. In Wollstonecraft, the operation of mind, galvanised by feeling, is an elevated activity, an expression of the best of humanity. In giving a central role (alongside reason and feeling) to the imagination, Wollstonecraft celebrates a faculty which Burke feared as fundamentally at odds with the property order: an independent power that frees the self from the subject relations which for Burke were necessary to society's natural order. Alongside the moral exertions of our other faculties, Wollstonecraft elevates and mobilises the imagination against the property order: through its means, independent thought and subjectivity become capable of challenging the social bonds, ranks, and identities which for a thinker like Burke were part of a society naturally organised around property. Burke's fears, expressed in the *Reflections* and beyond, of 'electrick communication', of the supposed enthusiasm of men of letters, and of what Pocock terms 'decivilized intellect', are usually understood to refer to his opposition to a reformist Enlightenment culture of thought: the dangerous operation of mind separated from the protective context of pre-existing social structures.⁶⁹ Pocock's analysis of Burke's *Reflections* makes clear that Burke's fear of enthusiasm is related too to Hume's fear of credit and its consequent idleness, discussed above. Where Hume warned that idle proprietors were vulnerable to enthusiasm, so too are men of letters, in Burke's eyes: both are separated from the 'natural relations' and social bonds which property upholds. For Burke, upholding the social order allied to political economy entails a mental discipline, which Wollstonecraftian imagination wilfully transgresses, rejecting the

subjection of mind to property relations. As her final work will explore, the imagination offers the possibility of alternative forms of social relation: thus, *The Wrongs of Woman* moves from early, Burkean fears of the enthusiastic mind 'left alone with its own creations' (an indictment of the fate of the female mind in property society) to the new social unit of Maria and Jemima, which dispenses with both men and property, and which is formed through imaginative sympathy.⁷⁰ If the problem remained of how such alternative social forms might be actualised, the imagination is nevertheless revealed as opposed to the property forms of commercial society, its liberation the elevation of an enthusiastic principle or power which commercial society long feared as a central threat.

Vindication of the Rights of Woman as Political Economy: Manners in Commercial Modernity

It is unusual in Wollstonecraft commentary for her two *Vindications* to be treated as linked.⁷¹ The first page of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* describes the work as a 'treatise on female rights and manners', and it is this focus on 'manners' (a broad analytical category which denotes behavioural forms, customs, social organisation and lifestyle) which enables Wollstonecraft to extend and develop in the second *Vindication* the critique of the property order offered in the first.⁷² Manners vocabulary makes an occasional appearance in the *Vindication of the Rights of Men*: for instance, in the claim that the 'partial' development of European civilization has refined 'manners at the expense of morals'.⁷³ But manners come centre stage in the second *Vindication*, including in the famous call, made a number of times, for a 'revolution in manners', which, in a rare typographical indulgence for Wollstonecraft, is placed in capitals in the final chapter.⁷⁴

In offering a manners analysis, Wollstonecraft worked in the tradition of Scottish conjectural history: in its historical sociological perspective, social customs, including those pertaining to gender, are understood to vary according to different stages of economic development.⁷⁵ Conjectural history also understood the status and treatment of women to be indicative of the state of manners in any historical period. But where other historians measured the advance of manners by improvements in the social status and condition of women, Wollstonecraft's extended account of the 'miserable' state of the female sex is an indictment of both the reality and the self-image of the commercial age. It made clear the consequences for women of a hereditary property order whose deleterious effects on human

nature, reason, and virtue were set out in her earlier work.⁷⁶ With women at the centre of her analysis, Wollstonecraft could offer a detailed account of the cultural and psychological formation of gender in the 'present order of property', linking gender strongly to existing economic structures and conditions.⁷⁷ The second *Vindication's* language of manners thus shows how these two works are successive stages of an ongoing analysis, with the second *Vindication* developing the earlier text's critique of property into a fully worked out gender critique of the manners of the late eighteenth-century property order.

The progress from the first to the second *Vindication* also involves a call to intervene in the conditions of the historical present which both works analyse. If the first *Vindication* sees idleness as a consequence of property, the second seeks to turn manners *against* property, a revolution whose necessity is determined precisely by the effects of the property order on manners. This turning of manners against the property order of commercial society marks Wollstonecraft's departure from conjectural history, for in such a revolution, manners would no longer be the unforeseen and cumulative effect of economic change and social organisation but rather would seek to further extend the progress of society as described by the Scottish historians, beyond an age defined by commerce. This is to use manners as a lever to change historical process, and to reform the 'partial' civilisation of the commercial age. Wollstonecraft's 'revolution' would thus mark the point at which humankind was not determined by the unfolding of stadial history but instead stage a deliberate intervention in the material and psychological conditions of their lives. 'Self-creation' may appear a strong word for this process, but it is justified by some of the more exhortative passages of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Placed at the forefront of Wollstonecraft's manners analysis as they are, women are addressed as an important group of change-makers, a revolutionary vanguard, through whom individual moral improvement and social change might be brought about, to transform society under the banner of reason and virtue. Wollstonecraft's 'revolution' is thus an act of faith in the power of personal self-reform, and an experiment in how the cultivation of virtue by individuals might benefit the larger human community as a whole.⁷⁸

Attending to Wollstonecraft's manners analysis also makes it possible to see how the second *Vindication* is not merely a treatise on female education (as it has often been read) but also as a work of political economy, as it was categorised by the *Analytical Review*.⁷⁹ Late eighteenth-century political economy was an outworking of conjectural history, which incorporated historical, sociological, and psychological analysis in its account of

the last of stadial history's four stages of social and economic development, the modern age of commerce. If Wollstonecraft's manners revolution was a call to intervene in the historical processes shaping the present, it was by the same token an attempt to resist the historical forces theorised by and underpinning political economy itself. If the determining 'springs of action' for Smith and others were a love of convenience, or a desire for self-betterment strong enough to motivate work, a 'revolution in manners' looks to manners as a counter to the expression of such forces informing the unfolding of human history, to offer a moral and social revolution against the forces of history themselves. And if the active subject theorised by political economy is male, women are the revolutionary agents of Wollstonecraft's manners revolution. The 'revolution in manners' is thus a rallying call for women to save commercial society from itself, and to save themselves from it.

