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Equal Portions of Heavenly Fire: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Sexless Soul

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"This female philosopher indignantly rejects the idea of a sex in the soul, pronouncing the sensibility, timidity and tenderness of women, to be merely artificial refinements of character, introduced and fostered by men," writes the appalled (and fictional) Hindu philosopher Shahcoolen in Benjamin Silliman’s series *The Letters of Shahcoolen* (1802).1 Published not long after Mary Wollstonecraft’s manifesto, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1796), Silliman’s series dedicates four epistles to detailing the nature and influence of the “re­generating system of this female lunatic.”2 Another detractor brands Wollstonecraft “an unsex’d female” in a poetic satire on the author’s manifesto and her fellow female “combatants” in “the new field of the Rights of Woman.”3

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1. Benjamin Silliman, *Letters of Shahcoolen, A Hindu Philosopher, Residing in Philadelphia: To His Friend El Hassan, an Inhabitant of Delhi* (Boston: Russell and Cutler, 1802), 22–23. *Letters* was originally published anonymously in the New York paper *Commercial Advertiser* and then compiled and published under Silliman’s name (see preface). Four out of fourteen “letters” were on Wollstonecraft.

2. Ibid., 24.

No greater compliments could have been paid to the pioneering, eighteenth-century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft than to have been considered "unsexed" and recognized for her rejection of the "sexed soul," notwithstanding the harsh indictment such ideas elicited from many of her contemporaries. Indeed, she insists in *Vindication*, "A wild wish has just flown from my heart to my head, and I will not stifle it, though it may excite a horse-laugh. I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society . . . for this distinction is, I am firmly persuaded, the foundation of the weakness of character ascribed to woman."

Amid the social reforms and political revolutions that would fuel Enlightenment philosophes, Wollstonecraft would see the very categories of male and female as hindering women from achieving the progress that men were enjoying in intellectual, political, and moral spheres. Mary Wollstonecraft recoils at the increasingly essentialist paradigms that would define women by their sex instead of their humanity—or, more significantly, their divinity. For, she asks, are not men and women both "children of the same parent?"—God? Are they not, she insists, given "heavenly fire" in "equal portions"?

By delving straight into the locus of human identity—the soul—and desexualizing it, Wollstonecraft upsets the sexual categories that continue to cripple women and "stop the progress of knowledge and virtue" throughout society. Through destabilizing gender categories, Wollstonecraft seeks to reconstruct human identity on the basis of humanity's true identity as sexless souls, unencumbered from the socially constructed and biologically trivial distinctions that have made

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5. Some scholars have judged Wollstonecraft's ideas as being directed at the bourgeois only. Yet Barbara Taylor argues that, while certain passages "certainly seem to support the interpretations of Wollstonecraft as a bourgeois thinker," her ideas on the whole reflect a more utopian eradication of such "partial interests and sectional loyalties"; *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 168.
7. Ibid., 68.
8. Ibid., vi.
humanity "forget their grand destination" as souls "capable of rising to [God]."

In Wollstonecraft's envisioned social utopia, the recognition of men and women's shared identity as equal, rational, sexless souls is an essential prerequisite. Wollstonecraft argues that women must help construct this utopia through the exercise of reason, virtue, and universal benevolence, not only because society needs such women, but also because women are designed to do so in light of their spiritual and intellectual identities as sexless souls made in the imago Dei (image of God). As historian Barbara Taylor has aptly argued, this religious vision, and the utopia it would facilitate, is the defining element of Wollstonecraft's Vindication. The only obstacles for women who fully exercise their divine gifts of reason and virtue are the socialization and the lack of education that train women to "please, and . . . live only to please" rather than to

9. Ibid., 135, 146.
10. The soul was then understood to encompass both meanings simultaneously, given the long-standing connection in Western Christian theology and philosophy between the mind and the soul. Both spiritual and intellectual identities were then understood to be the eternal element of humankind, the imago Dei, the innermost identity, and the seat of reason (humankind's defining attribute). In this article (unless otherwise noted), the concepts of mind and soul are equivalent.
11. Barbara Taylor has pioneered a new treatment of Wollstonecraft as a profoundly religious thinker in Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination and in several smaller articles and anthology chapters. Although Taylor's is the most comprehensive account of Wollstonecraft's religious consciousness, other articles treat Wollstonecraft's spiritual themes and influences as well. Complementing Taylor's analysis is Arleen Ingham's Women and Spirituality in the Writing of More, Wollstonecraft, Stanton, and Eddy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), which compares the literary works of key eighteenth- and nineteenth-century feminists and highlights commonalities and differences in their religious thought. Historian Gregory Claeys has authored a chapter titled "The Divine Creature and the Female Citizen," which revisits Wollstonecraft's concepts of rights "in the context of her much-neglected religious beliefs"; English Radicalism, 1550–1850, ed. Glenn Burgess and Matthew Feustensteins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115–34. Patricia Michaelson has also written of Wollstonecraft's feminism as "very much an expression of religious belief"; "Religious Basis of Eighteenth-Century Feminism: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Quakers," Women's Studies 22 (1993): 282. Other scholars such as Mervyn Nicholson have found in Vindication an "unbroken chain of deductions" leading from the just nature of God to the emancipation of women and equality of the sexes; "The Eleventh Commandment: Sex and Spirit in Wollstonecraft and Malthus," Journal of the History of Ideas 51, no. 3 (1990): 418.
be "rational creatures." Thus Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is not merely an educational or philosophical treaty, as many of her contemporaries would view it; instead, it is also a synthesis of theological and philosophical ideas that attempts to re-conceptualize human identity beyond sexual categories and within a realm where religious devotion and rational thought meet. The rational, sexless soul—a concept with a rich history in Western philosophy and Christianity—provides the platform for this reformulation.

Wollstonecraft was not the first to recognize the emancipating and equalizing potential of the sexless soul. Many of Wollstonecraft's defenses of the sexless soul, as well as her criticisms of the socialization obscuring it, had been articulated a century before by other women's advocates who rallied around the idea of the sexless soul. What makes Wollstonecraft's arguments different? How exactly does she define the sexless soul? And what happens to the notion after the turn of the century, when a new wave of women's advocates takes to the press, particularly in America?

To address these questions, this article analyzes Wollstonecraft's use of the sexless soul in the context of its broader philosophical and religious history as well as in particular passages of *Vindication* itself. Although the notion of the sexless soul hearkens back to Pythagorean philosophers in the sixth century BC and flourishes well into AD seventeenth century, Wollstonecraft's eighteenth-century manifesto is arguably the first time the idea is politicized; its implications are intended to have direct bearing on women's social, intellectual, and political position. The strong reactions that Wollstonecraft's manifesto would provoke as well as the variations on the sexless soul that would develop among Wollstonecraft's successors illuminate the different ways in which the sex of the soul served as a lightning rod for other social, political, and religious concerns. This contextualization will help elucidate the significant and unique cultural work that Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* performs as well as the significant religious undercurrents in Wollstonecraft's thought and in early modern feminism as manifest in the heated debates surrounding the sex of the soul.

Sex and Gender

“Sex” and “gender” are difficult to untangle in the concept of the sexless soul. Post-1970s scholars have generally understood “gender” as referring to socially constructed behaviors, attributes, and norms that signal masculinity or femininity within a particular cultural context and “sex” as referring to the biological status of male or female as determined by chromosomes, hormones, or anatomical differences. This bifurcation is difficult to apply in periods during which no such distinguishing vocabulary was used. However, for the purposes of this article, I claim that Wollstonecraft operates roughly within this dichotomy. Wollstonecraft views sex (maleness and femaleness) as a biological fact, pertinent primarily for “produc[ing] the fruit of life” (procreation) and fulfilling particular (and ultimately secondary) duties that arise from those procreative roles. Biological differences of sex also matter, however, in that a man’s superior physical faculties enable him “from the remotest antiquity . . . to exert his strength to subjugate his companion [woman].” Men often exploit the physical difference that Providence has granted them in order to subject women to duties, norms, attributes, and distinctions (in which women are far too complicit, Wollstonecraft seethes) that satisfies men’s own sexual needs and vanity. In other words, men have manipulated the biological consequences of being sexed male to produce a social condition—or “gender”—in which women are oppressed, in spite of the common material God has used to design their (equal) souls. Overturning the unnatural, constructed roles of gender would emancipate men as well as women from the moral shackles that have

13. See, for example, this excerpt from Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*: “Women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfill . . . but they are *human* duties” (106, emphasis in the original). While Wollstonecraft refers to the roles of wife and mother as “the proper places” (xii) for women, she depicts these as only educational, temporary roles that render the “road more pleasant” (48) and serve as useful lessons in this school during the soul’s “infancy” (245), or mortality’s “education” (245). Wollstonecraft acknowledges that men and women typically inherit different duties in life but argues that exacerbating and crystallizing those differences with socially constructed gender norms misconstrues the intention of those different duties as a divinely ordered method to develop virtue.

hindered them from "the grand purpose of life, that of rendering human creatures wise and virtuous." 