Wollstonecraft's call for a manners revolution also marks her difference from commentators for whom a 'softening' or 'polishing' of manners provided the best means of accommodating virtue in a commercial society founded on the pursuit of wealth.⁸⁰ Bernard Mandeville's notorious provocation in *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) had suggested that 'private vice is public benefit', and Montesquieu's tale of the Troglodytes in his *Persian Letters* (1721) – to which we return in Chapter 5 – narrated the rise of commercial society, motivated by greed and desire for wealth, as involving an irrecoverable abandonment of an earlier virtuous pastoral existence. The 'sociological irony' of polite manners advocated by Hume and others was rejected by Wollstonecraft, in frequent denunciations of the separation of morals and manners, and calls for their urgent realignment.⁸¹ More than once, the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* asserts that private virtue can and must be generalised to generate public virtue: a rejection of the Mandevillean paradox of private vice-public virtue, just as her assertion that rational virtue must be the basis for individual action rejects the Smithian motivational principle of the pursuit of self-betterment.⁸² In an essay 'Against Inconsistency in Our Expectations' which Wollstonecraft described as 'excellent', the writer and poet Anna Letitia Barbauld describes a choice between wealth or virtue: choose one or the other for your son, she advises, follow its path, but don't switch between them.⁸³ Wollstonecraft's praise for Barbauld's words suggests that she too believed that attempts to reconcile wealth and virtue through a show of fashionable, polite manners constituted a superficial skating over of a fundamental contradiction at the very foundation of her age.

Wollstonecraft's vehement linking of property with idleness and corruption in the first *Vindication* is the very antithesis of the argument

that commercial society refines and polishes manners. As in her first *Vindication*, her argument in the second deploys a philosophical analysis of human nature, this time historically embedded to highlight the role of the passions as forces shaping the unfolding of human history. The second *Vindication*'s important opening chapter offers a condensed reading of the formation of European society through this lens, demonstrating her intellectual debt to conjectural history, but also showing how and where she differs from the story about the passions on which political economy is founded. By attending to the differences between the story that Wollstonecraft tells about the passions and their relation to reason and action (the 'springs of action'), and a Smithian narrative of the individual's affective motivation, we can see how her critique of political economy rests on an assertion that it is fundamentally at odds with 'the nature of man' on which society should be built.⁸⁴

Wealth and the Passions in Commercial Society: Wollstonecraft versus Smith

Wollstonecraft's most famous work, the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, opens with a historical narrative of European civilisation from 'savagery' to 'monarchical government', announcing her account of 'woman' as specifically describing women in the current, commercial age. The 'wrongs' of contemporary women are thus from the outset understood through the conditions of the commercial age they inhabit. Wollstonecraft's mini-history bears comparison with the condensed history of Europe offered in book three of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, where the rise of commerce is presented as a pivotal event in the formation of the modern age, breaking the hold of aristocratic power and contributing to the growth of knowledge. Wollstonecraft follows Smith's account to show commerce's role, alongside 'reason' and 'literature', in challenging the oppressive and corrupt power of kings.⁸⁵ But for Wollstonecraft, it is the passions which are ultimately the driving historical forces, and wealth, with its strong appeal to the passions, corrupts: her version of the 'wealth and virtue' problem discussed above. If the age of commerce is also the age of reason, the struggle between mind and passion which Wollstonecraft will suggest is constitutive of human nature is also historically embedded, with Janus-faced commerce linked to both reason and enlightenment on the one hand, and wealth and tyranny on the other. The opening of the mind associated with commercial society is thus in conflict with the passions drawn to the wealth which also accompanies it. The same historical forces are explored

in more detail in Wollstonecraft's next work, and her only extended work of history, her *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794), but their outlines are evident here at the outset of her second *Vindication*.

The problem of wealth – a multi-faceted historical, political, and moral problem – thus dominates the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It corrupts and perverts human nature, shown especially in Wollstonecraft's depiction of women, and it impedes the growth of the affections and sentiments on which a reformed civilisation might be built: 'vices and follies ... all proceed from a feculent stream of wealth that has muddied the pure rills of natural affection'.⁸⁶ As with her history of Europe, Wollstonecraft's account of the problem of wealth draws in part from Smith, but she adapts and extends his analysis. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith analyses the social effects of wealth by describing the power derived by kings from the visual display of their status. Wollstonecraft generalises this to depict the 'mass' in modern society craving the attention which wealth would give. Riches, alongside rank, 'dazzle' and bestow a 'pre-eminence' which many crave, eclipsing a proper concern with virtue.⁸⁷ Wealth and rank also provide a smoke screen behind which character hides, so that it becomes impossible for reputation to be founded on virtue: the 'drapery of situation hides the man, and makes him stalk in masquerade, dragging from one scene of dissipation to another the nerveless limbs that hang with stupid listlessness, and rolling round the vacant eye, which plainly tell us that there is no mind at home'.⁸⁸ This picture of a social world in hoc to a culture of display also speaks to the situation of women, for whom beauty is a rare and double-edged source of power, and who might also exploit – or be ruined by – reputation's shifting sands.

For Smith, social spectatorship (and the sense of being looked at by others) leads to the development of moral judgement; for him, it was possible for a virtuous reputation to be sustained and recognised in the eyes of social spectators. But Wollstonecraft's sense of the pervasive corruption of the artifice and 'masquerade' of the social world makes such an accommodation of virtue amidst the 'manners' of commercial modernity impossible. O'Brien has rightly observed that Wollstonecraft's attack on the 'partial' nature of contemporary European civilisation took aim at a culture of manners which encouraged individuals to internalise a 'socially ascribed' identity defined by their role or rank, at the expense of their moral identity.⁸⁹ For Wollstonecraft, this was too flimsy an account of virtue, and the notion of reputation, in particular, operated in especially insidious ways for women, too easily identified with the question of sexual 'virtue'. Her condemnation

of the 'misery and disorder' of a theatrical society of empty display, with its 'jostling' of 'artificial fools', at times recalls Rousseau's rejection of modern society, but she has little time for Rousseau's response – a retreat to solitude – which is dispatched swiftly and thoroughly in the *Vindication's* first chapter.⁹⁰ Rather, if our feelings respond to wealth and rank in a way which skews reputation and eclipses the possibility of virtue, we need to reform those feelings in order to then reform the 'partial' civilisation of modernity. The thorough social reform of the commercial age thus addresses the passions which are at its foundation.⁹¹

Wollstonecraft's concern with what she calls the 'mechanism' of our passions, the 'system of government which prevails in the moral world', is signalled in the image of the watchmaker used in a footnote to the first chapter of the *Vindication*: long associated with questions of the design and purpose of human nature.⁹² For Wollstonecraft, the very existence of our feelings suggests they have a purpose: they were 'set in motion to improve our nature, of which they make a part, and render us capable of enjoying a more godlike portion of happiness'. The 'gracious fountain of life' gave us 'passions, and the power of reflecting' not to 'imbitter (sic) our days' but to lead us to happiness.⁹³ This is the moral lesson of the *Vindication*: that reflecting on our passions, and improving our nature will enable us to progress from self-love to sublime divine love, and thus attain, so far as is possible in this world, the 'happiness' which appears intermittently as a goal throughout the second *Vindication* (far more so than in the first). We must be careful, however, not to understand the 'happiness' at which we must aim, as merely what might be attained through 'moderation' and 'prudence', as if 'men were only born to form a circle of life and death'.⁹⁴ Rather, it is the 'natural course of things' to realise in old age, 'when an unwelcome knowledge of life produces almost a satiety of life', that (echoing Ecclesiasticus) 'all that is done under the sun is vanity': the 'awful close of the drama' draws near, with the imminent end of the 'first stage of existence'.⁹⁵ Whether consciously or not, Wollstonecraft echoes both Smith and Burke with her evocation of a 'natural course of things', a phrase used by both (as we saw in the previous chapter) to set out, although in significantly different ways, a 'natural course' defined by the productive activity of human labour. Wollstonecraft by contrast understands the 'natural course of things' to be the insights of old age into the vanity of life, including the error of understanding life's purpose as limited to the 'first stage of existence'. Nature, revealed by the wisdom of age, points us beyond the narrow 'circle of life and death' towards the 'immortality of the soul': the context in which our urgings towards a 'godlike portion of happiness' should be understood.

Smith too had attended to the end of life as a moment of retrospection in his own account of the workings of human nature. The story of the ‘poor man’s son’ in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* deploys the insights of age to explain the operation of our passions, and the actions which they ‘set in motion’. But Smith’s version of this is both more extended and more tragic than Wollstonecraft’s. ‘[V]isited with ambition’ by heaven ‘in its anger’, the poor man’s son devotes his life to unrelenting labour in an attempt to attain the ‘conveniences’ which he sees enjoyed by the rich – the carriages, the accommodation, the servants – which he mistakenly thinks will bestow happiness. In pursuit of them, he ‘sacrifices’ throughout his life the ‘real tranquillity’ which ‘is at all times in his power’. If, ‘in the extremity of old age’, he at last attains them, he finds them ‘in no respect preferable to that humble security and contentment’ which he had abandoned in their pursuit. Anticipating Wollstonecraft’s sense of age as giving insight into life’s vanities, but phrasing such insights rather more starkly, the poor man’s son in old age realises that ‘wealth and greatness are mere trinkets of frivolous utility, no more adapted for procuring ease of body or tranquillity of mind than the tweezer-cases of the lover of toys’. Power and riches now appear ‘immense fabrics, which it requires the labour of a life to raise’ which ‘keep off the summer shower, not the winter storm’ and which yet leave their possessor ‘as much, and sometimes more exposed than before to anxiety, to fear, and to sorrow; to diseases, to danger, and to death’.⁹⁶

The ‘natural course’ related in this sorry tale speaks, as in Wollstonecraft, to the misguided nature of worldly ambition; it points bracingly to the erroneous perception that ‘power and riches’ deliver happiness. Smith’s fable echoes the description of the ‘ever-busy civilised man’ who ‘sweats, scurries about ... [and] toils until death’, embodying the tragedy of futile modern existence, in the conclusion of Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), but for Smith, this is not the end of the story.⁹⁷ Rather, he reflects that ‘it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner’, for whilst it is a ‘deception’ to think that ‘the pleasures of wealth and greatness’ would be worth ‘all the toil and anxiety which we are so apt to bestow’ on them, this nevertheless ‘rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind’. This motivating ‘deception’ of the passions, indeed, tills the ground, builds houses, and founds cities, and sustains ‘all the sciences and arts, which ennoble and embellish human life’.⁹⁸ If in Burke’s ‘natural course’, there is a ‘necessary submission’ to the ‘wheel of circulation’, in Smith that ‘submission’ is hard-wired into our nature by our passions: in a fundamental, even constitutive self-deception of ‘nature’, we are all the poor man’s son, visited with ambition by heaven’s

anger. Whilst this is clearly tragic at the level of the individual, there are evidently significant economic and civilizational benefits. To the 'ironic' eye of the philosopher, able to see things play themselves out, this is an acceptable payoff. If Hume's 'sociological irony' accommodates morals to the manners of the commercial age, here is an 'economic' version of that irony: never mind the misery, look at the roads. It is that extra turn of the argument, the spinning of misery into the 'embellishments' of human life, that Wollstonecraft refuses.