Thus Wollstonecraft could be said to be operating with an understanding of "sex" (biological, given) and "gender" (social, constructed), terms that had not been semantically differentiated at the time. Indeed, for much of Western philosophical history, Aristotelian body–mind unity had rendered sex and gender interchangeable concepts, with the biological and the social (and intellectual, moral, spiritual, and so on) elements of human nature fused together. The relationship of biological sex and social roles (maleness and masculinity versus femaleness and femininity) began to be more problematized around the thirteenth century. By the eighteenth century, the relationship had grown complicated to a degree that would permit Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries to describe some women as masculine and some men as feminine (although the latter expressions are intended, more often than not, to be derogatory). This paradoxical behavior of Wollstonecraft's—wishing to eradicate sexual distinctions while negatively affirming them—is explored at a later point. For this article's purposes, the term sexless soul indicates a soul without a moral, spiritual, or intellectual nature that could be identified with cultural understandings of "feminine" or "masculine" (which, in virtually all cases, unless otherwise noted, is synonymous with or inclusive of "male" or "female").

15. Ibid., 418.

16. Prudence Allen argues that "in the thirteenth century we begin to find more and more philosophers recognizing that men and women are slightly more complicated than simply male beings with masculine characteristics and female beings with feminine characteristics," although it would take "six more centuries" to "articulate theories about this complex fact of human existence"; The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reforma_15643335tion, 1250–1500 (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 320.

17. Wollstonecraft and her radical contemporaries had excoriated the conservative philosopher Edmund Burke for being feminine, for example, and others had accused French aristocratic elites of being effeminate and responsible for the corruption of political and social order. See Wollstonecraft, Vindication of the Rights of Men in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France (London: J. Johnson, 1790).
Origins of the Sexless Soul

The sexless soul has a long and ambivalent history in Western philosophy and religion, through its initial development in the writings of Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle and its contentious incorporation into Christian theology. The following précis provided a sense of the key figures in the history of the sex of the soul—a history into which Wollstonecraft and her fellow advocates and detractors enter.

The concept of the sexless soul had existed uneasily, for the most part, alongside a belief in the female’s physical inferiority—a being defined in contrast to or as a privation of the male’s superior physical nature. Pythagoras first articulates the belief in a sexless, immaterial identity housed within a series of reincarnated, sexed, material bodies (with the male body superior to the female). 18 Plato later elaborates on Pythagorean beliefs, holding that immortal and sexless souls, once dethroned from their place among the perfect, immaterial world of forms, fall into a series of reincarnations in the inferior, material realm until they are able to free themselves of the bodily reincarnations, through wisdom and virtue, and reunite with the immaterial forms. Like the Pythagoreans, Plato believes female bodies are inferior (and that female reincarnation is a punishment), but as Prudence Allen puts it, Plato allows that, given humankind’s true identity as sexless souls, “from the perspective of their real nature, [men and women] are the same.” 19 Yet Plato’s successor, Aristotle, would reject Plato’s influential metaphysical dualism (the imperfect, material world and the perfect, immaterial

18. Allen, The Concept of Woman, 20–21. Although Pythagoras opposed and hierarchized the feminine and masculine elements in his Table of Opposites, he believed that reason was the superior part of humankind’s identity and had no sexual nature, rendering men and women essentially the same in their core personal identity.

19. Ibid., 61. See also 60–62, 88. Note that Plato’s conception of sexual distinction was more complicated; Plato believed in a cosmic sex polarity of a superior, masculine force of activity and an inferior feminine force of passivity. However, pertaining to individuals rather than cosmic forces, the “identity of a woman or man comes from their mind (or soul) and not from their body;” and thus, “the material aspects of generation, which played such a crucial role on the cosmic level of male and female identity, have no role at all on the level of actual human existence”; it is, in fact, “the sexless soul and not the material body that determines the identity of the woman or man”; Ibid., 61.
world of forms) as well as Plato’s belief in a rational, immortal, sexless soul as ontologically separate from the material body.

Aristotle propounds the unity of soul and body, with the implication that physical distinctions reflect internal ones; therefore, men and women’s differing physical nature reflect an internal difference—and not one that is favorable to women. The female is, as it were, a deformed male, Aristotle surmises, setting in motion a paradigm in which females would long remain at the underdeveloped end of the male continuum. Aristotle also believes the male has the creative capacity to give life and shape to the body—the “soul,” as he terms this animated essence—whereas the female is merely the passive receptacle or source of raw material for new life; women are the wood, men are the carpenters. “Thus,” he summarizes, “the physical part, the body, comes from the female, and the Soul from the male, since the Soul is the essence of a particular body.”

Aristotle’s decidedly unfavorable perception of women as the privation of maleness, both physically and intellectually, would become deeply influential for centuries in the scholarly understanding of the human body.

This dual inheritance—Aristotle’s identification of women with matter, and Plato’s demotion of the material—would shape the development of early Christian theological attempts to reconcile Greek philosophy with Christianity regarding gender. The addition of Christian theological elements such as the creation and fall of man and woman, the resurrection of the physical body, and the nature of God would produce new and often ambiguous variations on the concept of the sexless soul.

The first four centuries of Christianity largely upheld a male Godhead, leaving only men created in the *imago Dei*; according to several early church fathers, women could achieve salvation by becoming desexed or “male” in Christ through grace and the resurrection. The shift toward Platonized Christianity, centering on an asexual

22. Christopher Roberts, *Creation and Covenant* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2007), 13–38. Several prominent early church fathers such as Tertullian, Clement, Tatian,
Godhead, would rekindle the belief in a sexless, rational soul (having been made in the sexless, rational \textit{imago Dei}) encapsulated in both male and female bodies.\textsuperscript{23} This dualistic concept dominates theology and philosophy from late antiquity until the nineteenth century and is aided particularly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by the widespread accessibility of Latin translations of Plato's dialogues.\textsuperscript{24} The sex of the soul would be tangled in centuries-long debates among theologians over whether sexual differentiation had resulted from the Fall or from divine design, whether women could independently represent the \textit{imago Dei}, whether sex extends to the soul or simply the mortal body, whether it would be eliminated or preserved after the resurrection, and what it would mean if it were preserved.\textsuperscript{25} Their conclusions typically correlated with their beliefs about the materialism and gender of God—issues that eluded unanimity in this period.

Two of the most influential Christian theologians, Augustine and Aquinas, established two predominant ways of thinking about the sex of the soul among later Western Christian philosophers that reflected the fundamental distinctions between Platonic and Aristotelian tenets. Augustine promoted the Neoplatonic adoption of a rational, sexless soul

Greory of Nyssa, and others believed that God, in creating male and female, established a sexual differentiation that served some broader, providential purpose in mortality, but would be overcome through spiritual transcendence and ultimately, the resurrection, where the soul would rise as either sexless or male. See also Benjamin Dunning, \textit{Specters of Paul: Sexual Difference in Early Christian Thought} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). In chapter 2, Dunning examines Clement's seemingly contradictory views on gender and eschatology; while Clement believed the soul was rational and sexless, for both men and women, the latter must shed the particularities of female sexual difference in a "redemptive translation into the male" (32).

23. Origen's views are one such example of this Platonic bent; he believed that God created only men and women's sexless souls; the Fall and its corrupting effects introduced sexual differentiation, a condition that would be overcome through spiritual mastery and the resurrection. See Peter Brown, \textit{The Body and Society} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 163–68.


in the image of a transcendent, immaterial God. He believed that woman, not having been made temporally in the image of God like Adam, was therefore incomplete and imperfect in the mortal world. However, the intellect or the soul of a woman was in the image of God, ensuring an equality between man and woman in their core identity: “man is made there in the image of God, where there is no sex, namely, in the spirit of his mind.”

Aquinas, with his appropriation of the Aristotelian unity of body and soul (including the perception of female inferiority), perpetuated the idea, in the words of Prudence Allen, that “sex identity would always be an essential part of personal identity.” Although both were equally capable of being perfected by grace, woman (in classic Aristotelian terms) was the passive sex providing raw material for new souls through procreation, and was less capable of intellectual virtues.