If Smith looks beyond the old man's body, 'wasted with toil and diseases', to the 'deception' which 'keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind', Wollstonecraft insists instead on the 'unheard of misery' caused, for instance, by the pursuit of a cardinal's rank.⁹⁹ She resists a narrative of the 'springs of action' which has the tragic deception of human nature at the heart of its 'natural course of things'. If, for Smith, the passions produce as their unintended consequence the machinery or fabric of convenience writ large in human civilisation, happiness has been lost somewhere along the way, doubly displaced both by its deferral by labour, and the mistake or 'deception' that the objects or arrangements which deliver 'convenience' will provide pleasure or happiness. Wollstonecraft differs fundamentally from Smith both on the nature of the passions and the object of happiness. The feelings which in Smith compel us towards convenience with a seemingly inevitable determination are instead for Wollstonecraft part of God's plan for us to struggle with and improve ourselves; happiness is achieved not through possessions or convenience, but through improving our nature, and performing our duties.¹⁰⁰ This is why a strong claim about reforming our passions runs through the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and here there is a payoff from the historical nature of her social analysis: we can reform our passions because they are themselves historically produced, not a permanent feature of human nature but a product of a corrupt and corrupting time. Such a reformation involves the individual turning herself – for in Wollstonecraft's account, the onus for such work falls to women – against the tendencies of her age, and against the very historical forces of her own formation. Such a critical orientation of the individual against her time is absent in Smith's account, as is a sense of the historicity of the motivational 'springs of action' which he presents. Certainly, in Smith, the passions are linked to the development of civilisation through each of its historical stages: thus the desire for convenience has supposedly caused everything which has 'changed the whole face of the globe', from the first cultivation of the ground to the more recent development of the 'sciences and arts'. Yet by virtue of its apparent omnipresence,

the 'desire for convenience' appears an ahistorical force, consistently present in each stage of human progress. This overlooks the question of its origin: in Smith's account, the conveniences enjoyed by the rich need to already exist in order for them to be seen by others to motivate them to attain them for themselves. Smith's is thus a circular argument which renders transhistorical a sentiment which is arguably most obviously to the fore in commercial society, as is suggested in Smith's use of the language of consumer objects ('tweezer-cases', 'toys') for 'wealth and greatness'.¹⁰¹

From one perspective, Wollstonecraft's emphasis on reforming the passions could be read as a theological accommodation of a Smithian account of historical progress: whilst the passions of our nature impel civilisational progress, they also for her stage a God-given struggle which enables our self-improvement. Such an accommodation might appear to be implied in a passage in Chapter 5, where in a kind of dream-vision, Wollstonecraft sees 'the sons and daughters of men' playing out their roles as in a script written by Smith:

I see the sons and daughters of men pursuing shadows, and anxiously wasting their powers to feed passions which have no adequate object – if the very excess of these blind impulses, pampered by that lying, yet constantly trusted guide, the imagination, did not, by preparing them for some other state, render short-sighted mortals wiser without their own concurrence; or, what comes to the same thing, when they were pursuing some imaginary present good.¹⁰²

Here, not just the 'poor man's son', but, in a Blakean-formulation, all 'the sons and daughters of men' waste 'their powers' in pursuit of inadequate objects, impelled by a 'lying' imagination: Smith's necessarily 'deceptive' nature. '[V]iewing objects in this light', she continues, 'it would not be fanciful to imagine that this world was a stage on which a pantomime is daily performed for the amusement of superior beings'. The very same Shakespearean image used to condemn Burke's 'system' on the final page of the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* – the gods killing us 'for their sport' – returns to condemn a Smithian account of the 'constitution' of our 'nature' which makes us 'slaves' to 'hope and fear'.¹⁰³ At the same time, however, and like Smith, Wollstonecraft identifies an unintended consequence to this process: the 'excess' of passion prepares 'short-sighted mortals' for 'some other state', making them 'wiser' despite themselves. Her language is hedged and oblique, in a conditional formulation which approaches a double negative – 'no ... if ... did not' – and it is the 'adequacy' or otherwise of the 'object' which impels all this effort, which hangs in the syntactical balance. But the passage nevertheless points to some

belated gaining of moral wisdom: some insight, perhaps, into the 'vanity of things' which she elsewhere notes is natural in the final stages of life. To return to the analogy of the watch, the very existence of the passions in our 'mechanism' evinces that they were 'set in motion' for a purpose: to 'improve our nature' and enable our attainment of a 'more godlike portion of happiness', not for our performance of a pantomime for the gods.¹⁰⁴