There were exceptions to these Augustinian-Neoplatonic and Thomistic Aristotelian trends, of course. Some Christian sects would utilize the sexless soul as a platform from which they could acceptably transcend or transgress their own material sex in spiritual encounters with a maternal or erotic Jesus. Others like Bernard

26. Augustine, *The Trinity* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963), XII:354, quoted in Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, 221. See also 222–24 and 301. Augustine, like Plato, requires some work to untangle his thoughts on the sex of the soul. Allen argues that Augustine's views fall along fragmented lines. While Augustine asserts that the mind has no sex and therefore that men and women were equally divine when acting according to their highest functions, he also argues that, on a temporal level, women were inferior to men, since only man could be properly described as being “in the image of God” (given Eve's creation from Adam's rib). Notwithstanding this, Augustine also believes that sexual differentiation would persist after the resurrection, for “God ... who made us man and woman will raise us up as man and woman”; however, this would not detract from their true identity as sexless souls; Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, book XII (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 17, quoted in Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, 226.

27. Allen, *The Aristotelian Revolution*, 385. Aquinas resolves the conundrum of permitting inferior females into heaven by claiming that, while women would require more grace to perfect their inferior natures, they would end up in an equal state of perfection with men in the afterlife.

28. Ibid., 386.

of Clairvaux (twelfth century AD) would cast the soul as a female wooed and pursued by a masculine Christ.30 Although in the minority, a few Christian thinkers—particularly the church mothers Julian of Norwich, Hildegard von Bingen, and other mystics—would celebrate a God with feminine attributes. Hildegard believed God possessed a perfection of both masculine and feminine elements that men and women were to emulate in order to become wholly integrated.31 In addition to their perfected bisexual divine nature, men and women would rise in the resurrection “in the integrity of their bodies and their sex”—that is, as males and females.32 In the following century, the mystic Julian of Norwich recorded a series of visions that celebrated the “motherhood” of God and Christ in a radically feminized Godhead.33 For the most part, however, the Platonic sexless soul would dominate the *querelle des femmes* of the seventeenth century.

**The Sexless Soul in the Age of Reason**

The debates over the sex of the soul and the equality of women would proliferate dramatically during the Renaissance’s *querelle des femmes* at a primarily polemical level. During the seventeenth-century Age of...
Reason, more women would join in the debate and use scripture, theology, and logic to extend the implications regarding a sexless soul in the image of a rational, asexual God toward a greater recognition of women's equality, the instability of gender categories, and the need for improving women's education.

For example, Marie de Gournay, the well-known French author of various works on aesthetics, ethics, and social criticism (and friend and editor of Montaigne's *Essais*), penned *Égalité des hommes et des femmes* (*The Equality of Men and Women*) in 1622, two decades before René Descartes's influential *Meditations* (1641). An admirer of Plato, Marie de Gournay looks not only to Plato's egalitarian depiction of women in *The Republic* (380 BC) for support of gender equality but also to Plato's identification of humankind's defining essence as the rational, sexless soul. "The human animal," she explains, "taken rightly, is neither man nor woman, the sexes having been made double, not so as to constitute a difference in species, but for the sake of propagation alone. The unique form and distinction of that animal consists only in its rational soul." Like Plato, she claims that sexual difference exists not to indelibly bifurcate the human species but simply to enable procreation. The "rational soul" is a reflection of a God without sex; and "if anyone is so dull as to imagine masculine or feminine in God," she quips, "such a person shows in a plain light that he is just as bad a philosopher as he is a theologian." According to de Gournay, sexual categories do not work for the Divine or his creations. However, this does not prevent her from advocating for women as a social class to receive more privileges, like improved education. After all, she argues, "If, therefore, women attain less often than men to the heights of excellence," it is only for "lack

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of good education.” Yet, to Marie de Gournay, the battle for women’s improved condition and acknowledged equality would remain on primarily a theoretical level; aside from encouraging better education and lamenting the lack of public offices, titles, or responsibilities for women, she does not explicitly utilize the sexless soul to advocate particular political changes.

Some of her main arguments are closely mirrored by the popular and respected Spanish writer María de Zayas. In the preface to her first publication, *Exemplary Tales of Love and Tales of Disillusion* (1637), María de Zayas feels it necessary to defend her authorship as a woman to her male readers, since many would be “amazed that a woman has the audacity not only to write a book, but to send it for printing.” Yet, she continues, anyone with good sense should not be astonished, given that no reason exists for “why we [women] would not have aptitude for books.” For, she asks her female readers rhetorically, “If this material of which men and women are made... is no more noble in them than in us, if our blood is the same thing... the soul the same as theirs—since souls are neither male nor female—what reason is there that they would be wise and presume we cannot be so?” Blood, sense, faculties, organs, and, most importantly the soul, admit no sexual distinctions, she claims; men and women are virtually the same.

The only difference she acknowledges between men and women—besides the differences in humors and temperatures, an Aristotelian concept that still held sway in Spain—is women’s lack of education and different upbringing. If, she argues, “they were to provide us with books and preceptors, we would prove as apt for posts and professorships as men.” Wryly, she concludes that she is “confident” in the “gallantry” of her male reader, who, if he should find her work displeasing, “will be able to pardon me because I was born a woman.” The implicit

39. de Zayas, 51.
40. Ibid., 47; emphasis added.
41. Ibid., 48.
42. Ibid., 51.
emphasis on the incidental nature of her female embodiment throws into relief María de Zayas’s defense of the intellectual product of her rational, sexless soul.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, an extraordinarily well-read nun in New Spain, echoes the Neoplatonic notion that the soul is without sex in many of her personal writings and poems near the turn of the seventeenth century. To her, the body is only the “neuter . . . dwelling of [her] soul.” She would pursue intellectual interests within the walls of a convent so that, as she says, “if in fact I am a woman, no one could find it out.” In a poem to the Countess de Paredes, she reminds the countess that “souls are ignorant of distance and gender.” Although Sor Juana certainly does not position herself to argue for women’s rights, she feels her personal life of the mind—one usually reserved for men—is justified by her belief in the sexless soul and the universal call to learning.

About the same time, Anna Maria van Schurman, the celebrated Dutch linguist, philosopher, and correspondent of Marie de Gournay, would add her voice to the support of the sexless soul—although via medieval forms of scholastic argumentation. In “Whether the Study of Letters Is Fitting to a Christian Woman” (1646), her defense of women enjoying the life of the mind, Schurman affirms that “whatever leads to true greatness of the soul” is fit for the Christian woman, regardless of gender. According to one scholar, Schurman’s theology “did not allow for distinctions of sex in regard to the human mind or soul.” Schurman’s own mentor, Gisbertus Voetius (a devotee of Aristotle who gets into sharp disputes with Descartes) defends the spiritual equality of

43. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, prefatory material in Obras selectas, ed. Georgina Sabat de Rivers and Elias L. Rivers (Barcelona: Noguer, 1976), quoted in Georgina Sabat-Rivers, “A Feminist Rereading of Sor Juana’s Dream,” in Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 143.
44. Ibid.
45. de la Cruz, “No. 403” in Obras selectas, quoted in Sabat-Rivers, “A Feminist Rereading,” 144.
women in his own essay "Concerning Women" (part of his major work, *Politica Ecclesiastica*, 1663–76), by arguing that "the same essential parts constitute a woman as well as a man, namely a human soul and a human body."48 The soul is not gendered male or female but is simply a "human soul" present in male and female bodies alike. As Voetius puts it, a woman "essentially has the same human body as that of a man" with only minor differences necessary for procreation; the most important thing, however, he argues, is that women's souls, as men's, are made in the image of God.49

After mid-seventeenth century, new modes of discourse would set the stage for more sophisticated defenses of the sexless soul and its implications of equality for women and men. As one scholar summarizes, "[John] Locke's empiricism enabled men and women to argue for the importance of nurture against essentialist notions of female inferiority, while [Rene] Descartes' mind-body dualism facilitated the argument that the mind has no sex."50 Indeed, the Cartesian divide between the immaterial mind and the corporeal body would enable future feminists to claim with more philosophical rigor that the soul and mind have no sex and that women, too, are defined by their capacity to think. Locke's tabula rasa notion, on the other hand, would allow feminists to throw into relief the deeply informative influence of socialization and education on individual character.