Wollstonecraft's opposition to a Smithian narrative of our 'constitution' which makes us 'slaves ... to hope and fear' emerges still more clearly from the larger context of this passage where, although ostensibly discussing Lord Chesterfield's advice to his son in his *Letters*, Smith appears still to be running through Wollstonecraft's mind. Attacking axioms 'made by men who have coolly seen mankind through the medium of books' and taking aim at the Smithian goal of securing 'ease and prosperity on earth', Wollstonecraft rejects the qualities of moderation and prudence which are central to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, especially in its outlining of a morality appropriate to the pursuit of self-interest fundamental to the commercial age.¹⁰⁵ In a jibe at Smith, or at his terminology at least, the pursuit of 'conveniences' is termed a mere 'vegetable life', in which the 'passions' and the 'powers of the soul' would be 'useless'.¹⁰⁶ The existence of the passions points, in Wollstonecraft's eyes, to our potential for more sublime virtue than sticking to 'the letter of the law'.¹⁰⁷ Asserting that 'the regulations (*sic*) of the passions is not, always, wisdom', and asking how they might 'gain sufficient strength to unfold the faculties', Wollstonecraft reflects that it is the very 'force of [men's] passions' which enables them to leap over 'the boundary that secures content' and strengthen their reasoning capacities, giving them 'superior judgement, and more fortitude than women'.¹⁰⁸ If 'going astray' enables men to 'enlarge their minds', the fruit of this, where moralists are concerned, would appear to be maxims which especially constrain and confine female minds and their affective natures. These are themes to which Wollstonecraft will return, especially in what was to be the final output of her career, *The Wrongs of Woman*, where, as we will see in my final chapter, the character of Venables embeds an extensive critique of Smithian prudence (called in the *Vindication* the 'cautious craft of ignorant self-love'). The turn to fiction, too, despite Wollstonecraft's earlier reservations about the novel form, will address the passions of the reader, offering an affective experience through which the boundaries of their experience might be 'overleaped' and their reasoning capacities unfolded. Given the tendency to associate such themes with the later end of her career, it is worth noting here in the *Vindication* the force of Wollstonecraft's insistence on the role of the passions in self-formation. Her counter-argument

against a Smithian narrative in which the passions are yoked to economic benefit is thus neither the repressive rejection of the passions for rational self-correction nor the experiential narrowing of moderation and constraint exhorted by conduct books. She agrees with Smith that a 'common stream' of 'ambition, love, hope and fear' run through us all, but against him suggests that our reason can tell us that 'their present and most attractive promises are only lying dreams'. Yet we should not dampen our 'generous feeling' with the 'cold hand of circumspection'. The bestial passions of the Yahoos, and the passionless rationality of the Houyhnhnms, are equally unattractive models: it is through 'habits of reflection', attaining knowledge through fostering the passions, that we might improve ourselves, and what lies beyond us.¹⁰⁹

Wollstonecraft's faith in the capacity of reason to reflect on the effects and consequences of the passions makes a strong contrast with the narrative of the passions on which Smithian political economy is founded. In Smith, an analysis of the passions finds a larger systematic account in which human labour is organised into systems of exchange, value, and wealth.¹¹⁰ Smithian moral theory works upwards and outwards at dizzying speed, from one paragraph to the next, so that an argument about individual desire for convenience and self-betterment quickly becomes the inevitable cause of the larger economic system, such that it appears difficult to intervene in or unpack the one from the other. What 'boundary' has been 'overleaped' here, in the 'freer scope' enjoyed by the 'enlarged mind'? Wollstonecraft's quite different treatment of the passions opens up the possibility of escape from the story about wealth society that Smith offers, and sets the stage for the individual's moral struggle with conditions of the commercial age itself. For Wollstonecraft, the onus is on individuals to reflect on how the culture of riches, property, and rank of our time works on us to produce such passions as Smith describes, and to struggle against them. The possibility of rational self-interrogation against our 'mechanisms' shows that we need not be ruled by the 'springs' of our nature but are capable of developing the reason, understanding, and self-knowledge which should properly be the basis of community and society itself, from the rational friendships between men and women which should constitute marriage, to the larger community of reason evoked in the first *Vindication*. To all of this, Wollstonecraft adds a call for social reform: a benevolent legislator should seek to 'make it the interest of each individual to be virtuous' and hence 'cement' public happiness on 'private virtue'.¹¹¹ This would mean working against our tendency to be swayed by riches, rank, and reputation not just at an individual level, but by

organising society to minimise their effects, which, as the first *Vindication* demonstrated, include the moral and social corruptions consequent on property, rank, and dependence. In this way, 'an orderly whole is consolidated by the tendency of all the parts towards a common centre'.¹¹²

Wollstonecraft's commitment to understanding human nature as expressed and moulded by the character of the historical moment produces the constitutive problem or tension in her writing. If, as she says, 'hereditary power chokes the affections and nips reason in the bud', how are these very affections and reason to become the means through which we improve ourselves and our world?¹¹³ The interposition of some additional force is needed to kick-start an alternative running of our mechanisms, to turn a vicious circle into a virtuous one. Within the economy of her text, this additional force is the exhortative power of her own voice, which ranges from philosophical argument to political invective, from sarcasm and irony to moral urging, from cultural denunciation to affective effusion: running the gamut of every possible tone to maximise the chances of working an effect on her reader. The question of where her own insight derives from – her capacity to trace the formation as well as the problems of her age – is not addressed (although as we have seen, there is at least one figuration of her insights as those of a dream or vision); like Smith, she enjoys the philosophical capacity for overview, insight, and connection despite being one of what she herself describes as the most abject of subjects, a woman. For some commentators, the combination of the nature and power of Wollstonecraft's rhetorical voice, and what is, in effect, her self-differentiation from the collective group of 'woman' which she addresses in her writing, has led to a characterisation of Wollstonecraft herself as 'masculine' in some way – despite both her famous 'wild wish' that differences of gender cease to be attended to, and her attack on the very characterisation of thinking women as 'masculine'. In her eyes, indeed, not even the men who 'have coolly seen mankind through the medium of books' have displayed any particular prowess in the acquisition of knowledge. Here is a voice, perhaps, which seeks to transcend the binaries of gender which might otherwise contain it.