French philosopher Francois Poulain de la Barre would be the first to recognize the potential for a Cartesian case for feminism because, interestingly, Descartes himself had forged no direct link between his metaphysical dualism and the question of gender. A few decades after Descartes's *Mediations*, Poulain would write a succession of books arguing for women's equality, starting with *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (Equality of

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49. Ibid.
the Two Sexes) in 1673. In it, he pens the famous phrase "the mind has no sex," in what one scholar describes as a feminist philosophy of social Cartesianism that extends the argument for the equality of the sexes to all fields of social life. Although the book (and Poulain's authorship of it) received nominal attention in France, one scholar notes that it had a "significant influence in England following its translation in 1677 as The Woman as Good as the Man." A spate of essays followed in its wake, defending the equality and sexlessness of men's and women's minds.

One prominent essay within this group combines Poulain's belief in the sexless mind and soul with Locke's empirical methods: In Defense of the Female Sex, published anonymously in 1696 by Judith Drake. One of the first sections in the book is titled "No Distinction of Sexes in Souls." In it, she challenges her readers (in a passage uncannily similar to one in Wollstonecraft's future Vindication) that if women "be naturally defective, the Defect must be either in Soul or Body"; but in the "Soul it can't be, if what I have heard some learned Men maintain to be true, that all Souls are equal, and alike, and that consequently there is no such Distinction as Male and Female Souls." In a markedly Lockean line of thinking, she continues, "there are no innate Ideas, but that all the Notions we have are deriv'd from our external Senses." But since she sees "no Difference in the Organization of those Parts which have any Relation to, or Influence over, the Mind" and sees "no natural Impediment in the Structure of our Bodies," the difference between men and women must reside in the "disparity [between men's

51. François Poulain de la Barre, De l'Égalité des deux sexes, discours physique et moral où l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des préjugés (Paris: Chez Jean du Puis, 1673).
52. Ibid., 109.
57. Ibid.
and women's] customary education." On the other hand, women's less robust physicality—"the very make and temper of our bodies"—could indicate that women are, in fact, "chiefly intended for thought, and the exercise of the mind." Given women's fundamental intellectual aptitude, which is equal (if not superior) to men, no reason exists, the author argues, for women to be barred from civic involvement and improved education.

As Desmond Clarke explains, other contemporary works also borrow from Poulain's Cartesian ideas, with phrases plagiarized and pirated by other various English defenders of women's equality. Such works include Woman Not Inferior to Man (1739) by the pseudonymous "Sophia"; the expanded edition of that book, retitled Beauty's Triumph (1751); and Female Rights Vindicated (1758) by the pseudonymous "Lady," which was republished as Female Restoration (1780) and Female Rights Vindicated (1833). Another anonymously written text, the 1766 Biographium Faemineum: The Female Worthies, also affirms that "souls are of no sex, any more than wit, genius, or any other of the intellectual faculties." Yet, while these philosophical and epistemological tools would prove highly useful to advocates of women's innate equality in the next century, other trends would develop as the Enlightenment project gained momentum throughout Europe, complicating the defense of women's equality.

58. Ibid., 11, 23.
59. Ibid., 23.
60. Clarke, "François Poulain de la Barre."
61. Sophia [pseud.], Woman Not Inferior to Man, or A Short and Modest Vindication of the Natural Right of the Fair-Sex to a Perfect Equality of Power, Dignity, and Esteem, with the Men (London: John Hawkins, 1739); Sophia [pseud.], Beauty's Triumph, or The Superiority of the Fair Sex Invincibly Proved, (London: J. Robinson, 1751); A Lady [pseud.], Female Rights Vindicated, or The Equality of the Sexes Morally and Physically Proved (London: G. Burnet, 1758); A Lady [pseud.], Female Restoration, by a Physical and Moral Vindication of Female Talents, in Opposition to All Dogmatical Assertions Relative to Disparity in the Sexes (London: Free-Masons Coffee-House and J. MacGowan's, 1780); and A Lady [pseud.], Female Rights Vindicated, or the Equality of the Sexes Proved (South Shields, England: James Jollie, 1833). For a discussion of these works, see Clarke, "François Poulain de la Barre."

The Age of Enlightenment’s preoccupation with championing natural rights, universalizing schemes of reason and moral virtues, and identifying and moralizing the “natural order” had developed in tandem with an increasing emphasis on women as biologically, intellectually, and morally “other.” The tensions and paradoxes of the Enlightenment’s universalizing project that had coexisted with the crystallization of gender roles and sexual categories would create, as one scholar dubs it, a “watershed in European culture’s attempts to define difference between the sexes.”

A contextualizing summary from Thomas Laqueur captures the variety of forces that would fortify perceptions of women as inherently different and inferior throughout the eighteenth century:

Social and political changes are not, in themselves, explanations for the reinterpretation of bodies. The rise of Evangelical religion, Enlightenment political theory, the development of new sorts of public spaces in the eighteenth century, Lockean ideas of marriage as a contract, the cataclysmic possibilities for social change wrought by the French revolution, postrevolutionary conservatism, postrevolutionary feminism, the factory system with its restructuring of the sexual division of labor, the rise of a free market economy in services and commodities, the birth of classes, singly or in combination—none of these things caused the making of a new sexed body. Instead, the remaking of the body is itself intrinsic to each of these developments.

In other words, all the following forces combined to add great weight to the notion of a sexed body and, increasingly, a sexed soul in mainstream culture: the conservative forces in religious and political spheres, industrial trends more clearly delineating the public and private spheres, and

65. Ibid., 77.
a medical discourse increasingly linking the distinctive "biological" differences of men and women to their "moral and . . . social differences." Because of these polarizing forces, Laqueur argues that the dimorphic understanding of sex had, in fact, been "invented" in the eighteenth century. Political, social, religious, and economic forces would enable a two-sex model—one which defines men and women as biologically incommensurable creatures—to overturn the centuries-long one-sex model that had placed men and women on a single spectrum, with the female being the underdeveloped version of the male. With a two-sex model, in which men and women are completely opposite or "other,” social boundaries and gender hierarchies receive stronger justification. This would not sit well with radical progressives and intellectuals like Wollstonecraft who were alert to the ways in which women had been excluded from the Enlightenment project. While Wollstonecraft's first philosophical and political foray in print, Rights of Men, defends the overturning of aristocratic and monarchical institutions in the context of the French Revolution, her Vindication is even more passionate about the "revolution in manners" that would be needed to bring down the social institutions oppressing women and corrupting society. Questions of sex became a litmus test for how far Wollstonecraft's contemporaries would be willing to go in their embrace of Lockean psychology, Cartesian dualism, and rational scrutiny and in their belief that all human beings are perfectible, virtuous, and rational and are in possession of natural, inalienable rights.

Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication and the Sexless Soul

Mary Wollstonecraft's social circle had prepared her well to issue a revolutionary manifesto. Wollstonecraft had surrounded herself with an "eclectic circle of artists, poets, and revolutionaries" and Rational Dissenters, including the influential publisher Joseph Johnson, Joseph

68. Laqueur, Making Sex.
69. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, xix.
Priestly, Richard Price, Thomas Paine, and others. Rational Dissent—a highly cerebral, liberal, and "very reform-minded creed" that would eventually become known as Unitarianism—was a brand of Protestant Nonconformity created essentially by and for the avant-garde, educated middle class. It embraced "Lockean psychology, Newtonian cosmology, rationalist morality and reform politics" in a profoundly optimistic teleology. In contrast to the Calvinist preoccupation with humankind's sinful nature, Rational Dissent dismissed the concept of original sin and focused on humanity's inherently good nature; its capacity for personal judgment, authority, and revelation; and its potential for progress and perfectibility.

Wollstonecraft’s social circle had certainly been key in propelling Wollstonecraft into public discourse; the timing was also fortuitous, for it was a time of revolution. With the still-lingering success of the American Revolution’s republican project, the exhilarating dawning of the French Revolution, and vindications of human rights dripping ink all over Europe and the Americas, the stage had been set for


72. Taylor, Feminist Imagination, 103.

73. Wollstonecraft would go so far as to say this in another text: “We must get entirely clear of all the notions drawn from the wild traditions of original sin: the eating of the apple, the theft of Prometheus, the opening of Pandora’s box, and the other fables, too tedious to enumerate, on which priests have erected their tremendous structures of imposition, to persuade us, that we are naturally inclined to evil: we shall then leave room for the expansion of the human heart, and, I trust, find, that men will insensibly render each other happier as they grow wiser”; An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution (London: Joseph Johnson, 1794), 17.