As we saw earlier, and despite its counter-acting capacity to delude, the imagination offers the possibility of breaking out of the limits of knowledge marked by prejudice, historicity, and the inevitable impress of cultural formation. Whilst it is never suggested that we can simply imagine ourselves out of the problems of our time, the powers and capacity of the imagination are resources to which Wollstonecraft repeatedly returns. Combined with our historical experience, both collective and individual,

it promises that the knowledge required for human improvement can be attained. The embodied experience of passionate existence, allied to proper reflection and the powers of reason, may thus generate imaginative insight. After all, it is in precisely such reflections on impassioned experience that Wollstonecraft's analytical voice originates: as the story of the Advertisement to the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* shows, her turn to authorship was impelled by the emotive experience of reading Burke. And as we shall now see, it is because women's experience in general is so marked by the commercial age – because women are so exposed to, and so particularly embody, the problems of commercial society – that it is to them that her rallying cry to turn that experience into knowledge and change is particularly addressed.

Property Redux: Women, Manners, and the Public Good

In conjectural history's manners tradition, the treatment and status of women were read as indicative of social progress (or its lack) from one epoch to the next. Wollstonecraft's focus in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* on the relationship between the 'manners of women' and the 'manners of the times' thus did not merely situate the problems of contemporary womanhood in the context of the property world of late eighteenth-century commercial society: it also used the former to critique the 'present modification of society', and to show how it might be reformed.¹¹⁴ The picture she paints of things 'as they are at present organized' in civil government, from her observations of female manners, is a damning one.¹¹⁵ Far from signalling the progress of the commercial age, women make clear its uneven development, embodying its 'partial' civilisation with their disturbing mix of the childlike (they 'lisp', they are like 'toys') and their sexual power games, or in the way their status (sexual and social) veers from object of veneration and elevation one moment, to abjection and obsolescence the next. Scurrying 'helter-skelter' around London in their carriages, reclining listlessly on their sofas, women do not connote progress but stasis, even arrested development: they thus pose the problem of history itself, of civilisation at once over- and underdeveloped.¹¹⁶ The problems Wollstonecraft sees when she turns her attention to women are those of commercial society itself; hence her perception of a direct and unequivocal link between the status of women and human progress: 'till women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge must receive continual checks'.¹¹⁷

Wollstonecraft was far from the first to approach women as a diagnostic or symbolic tool with which to explore eighteenth-century commercial modernity. Joseph Addison and Daniel Defoe, using the ambivalent but alluring figure of Lady Credit in the early years of the century, inaugurated a long tradition associating women with the troubling passions (desire, self-interest, avariciousness, and greed) of commercial society.¹¹⁸ Lady Credit, in their allegory of the system of public credit, personified the nature of risk in an uncertain world; she was followed in the eighteenth-century economic and cultural imagination by a succession of female figures who embodied the enticements of commercial gain alongside anxiety about how such gain depended on the worst passions of human nature, and its deleterious social and moral effects.¹¹⁹ Whilst he sidelined women from the main stage of economic and commercial activity, Hume's 'ironic' accommodation of morals to the manners of the commercial age was associated with the highly artificial figure of the *salonnière*, whose receipt of male gallantries and *politesse* helped to stabilise the passions of the commercial world, and to exemplify its supposed polish.¹²⁰ Such a figure was directly at odds with what Harriet Guest has described as 'the figure of insatiable feminine desire', projected 'out of itself' by the eighteenth-century 'discourse of commerce', as 'the image of its own amorality', embodying the 'vices of commerce' as well as 'the radiance of the commodity'.¹²¹ Even before Wollstonecraft's turn to the problem in her second *Vindication* then, 'woman' frequently named a central tension in eighteenth-century thinking about the morality of commerce, even whilst it was accompanied by a concern about the supposed demasculating effects of '*le doux commerce*' on men.¹²²

The dominant metaphor for womanhood in the *Vindication* is the state of slavery and self-dispossession characterised by being the property of another. 'Woman' is thus the negative or inverse of the figure of the person imagined by a commercial modernity which is organised around gaining and owning property. In her reading of Hume's sceptical treatment of the problem of identity, Adela Pinch has noted how property objects and personal possessions might solve the problem of knowing the self, filling through a principle of contiguity the vacuum posed by the epistemological difficulty of securing self-identity. Possessions might 'provide a solid basis for the contingency of self by introducing a more properly proprietary category, such as property: the self may be a fiction, but its horses, carriages, and clothes are not'.¹²³ Where Hume sees the passions enacting a 'kind of person-ification', tying a 'bundle of perceptions' into a 'recognisable human form one can claim as our own', the same 'person-ification'

might be performed by property objects.¹²⁴ If this is one way of understanding personhood in commercial modernity, however, it is not available to women. As the *Vindication* shows, women were largely excluded from or periphery to the world of ownership, whether understood as self-possession or possession of property (an analysis further developed in *The Wrongs of Woman*). The 'woman' of Wollstonecraft's title thus reveals enslavement and dispossession as the dark side of commercial modernity's defining concern with ownership and property culture.

Wollstonecraft sees enslavement in every context in which she considers women. '[E]very where' in a 'deplorable state', they are 'shackled' like slaves by the reputational requirement of propriety; they are slaves to the 'sensuality' of man; they endure 'slavish submission' to parents; they are even self-imprisoned in the 'gilt cage' of their beauty.¹²⁵ The figure of slavery operated throughout eighteenth-century political discourse as the opposite of the desired state of political liberty, but Wollstonecraft's comparison of women to 'poor African slaves ... subject to prejudices that brutalise' them references a more literal, explicit, form of slavery. The propriety which Rousseau and others recommend for women binds them in a kind of slavery and 'sweetens' the 'cup' of man just like the sugar produced by enslaved persons.¹²⁶ Codes of female propriety operate to control sexual behaviour and assure legitimacy in the male line of inheritance: a pointed parallel is thus drawn between two systems of male property ownership at home and in plantations overseas, perpetuated by reproduction on the one hand, and enslaved labour on the other, both sustained by the oppression, even 'brutaliz[ation]' of others.¹²⁷ At least for women, there is a route out: rational virtue and the settling of morality 'on a more solid basis' by recognising women as rational beings, without which woman will remain the 'slave of man'. The *Vindication*'s closing paragraphs nevertheless compare the sovereignty of fathers and husbands to that of Russian wife-beaters and Egyptian slave-masters.¹²⁸