74. The era’s most well-known works promoting human rights are Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man: Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution (London: J. S. Jordan, 1792), Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), and Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Men (1790), which was her response to Burke’s criticism in Reflections of her mentor Richard Price’s pro-French Revolution sermons. Vindications of human rights also date decades back, from Edmund Burke’s Vindication of Natural Society: A View of
Wollstonecraft to make a fresh case for a "revolution in manners" through the reconstruction of human identity based on the sexless soul. It would be an uphill battle for Wollstonecraft because Enlightenment thinkers—radicals and conservatives alike—had been intensely occupied with the "natural order" and had appealed to nature as the blueprint of the divine will, the source of morality, and "the arbiter of everything from aesthetics to the political order." Unfortunately for Wollstonecraft, the distinctions of sex and the hierarchy they had long entailed were becoming increasingly naturalized, accumulating the moral weight of religious tradition and the intellectual authority of natural economy and scientific proofs. Even her own French radical allies would hedge reforms for women because, in the words of Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, the "will of nature" dictates that women "do not aspire to exercise rights and political functions." Talleyrand-Périgord is, notably, the French politician to whom Wollstonecraft dedicates *Vindication.* Yet it is this interpretation of "the will of nature" that Wollstonecraft seeks to overturn in order to secure women full participation in the "natural rights of mankind." Her use of the sexless soul as an underlying defense for women to "share the advantages of education and government with man" is far more developed, far-reaching, politicized, and subversive than anything her seventeenth-century predecessors had dared.

What exactly does the "soul" mean to Wollstonecraft? Wollstonecraft avoids the convoluted and contested interpretations that try to utilize the Genesis creation account to answer the question "from whence the soul?" and thus dismisses the whole account as "Moses' poetical story"

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*the Miseries and Evils Arising to Mankind from Every Species of Artificial Society* (London: M. Cooper, 1756) to numerous vindications of other issues during the eighteenth century, such as tithes, the House of Lords, the right of kings, the divinity of Christ, and so on.  
75. Outram, *Cambridge History of Science,* 814.  
76. See Laqueur's *Making Sex* for an in-depth discussion regarding the medicalization of sexual difference and the two-sex model.  
79. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication,* x.
(in true Rational Dissenting fashion).\textsuperscript{80} Instead, Wollstonecraft claims straightforwardly that the soul is the source of each individual's true, immutable identity and the locus of both reason and virtue—the two defining attributes of the typical rational believer's Creator-God—on which are "stamped the heavenly image."\textsuperscript{81} Reason is the "emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator," and the means for developing virtue.\textsuperscript{82} Appealing both to the Enlightenment belief in a "universal value system based on reason and virtue"\textsuperscript{83} and to the theological axiom that God, the author of that universal system, is rational, eternal, immutable, and one, Wollstonecraft argues that all of humanity can have only one standard of virtue. And since virtue is a function of the soul, it follows that only one type of soul exists—a single, rational soul, not two sexually differentiated ones. Both men and women, "having an immortal soul," will find that their "employment of life [is] to improve," she declares.\textsuperscript{84}

Elsewhere, she again emphasizes the uniformity of the soul vis-à-vis the uniformity of virtue. Although "many ingenious arguments have

\textsuperscript{80} In case her feelings about the creation account are in any doubt, she writes, "I will simply declare, that were an angel from heaven to tell me that Moses' beautiful, poetical cosmogony, and the account of the fall of man, were literally true, I could not believe what my reason told me was derogatory to the character of the Supreme Being"; Wollstonecraft, 	extit{Vindication}, 173. Such freedom with scriptural texts was common to many Enlightenment philosophes, including Thomas Jefferson, Joseph Priestley, and others.

\textsuperscript{81} Wollstonecraft, 	extit{Vindication}, 111.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. Because of this close connection, Wollstonecraft uses soul and mind interchangeably, perhaps due to René Descartes's conflation of the soul and the mind. As one scholar explains, "Descartes did not deny the distinction between animate and inanimate, but he redrew the line between ensouled and unensouled beings. In his view, among earthly beings only humans have souls. He thus equated soul with mind: souls account for intellecction and volition, including conscious sensory experiences, conscious experience of images, and consciously experienced memories"; Gary Hatfield, "René Descartes," in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2014 ed.), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed May 10, 2013, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/descartes/. See also James Byrne, Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 68. The interchangeability of these terms is evident in one of Wollstonecraft's scathing passages directed at the contemporary philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, by giving "a sex to mind" was "not very consistent with the principles of a man who argued so warmly, and so well, for the immortality of the soul"; Wollstonecraft, 	extit{Vindication}, 85.

\textsuperscript{83} Outram, 	extit{Enlightenment}, 79.

\textsuperscript{84} Wollstonecraft, 	extit{Vindication}, 135, emphasis added.
been brought forward to prove, that the two sexes, in the acquirement of virtue, ought to aim at attaining a very different character,” Wollstonecraft argues, “it should seem, allowing them to have souls, that there is but one way appointed by Providence to lead mankind to either virtue or happiness.” If men are to “give sex a virtue,” then not only would God’s oneness and consistency be undermined, but, as Dorinda Outram points out, the entire “Enlightenment project of emancipation” through a universally applicable, “non-gendered standard of morals and rationality” would also be delegitimized.

And what of the soul’s relationship to the body? While her predecessors had comfortably accepted the Cartesian division between the rational, immortal soul/mind and the irrational, corruptible body, Wollstonecraft had seen a more complicated relationship. After all, if women’s souls were completely removed from and unaffected by bodily conditions and physical experiences, then women would have no need to be educated or politically and civically involved. Wollstonecraft’s whole argument for women’s education and empowerment rests on the mutual permeability of the soul and the body.

So even as the immortal soul is platonically “struggling to free itself from the shackles of matter,” Wollstonecraft believes that the feelings and passions are “set in motion to improve our nature,” “unfold our reason,” and prompt the soul toward “the heavenly.” She chastises her sex (and the rich, whom she and other radicals blisteringly feminize) for allowing reason to be subsumed by “senses [that] are inflamed,” becoming “prey of their senses . . . [and] blown about by every momentary gust of feeling.” Yet the passions are only detrimental insofar as they upset the dominance of reason and prevent the cultivation of virtue; Wollstonecraft does not wish to “guard the female

85. Ibid., 32.
86. Ibid., 10.
87. Outram, Enlightenment, 79.
88. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 98.
89. Ibid., 22, 20, 162, respectively. It is worth noting that a few scholars such as Ann Curthoy and Susan James have noted the resemblance between Wollstonecraft’s and Spinoza’s attitudes toward the passions in that reason and passion can, and should, work harmoniously together and are mutually necessary for human happiness and growth.
90. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 129.
heart" against "strong, persevering passions" but only against "romantic wavering feelings" that lead to idle reveries and indulgent fancies. Even if women have a tendency to be dominated by such instable feelings, she counters, the tendency would not "prove that there is a sex in souls," for "fatal passions" have "ever domineered over the whole race."92

Wollstonecraft carefully grants that the sexless souls of both men and women are not impervious to bodily passions—on the contrary, they are dependent, to a degree, on them—but she is straightforward about the influence of the physical faculties themselves on the soul. In one passage, she posits that women's "want of understanding" may have arisen from "physical or accidental weakness of faculties."93 Not only did physical strength affect the intellect; it correlated with the soul's other twin function: virtue.94 In one docile passage, Wollstonecraft reassures her readers: "Let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things; I have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue."95 Indeed, when facing the dismal record of truly emancipated women, Wollstonecraft peevishly wonders if the "few extraordinary women who have rushed in eccentric directions out of the orbit prescribed to their sex" are actually "male spirits" trapped in female bodies.96 She then surmises, however, that "if it be not philosophical to think of sex when the soul is mentioned, the inferiority must depend on the organs."97 To remedy women's physically inferior condition (and consequently, their morally and intellectually inferior condition), Wollstonecraft urges Locke's prescription of physical exercise for young girls, for the "most perfect education . . . is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart."98 Women's

91. Ibid., 163.
92. Ibid., 128.
93. Ibid., 168.
95. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 49.
96. Ibid., 68.
97. Ibid.
98. Ibid., 37.
socially prescribed sedentary lifestyle "weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves" and, presumably, prevents women from attaining virtue. In short, although the soul could inspire and refine bodily passions, the soul could also be conditioned or crippled by the education and experiences that the body encounters—and even by the inferior physical faculties the body itself might possess.