The *Vindication*'s larger narrative focuses on the state of 'woman' to show how a social order founded on wealth and hereditary property has stalled human progress. The attack on the property system familiar from the first *Vindication* returns powerfully in Chapter 9 of the second *Vindication* to show the 'pernicious effects which arise from the unnatural distinctions established in society', reiterating themes from the earlier *Vindication* but showing their effects on manners in more detail, especially in ways which relate to women. Property is thus a 'poisoned fountain' from which flow 'most of the evils and vices' present in the current 'modification' of society.¹²⁹ A version of Smith's parable of the poor man's son is

writ large to describe a domino-effect as the duties of the rich are done by deputies, leaving the rich to a life of idleness which others seek to emulate and attain, and so in 'the next rank ... numerous scramblers for wealth sacrifice every thing to tread on their heels'.¹³⁰ The respect which virtue should receive is instead given to rank, and property becomes a false religion.¹³¹ Whilst this is a general condemnation, such 'evils and vices' are particularised to illustrate their effects on women.¹³² The claim that the system of property and rank impedes morality and humanity is illustrated by showing that female dependence produces vice; women can only be virtuous when independent from men, but dependence inculcates cunning, meanness, and selfishness. Indeed, Wollstonecraft asserts that riches are more destructive to women than men, as wealth enables some men to offer service as statesmen or soldiers, but no such public roles are available to women.¹³³ The importance of independence, meanwhile, which women lack, is underlined by Wollstonecraft's claim that it is both necessary for generosity and virtue, and associated with discharging the duties of one's station.¹³⁴ Female dependence on their property-owning fathers and husbands is thus an impediment to moral action.

The effects of the property system on female manners are addressed through three interconnected areas. Following Smith's account in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* of the attention-economy centred on Louis XIV, Wollstonecraft argues that, deprived of other resources, women deploy beauty as a kind of property that bestows 'rank' and thus demands attention and bestows social power. Women thus exist as 'short-lived queens' rather than labouring to 'obtain the sober pleasures that arise from equality'.¹³⁵ Any apparent power is in fact dependence: 'were it not for mistaken notions of beauty, women would acquire sufficient [strength of body] to enable them to earn their own subsistence, the true definition of independence'.¹³⁶ Related to the issue of female social power is the question of female reputation, where, Wollstonecraft observes, 'attention ... [is] turned to the show instead of the substance. A simple thing is thus made strangely complicated'.¹³⁷ Like the 'false respect' given to 'wealth and mere personal charms', that given to the mere 'show' of reputation blights the 'tender blossoms of affection and virtue'.¹³⁸

Having shown the false respect given to beauty and the skewed operation of reputation, Wollstonecraft generalises her argument to associate women with what she sees as the voluptuousness of power and the indolence of wealth. Women luxuriate in the 'torrid zone' of pleasure alongside, in somewhat overheated rhetoric, the 'noisome reptiles and venomous serpents' who 'lurk under the rank herbage' of 'polished society', where 'there

is voluptuousness pampered by the still sultry air, which relaxes every good disposition before it ripens into virtue'.¹³⁹ On the 'rank soil' of wealth, idleness has generated 'swarms of summer insects that feed on putrefaction', and women, like men, are rendered weak and luxurious by the pleasures of wealth, becoming 'slaves to their persons', to 'glory in their subjection'.¹⁴⁰ Faux sexual mores also follow: 'so great is [women's] mental and bodily indolence, that till their body be strengthened and their understanding enlarged by active exertions, there is little reason to expect that modesty will take place of bashfulness'.¹⁴¹ This association of hereditary property with idleness is familiar from the first *Vindication* ('what but habitual idleness can hereditary wealth and titles produce?' Wollstonecraft asked) but women are now among its 'unfortunate victims'. They 'seldom exert the locomotive faculty of body or mind; and, thus ... are unable to discern in what true merit and happiness consist'.¹⁴² Indolence not only prevents the exercising of one's faculties and performance of one's duty which in Wollstonecraft's eyes is necessary for the development of reason and virtue; it even prevents women from breastfeeding.¹⁴³ At the same time, women are also agents of arbitrary power and privilege, even tyranny. The 'weak woman of fashion' who lounges with 'self-complacency' on her sofa but insults an elderly and dependent petitioner is an 'irrational monster', like a lawless Roman emperor, or a Sybarite, 'dissolved in luxury'.¹⁴⁴ And as 'vicious or indolent people are always eager to profit by enforcing arbitrary privileges', such habits corrupt familial relationships, where rather than the natural affection which should exist, there is only a 'selfish respect for property'.¹⁴⁵ If 'every family is a state', to be founded on understanding and virtue, those in which property is the guiding principle are not just failures in moral and affective terms, but in a political sense too.¹⁴⁶

Such language shows how Wollstonecraft's analysis of the situation of women bridges into her political economic critique. Lacking the force of any necessity which would stimulate and educate them, women are caught in 'negative supineness'.¹⁴⁷ As society is currently organised, 'what have women to do in society [is] ... but to loiter with easy grace'.¹⁴⁸ For Wollstonecraft, happiness depends on the performance of duty, and whilst she implies that it is as wives and mothers that most women will fulfil their duties, she offers other examples of ways in which women might have active lives, including as shopkeepers, physicians, midwives or nurses, farm managers, or business women.¹⁴⁹ All this is neglected, however, as much by the women who neglect maternal duties for flattery, as by wealthy men for whom need does not provide the necessary impetus.¹⁵⁰ It is wholly significant that it is in Chapter 9's discussion of the effects of property

that Wollstonecraft addresses the failure of society to enable women to be independent, active, and virtuous, for existing property society ensures that they have no way to make their private virtue contribute to the public good. Her perception that 'in order to render their private virtue a public benefit, [women] must have a civil existence in the State' is thus absolutely key.¹⁵¹ Here in a nutshell is the thrust of the *Vindication's* attack on the property order: it inhibits women by excluding them from 'civil existence'. That this claim lies at the heart of the *Vindication's* argument explains why it was classified as a work of political economy by Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review*. As both an attack on the manners produced by a system primarily organised by hereditary property and wealth, and the imagining of an improved version of human society, founded on reason, morality, and virtue, it presents an engagement with, and gender-based critique of, the discourse of political economy, which contests the exclusion of women from the sphere of rational action and civil participation, and looks to the constitution of human nature, as well as morality, for the proper foundation of society. As such, it chimes with Pocock's description of political economy in eighteenth-century Britain as a 'nascent social science of a remarkably new order, part of an enduring though increasingly historicized science of natural morality'.¹⁵² Pocock's further claim that political economic discourse is also 'an ideological defence of the Whig ruling order' only underlines the political ramifications of Wollstonecraft's critical intervention, and how much is politically at stake in such 'nascent' knowledge forms.

The *Vindication's* repeated exhortation of women to unfold their reason and virtue is thus about more than gender emancipation alone: their 'revolution' is the means by which the transformation of commercial modernity will be achieved. Gender is repeatedly mutually imbricated with larger civil and social improvement throughout the work, including often at the ends of chapters, where Wollstonecraft raises her eyes from the specificity of her attention to women to the larger vista within which her argument is located. Thus, Chapter 3 concludes by observing that 'wealth and female softness', which 'equally tend to debase mankind' are 'produced by the same cause': the present organisation of 'civil government'.¹⁵³ Wollstonecraft's attention to the cultural and psychological formation of female identity shows that gender is itself a product of the property order, an insight which perhaps explains both Wollstonecraft's profound disaffection for contemporary womanhood (so troubling to later feminist readers), and her 'wild wish' that 'the distinction of sex [is] confounded in society'.¹⁵⁴ If gender is historically constituted and enacted, as an effect

and product of manners, then it too might be dismantled in any manners 'revolution'. What modern feminism recognises as gender liberation is an integral part of a larger vision for social and moral reform, a change in the 'very constitution of civil governments': a vision which depends on female reason and virtue for its first step.¹⁵⁵ The abjection of women in late eighteenth-century property society is the weak point through which the whole might be remodelled: if women might be newly considered 'rational creatures', and emancipated to virtuous participation in civil society, the whole edifice of property society might be reformed. Most vulnerable to property society's effects, women are rightly at the forefront of the possibility of change; they thus constitute, as observed earlier, a kind of revolutionary vanguard, although Wollstonecraft never phrases it quite this way. Women are thus both least best situated and also the key to future improvement of society as a whole: their very abjection makes them privileged potential agents of reform, through whom the change Wollstonecraft seeks in the 'manners of the times' might be brought about.¹⁵⁶

Wollstonecraft's intervention in political economy is motivated not just by the indignation of political oppression and social injustice but also by faith.¹⁵⁷ To strive towards an improved world is not utopian dreaming, she insists; rather we are enjoined by God and by our God-given natures to improvement, to imitate his sublime virtues.¹⁵⁸ This faith-based perspective sits alongside, and runs parallel to, the historical and philosophical elements of Wollstonecraft's thinking. As we have seen in this chapter, Wollstonecraft's attention to our very natures – to our passions, our faculty of reflection, our capacity for reason – secures her argument. At present, she writes, 'the science of politics is in its infancy'; in its place '[b]rutal force has hitherto governed the world', and produced 'the present modification of society', in its 'corrupt state'.¹⁵⁹ A reform of manners – a change in the 'manners of the times' – and especially the separation of 'unchangeable morals from local manners', will change all this.¹⁶⁰ Directly critiquing contemporary manners, including those between the sexes, she extends political language to the sphere of human relations, identity formation, and individual affective experience. Just as the failure of modern morals can be shown in the social units (the family, the married couple) normally excluded from political economy's purview, so too would a manners reform transform not just these spheres, but recast the very relations between private virtue and the public state. In such a world, educated men and women would not be faithless; marriage would be based on affection; women would turn from the looking-glass to their children; men would not visit 'harlots', and mothers would not be coquets.¹⁶¹ Crossing

a manners analysis, with its attention to the minutiae and habits of psychological, affective, and social life, with a political language hostile to oppression and alert to 'legitimate rights', Wollstonecraft builds public virtue on the basis of private virtue, to reject the confinement of women 'to domestic concerns' and to contest political economy's separation of the public world of wealth acquisition from private affect and morality.¹⁶² The 'truly benevolent legislator' will always endeavour 'to make it the interest of each individual to be virtuous', to make 'private virtue' the 'cement of public happiness', thus consolidating an 'orderly whole' by ensuring 'the tendency of all the parts towards a common centre'.¹⁶³ In the absence of such a legislator, 'public spirit must be nurtured by private virtue', a formula whose hope of reforming the public world with private morality nevertheless runs the risk of perpetuating their separation.¹⁶⁴ This then is the dream of Wollstonecraft's political economy: the establishment of a 'sound politics' which will diffuse liberty, in which men and women will become more virtuous, and the improvements which human nature itself suggests is possible will be realised.¹⁶⁵