Acknowledging this connection was risky but necessary for Wollstonecraft's defense of women's right to equal and unfettered education. Yet, even while implicitly admitting the permeability between the soul and body, Wollstonecraft tries to maintain careful boundaries between the two. As one scholar notes, "[t]o make her protest Wollstonecraft had to shy away from her own occasional sense that the unsatisfactory body controlled the brain and disturbed reason. If the female body were emphasized, woman would be omitted from the Enlightenment experiment and perhaps suffer another millennium of oppression." This "Enlightenment experiment," or the audacious belief in universal reason, would be jeopardized for women so long as women would continue being defined as creatures of passion, nerves, hysterics, and other weaknesses that are seen as inherently feminine and irrational. Wollstonecraft had to tread the line uniting body and soul very carefully.

Even when that relationship between the body and soul grows hazy, Wollstonecraft refuses the incursion of sex into the soul. After all, she is "firmly persuaded" that "the distinction of sex" lies at the root of all inequalities and that "the desire of being always a woman is the very consciousness that degrades the sex." Maintaining the sexlessness of the locus for human identity and divinity—the soul—is imperative to Wollstonecraft's equalizing intentions, and the notion is often repeated throughout the text. Indeed, one scholar observes that "so repeatedly does A Vindication of the Rights of Woman refer to a notion of soul that is not sex-differentiated that it seems to authorize its case on this ground

99. Ibid., 84. See also Natalie Taylor, The Rights of Woman as Chimera (New York: Routledge, 2007), 78.
100. Todd, Revolutionary Life, 186.
101. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 121, 221.
alone." Given the ample historical precedents we have reviewed for the philosophy and religious belief of a sexless soul, Wollstonecraft may not have felt the need for much authorization; as she says, it is "not philosophical to speak of sex when the soul is mentioned." She recognizes, however, the shifting tides; in light of the growing tendencies in the eighteenth century to extend the sexual differentiation of men and women's biology into the moral and spiritual spheres, the attempt to eradicate this increasingly entrenched distinction is, she acknowledges rather desperately, a "wild wish." She realizes that, although most of her intellectual peers do not seem to agree with the medical claims for the innate incommensurability of men and women, they do seem to agree at least with Rousseau's popular belief that sexual distinction is nature's way of ensuring social stability and order.

However, one tendency of Wollstonecraft's threatens to mar her commitment to the complete eradication of the soul's sexual distinction. Throughout *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft reinforces, in some ways, sexed associations with her ideals of humanity. The words *feminine* and *masculine* are morally laden and rhetorically useful to Wollstonecraft. So while Wollstonecraft may have appealed to the sexless soul to argue for women's education and eventual liberation, she holds up "masculine" virtues as the ideals that men and women should seek. Virtually all

103. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 68.
104. Ibid., 121.
105. Londa Schiebinger, "Social Inequality as Natural Law," in *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Catherine Gallgaher and Thomas Laqueur (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 67. Interestingly, one passage in Rousseau's novel *Heloise* depicts a character saying, "You pleasantly asked me once, if souls were of a different sex. No, my dear, the soul is of no sex; but its affections make that distinction, and you begin to be too sensible of it"; Jean-Jacque Rousseau, *Eloisa: Or, a Series of Original Letters*, vol IV (London: R. Griffiths, 1761), 70. Rousseau seems to have represented an ambiguous gray area in which the soul may have no sex, but for all intents and purposes, nature had established sexual distinctions that eclipsed it. It should be noted that a few of the more radical Enlightenment philosophers, particularly Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Diderot, had held more egalitarian views on women that minimize or trivialize differences between the sexes. See Outram, *Enlightenment*, 91.
the terms Wollstonecraft uses for femininity connote vices (vanity, weakness, sentimentality, indulgence), whereas the terms she uses for masculinity represent a monopoly on celebrated, eighteenth-century virtues (reason, judgment, and independence). This pattern reflects the broader "classical republican language of politics," which "associate[s] 'manly' virtues with patriot activism and tend[s] to identify aristocracy with a feminized sensibility."¹⁰⁶ For all Wollstonecraft's insistence that there "[is] no sex in virtue," masculinity certainly seems synonymous with virtue in many instances within her text. "All those who view [manly virtues] with a philosophical eye must, I should think, wish with me that [women] may every day grow more and more masculine," she writes dryly in her introduction; a few pages later, she retorts, "I presume that rational men will excuse me for endeavoring to persuade [women] to be more masculine and respectable."¹⁰⁷ At times, she attempts to recast these traditionally masculine virtues as more gender neutral; some examples include her refusal to call the admired Catherine Macaulay's intelligence "a masculine understanding, because I admit not of such an arrogant assumption of reason"¹⁰⁸ and her correction that "manly virtues [are], more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character."¹⁰⁹ Whether explicitly appealing to masculine traits or trying to recast them as more universal virtues, Wollstonecraft still reaffirms the superiority of what society has deemed the "masculine" virtues.

Various scholars have interpreted this discursive inconsistency in different ways, positing that Wollstonecraft may have been imbuing the sexless soul with Western rational maleness, attempting a fully masculine makeover of women, trying to show the constructed nature of both masculinity and femininity, or simply working within the semantic discourse available to her.¹¹⁰ Given her commitment to the

¹⁰⁷. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 4, 10, emphasis added.
¹⁰⁸. Ibid., 235.
¹⁰⁹. Ibid., 4.
¹¹⁰. Genevieve Lloyd, in her influential monograph Man of Reason, argues that "sexlessness" is often a "covert way of privileging maleness," given the implicit and indelible association in Western thought of the material (including bodily passions) with
sexless soul as a platform from which she could logically argue the constructed nature of sexual identity (and thus, the need for reform), it is most likely that she resorts to masculine identification because, as one historian notes, both the realm of citizenship itself and "the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, had been largely confined to men." Men had appropriated the realm of virtues that Wollstonecraft believes belonged to humanity. Therefore, Wollstonecraft's appeal to masculinity does not, in fact, undercut her commitment to the sexless soul; it simply manifests the social context within which Wollstonecraft is forced to communicate. Ultimately, occasional regression in her terminology notwithstanding, Wollstonecraft's reliance on a sexless soul holds the promise

the feminine and the immaterial (including incorporeal reason) with the masculine; The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy (London: Routledge, 1993), xiii. Thus, given the "complex configuration of sexual symbolism with ideas of reason," the sexless soul inevitably "takes on a shadowy maleness"; Lloyd, Man of Reason, xiii. Other scholars go further, arguing that Wollstonecraft encourages more than a "shadowy maleness"; rather, they argue, she encourages a full identification with the masculine (deliberately or not). Leanne Maunu argues that "although [Wollstonecraft] claims otherwise, I suggest that the standard of morality Wollstonecraft believes in is essentially a 'masculine' and British one"; Women Writing the Nation (Cranbury, N): Rosemont Publishing, 2007), 162. And Steven Blakemore says that Wollstonecraft "actually aspires to be a man, for she suspects the shortest way to success and equality is to join the cultural myth-makers, to hide what seemed to her a fatal female flaw beneath the mask of male discourse"; Intertextual War: Edmund Burke and the French Revolution in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, and James Mackintosh (Cranbury, N): Associated University Press, 1997), 50. Adriana Craciun resolves the conundrum by claiming Wollstonecraft recognized both masculinity and femininity to be constructions; for if "sex can be separated from gender in women's case [as Wollstonecraft vehemently argues], it can in men's as well"; Fatal Women of Romanticism (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 69. Seeing "natural 'manliness' . . . as a construction' enables Wollstonecraft to appeal to masculine virtues without privileging men themselves; ibid., 69. Masculinity is simply the social construction, or amalgamation of virtues, that happens to capture the right ideals. Barbara Taylor offers what seems to be the most compelling explanation: Wollstonecraft is not appealing to constructions but shattering them. Wollstonecraft's "wild hope" is, ultimately, "for a revolution of sexual subjectivity which will transform—at times she even hints supersedes—gender as a psychological reality as well as a cultural force"; Barbara Taylor, "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Wild Wish of Feminism," History Workshop 33 (Spring 1992): 213, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4289149. 111. Taylor, "Wild Wish of Feminism," 206.
of escaping the binaries responsible for the inequalities that prevent
women—and society—from achieving the wisdom and virtue for
which they, as God's children, are destined. Sexual distinction is the
last terrain to overcome—the "ne plus ultra [highest point] of demo-
cratic leveling," as Taylor puts it.\textsuperscript{112} However, if the sexless soul had been
a fairly common thesis in the seventeenth century and, according to
Wollstonecraft, was a philosophical given in at least a few intellectual
circles of the eighteenth century ("if it be not philosophical to think
of sex when the soul is mentioned . . ."), it certainly would not be by
the turn of the century. The controversy this radical egalitarianism
would stir, and the few radical supporters it would gain, illuminates
a culminating point in a debate that had been brewing for centuries.
Wollstonecraft's radical politicization of the concept, combined with
shifting intellectual, social, economic, and scientific tides that increas-
ingly promoted a two-sex model of the human body and human nature
would contaminate the soil necessary for the idea to flourish.

**Contemporary Responses to Wollstonecraft's**

**"Sexless Soul"**

If a poem of Susanna Wright, the Quaker poetess, could be used as a
gauge, the decline of the sexless soul's legitimacy would not take long;
in 1750, she could write that "No right has man his equal to control, /
Since, \textit{all agree}, there is no sex in soul."\textsuperscript{113} But by 1792, when Wollstone-
craft would publish \textit{Vindication}, the agreement would seem anything
but unanimous. The backlash against the French Revolution (including,
in particular, the sexual radicalism and social subversion it had pro-
moted) would make the idea increasingly suspect toward the end of
the eighteenth century. Of course, Wollstonecraft's own sexually radical
reputation would not help. \textit{Vindication} had only a few short years to be
attacked or defended on its own merits before the book and its author's

\textsuperscript{112} Taylor, \textit{Feminist Imagination}, 3.

\textsuperscript{113} Susana Wright, "To Eliza Norris—at Fairhill" (1750), in \textit{Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions}, ed. Lisa L. Moore, Joanna Brooks, and Caroline Wigginton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 131, emphasis added.
reputation would be sabotaged in the scandalous *Memoir* (1798) written by William Godwin, her husband, who would publish it a year after Wollstonecraft died from a childbirth-related infection. After *Memoir*, it would be difficult for people to untangle Wollstonecraft’s ideas from her shockingly liberal sexual lifestyle that the book exposes (including illegitimate children, sexual affairs, and her initially unwed cohabitation with the political radical and Dissenter-turned-atheist Godwin himself).

Nonetheless, Wollstonecraft’s widely read *Vindication* seems to have marked her as the sexless soul’s most vocal champion, and the idea garnered a smattering of ardent support from Wollstonecraft’s contemporaries at home and abroad. One early review of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* from Dissenting minister William Enfield in the radical *Monthly Review* heartily endorses Wollstonecraft’s argument that the “mind is of no sex” and urged “both men and women . . . to regard themselves, and . . . be treated by each other, as human beings.”

American advocate for women’s rights Judith Sargent Murray had defended the idea in print two years before Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, though, according to Marion Rust, their arguments anticipated each other on certain issues. Murray’s 1790 essay “On the Equality of the Sexes” opens with a poetic verse that presages the vision of Wollstonecraft’s sexless utopia: “Yet haste the era, when the world shall know / That such [sexual] distinctions only dwell below;/ The soul unfetter’d, to no sex confin’d / Was for the abodes of cloudless day design’d.” Rust opines that Murray’s “single greatest contribution to female equality” is the “popularization of the concept of the sexless soul” with which she “was able not only to defend the disgraced Wollstonecraft and preach the merits of female self-regard but also to advise her readers that

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gender itself... did not survive into the afterlife.” On the other hand, perhaps she had been in a position to defend Wollstonecraft because her treatment of the sexless soul had been more socially palatable thanks to Murray’s endorsement of profound differences in the aptitudes and gifts between men and women. For instance, she writes to her friend John Winthrop, explaining why a widowed father is not equipped to raise a daughter: “Nature, although equal in her distribution is nevertheless various in her gifts, and her discriminating lines are perfectly obvious.” Those lines are not so obvious—or perhaps so significant—to Wollstonecraft.

One of Murray’s peers, Annis Boudinot Stockton, poet and hostess for one of the most famous literary salons of the American colonies, would discuss Wollstonecraft’s advocacy of the sexless soul in an exchange of letters with her daughter. She summarizes, “You know it is a favorite tenet with me that there is no sex in Soul—I believe it as firmly as I do my existence.” But, like Murray, she moderates her position: “but at the same time, I do not think that the sexes were made to be independent of each other... if our education [were] the same, our improvement would be the same—but there is no occasion for exactly the same education.” Stockton’s reticence signals the discomfort even supporters of the sexless soul felt toward upsetting the status quo or dismissing the sexual distinctions that render men and women less autonomous than what Wollstonecraft idealized.

English historian and feminist Lucy Aikin is more straightforward about the sexless soul in her own feminist history of Western culture in *Epistles on Women* (1810). One scholar notes her usage of the

120. Ibid.
121. Lucy Aikin, *Epistles on Women: Exemplifying their Character and Condition in Various Ages and Nations, with Miscellaneous Poems* (London: J. Johnson, 1810). Aikin was the niece of the notable British poet and pro-revisionary Dissenter Anna Laetitia Barbauld, whose essentialist views Wollstonecraft criticizes in *Vindication*. 
“Wollstonecrafted claim”\textsuperscript{122} of the sexless soul in a poetic verse of her text: “Souls have no sex; sublimed by Virtue’s lore / Alike they scorn the earth and try to soar.”\textsuperscript{123} By the time Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the Romantic poet and former peer of Wollstonecraft, starts writing his \textit{Notebooks, 1808–1819}, he apparently sees enough supporters of the idea for him to wonder, “Is it true what is so \textit{constantly affirmed}, that there is no Sex in Souls?”; yet he himself is not convinced: “I doubt it—I doubt it exceedingly.”\textsuperscript{124}

Coleridge is not the only one unconvinced. Judging by the “flood of didactic literature” that “poured from the pens of popular writers advocating a style of womanhood so steeped in the feminine, so excessively assertive of sexual difference, that to the modern reader it smacks of parody,” cultural tides favored the sexed soul and the social stability it secures.\textsuperscript{125} Social harmony and “nature’s order” became paramount, making Wollstonecraft’s advocacy of the sexless soul all the more distasteful to those in conservative circles who associated such radical egalitarianism with the alarming trajectory of French Revolution politics. According to Edmund Burke, the blurring of gender distinctions had fostered “domineering,” shameless women who are mixing with ferocious men in an “inverted order in all things.”\textsuperscript{126} Rousseau had felt similar alarm at the chaos that would result from eradicating sexual roles and identities, as women, “unable to make themselves into men . . . make us into women.”\textsuperscript{127} Taylor summarizes Rousseau’s anxieties

\begin{footnotes}
\item 122. Wolfson, \textit{Borderlines}, 310.
\item 124. Coleridge, \textit{Notebooks, 1808–1819}, quoted as epigraph in Wolfson, “\textit{Gendering the Soul},” 33; emphasis added. Coleridge would follow up with a more emphatic disagreement as he develops his philosophy of the “union of difference”: “I would hazard the impeachment of heresy, rather than abandon my belief that there is a sex in our SOULS”; Coleridge, Letter (to a Lady), \textit{The Friend}, 7 December 1809, quoted as epigraph in Wolfson, “\textit{Gendering the Soul},” 33.
\item 126. Edmund Burke, \textit{French Revolution}, 63.
\end{footnotes}
thusly: “Women will become men; men will become women; paternity will be uncertain; society’s moral structure will disintegrate.”

In light of the threat that such leveling would pose to the division of labor and social hierarchy, the authors of another review conclude that they are “infinitely better pleased with the present system” and that women themselves would be happier too. Thomas Hearn also urges the eschewal of the “miserable phantoms of metaphysical equality” in his *Short View of the Rise and Progress of Freedom in Modern Europe* (1793). The *English Review* opines, “Miss Wollstonecraft, if she were to be appointed AUTOCRATIX over all the human species, in arranging the affairs of nations, as well as those of the different sexes, would really, in many points, ‘turn the world upside down.’” “Let all things be done in order,” the review concludes piously, because “this is the precept of grace.” The sexless soul, and all the “metaphysical equality” it entailed, imperiled the delicate social order whose harmony depended, in large part, on sexual distinctions.

In typical Enlightenment fashion, other reviewers appeal to the divine will as manifest in nature’s patterns. Laetitia Hawkins reflects this mentality in a direct response to Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* with her *Letters on the Female Mind* (1792), arguing that “it cannot, I think, be truly asserted, that the intellectual powers know no difference of sex. Nature certainly intended a distinction.” Also concurring with this opinion is Benjamin Rush, the famous American physician whose medical lectures would do much to forward the notion of the male and female difference. Responding to “the ingenious and eloquent female author of the *Rights of Women,*” Rush argues, “There is an original

132. Ibid., 352.
difference in the bodies and minds of men and women, stamped upon both in the womb by the hand of nature,” with a clear “line between male and female.”

This is not to say that oddities could not occur; he admits that doctors found “as many female minds and bodies among men as [they find] masculine minds and bodies among women.”

Hannah More, a staunchly conservative Evangelical moralist and one of the era’s most prolific British female authors, may have agreed with many of Wollstonecraft’s opinions on improving girls’ education, but she had refused to read Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication.* She, for one, is convinced that the “preservation and observance” of the distinction and “natural bias” in the “mind [of] each sex” is necessary for men’s and women’s happiness.

In addition, at the turn of the eighteenth century, evangelical Christianity’s “ideological shift of stunning proportions” would recast women from their former roles as inferior, weak, and sensual creatures to “apostles of virtue,” capable of exerting a redemptive moral influence on society. With the increased reliance on sexual difference being heightened, the threatening implications of the sexless soul would play a pivotal role in how Susan Rowson would craft her image as an author. Notably, Rowson is the British-American author of America’s first best seller, *Charlotte Temple,* originally published in England in 1791. According to one scholar, Rowson’s contemporaries would seek to “keep Rowson from suffering the fate of a Wollstonecraft” in urging her not to invoke the radical idea of “her fitness as a sexless soul.” Instead, her publishers use Rowson to “feminize the novelistic enterprise,” in


135. Ibid., 659–60.


order for her "womanly capacity to remain above grubby considerations of profit, fame and fortune." As Wollstonecraft's reputation had continued to deteriorate in the onslaught of vicious attacks in the wake of Godwin's Memoir, critics like Richard Polwhele would make any association with the sexless soul and Wollstonecraft's other radical ideas even more hazardous. In a particularly vicious passage of his poem, The Unsex'd Females (1798), Polwhele insinuates that "[Wollstonecraft] died a death that strongly marked the distinction of the sexes, by pointing out the destiny of women, and the diseases to which they are liable" (in this case, infection from giving birth) and hopes that, with her ignoble death, "the fallacy of her doctrines and the effects of an irreligious conduct, might be manifested to the world." It is, in Polwhele's eyes, an inexorable lesson that women should learn: the distinction of the sexes will be preserved in life-and-death situations, radical philosophies notwithstanding.

Even Wollstonecraft's daughter, Mary Shelley, would muse decades later in an 1835 letter about her mother's belief in a sexless soul: "In short my belief is—whether there be sex in souls or not—that the sex of our material mechanism makes us quite different creatures—better though weaker but wanting in the higher grades of intellect." One scholar interprets Shelley's own famous work, Frankenstein, as a manifestation of "one of Shelley's central tenets... that her mother's feminism reduces the human to a rational corpse." Shelley's admission of the overpowering—and even enriching—'influence of the sexed, material body captures what appears to be the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries' dominant sentiment, as Taylor aptly summarizes: "the soul may be sexless, but its earthly vehicles patently are not: a fact that acquired increasing weight over the course of the eighteenth century" and beyond.

140. Ibid., 139, 115, respectively.
142. Mary Shelly to Maria Gisborn, June 11, 1835, quoted in Wolfson, "Gendering the Soul," 33.
Early- to Mid-Nineteenth-Century Permutations of the Sexless Soul

As the Enlightenment project withered in the wake of the guillotines and gunpowder of France's Reign of Terror, a reinvigorated conservatism and middle-class reformism would sweep through England, extending across the Atlantic to America. With the rise of an "overtly utilitarian discipline of political economy" and the "triumph of anti-intellectual Evangelicalism," women's place in the private, domestic, and wholly feminine sphere became more entrenched. Romantic ideals would also play a role in reinforcing sexual distinctions, as both Philip Shaw and Susan Wolfson demonstrate. According to these scholars, some male romantic poets—including William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and William Blake—often portray the feminine as other, alien, and, in some instances, dangerous. However, more positive portrayals of sexual difference exist in romantic literature as well, typified in Coleridge's approving affirmation that "there is a Sex in our Souls as well as in our perishable garments." Another example is Alfred Lord Tennyson's poetic claim that "Woman is not undeveloped Man, / But diverse; could we make her as the Man, / Sweet love were slain; whose dearest bond is this, / Not like to like, but like in difference."
Although these trends diverged from Wollstonecraft's efforts to champion the sexless soul and secure social and intellectual equality for women, the increased emphasis on sexual differentiation also opened up different possibilities for advocates of women's rights. One scholar has surmised that "[feminists] either had to argue that women were the same as men, and therefore deserved equal treatment; or that women were essentially different from men but on those grounds 'womanly' qualities should be brought to the public spheres of education, politics, and religion." While it risks oversimplification, this formulation is helpful in describing the orientation that many nineteenth-century feminists would adopt in their advocacy of women's rights. The permutations resulting from the combination of a sexless soul and sexed body would create more varied understandings of human nature and spiritual identity.

Indeed, the debate over the sex of the soul would not end with Wollstonecraft's death. As Eileen Botting and Christine Carey have shown, women's rights advocates across the Atlantic would pick up Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, engaging with and incorporating many of Wollstonecraft's ideas into their own philosophies and political platforms. Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sarah Grimké, as well as other intellectuals from major literary journals and magazines, would continue debating over the extent to which sexual differentiation affects man's and woman's innermost locus of identity. No one would advocate for the sexless soul and the eradication of sexual distinctions in society to the extent that Wollstonecraft did, although Grimké would lean in that Plato-inspired direction. Others, such as Stanton, would find the surest guarantee for women's equality by arguing the opposite—that women were intellectually and spiritually distinct, their particular genius not replicable by men. Still others, like Fuller, would blend both strands in a Hildegardian model that upheld an androgynous human nature in which both the male and female elements were essential. The


sex of the soul represented the key for many feminists and intellectuals striving to advance women’s rights, although consensus was no closer than it had been in the debates of the early church fathers.

A well-known antislavery and women’s rights activist, Sarah Grimké would become both a convert to Quakerism and, thanks to feminist Lucretia Mott, to Wollstonecraftian philosophy. In her 1838 *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman*, Grimké claims that men and women’s moral and intellectual equality stems from their shared spiritual pedigree, having been created jointly “in the image of God.” As dual inheritors of the heavenly image, she writes, “not one particle of difference [is] intimated as existing between them”; woman is “clothed by her Maker with the same rights, and of course . . . the same duties” as man. The well-known American author and journalist Edward D. Mansfield concurs in his treatise on education a few years later, stating as a “broad fact” that “the human soul has no sex,” for it is the “consciousness that the original and distinctive attributes of spirit are the same in men and women, and among all nations,” affirming that “human nature is not two.” The pseudonymous male author “G,” in the well-respected literary journal *New England Magazine*, offers a slightly moderated view of the soul that, while sexless, still takes on “a tinge from [one’s] sex” by virtue of its embodied state and consequent stations and duties. Although the author emphatically argues that “there is no sex in the soul” and that “their [men and women’s] abilities, their capacities, their affections, are equal,” the “original texture” of the sexless soul is nonetheless “lost in the thousand webs, which custom, education and society has woven around them.” The author articulates the permeability of soul and body that Wollstonecraft had reluctantly implied;

151. Ibid., 713.
156. Ibid., 280.
while urging his readers to “remember, that spirits have no sex,” he also reminds women to recognize that souls are nonetheless “formed by their interests and objects.”\(^{157}\) “Whilst you feel that you are intellectual beings,” he concludes, “never forget that you are women. That is your station; there you are to act; there you must be useful; there you must find your happiness.”\(^{158}\)

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, staunch feminist and co-organizer of the first women’s rights convention at Seneca Falls in 1848, would fully embrace and propound the sexed nature of the soul. As much as she openly admires and champions Wollstonecraft, their objectives would part ways at a crucial point.\(^ {159}\) The liberation of women, according to Stanton, depends on recognizing the distinctiveness and otherness of both sexes, rather than trying to mask or expunge their sexual differences. “No doubt there is sex in the mortal and spiritual world,” she argues emphatically, asserting that the complementary nature of “the masculine and female elements” is vital to ensuring that humankind “reach the divinest heights of which he is capable.”\(^ {160}\) Both man’s and woman’s potential could only be realized through a full recognition and uniting of their true natures as harmonized sexed souls. In later correspondence with a friend about the flagging suffrage movement, Stanton marvels at the “indifference and apathy of our women” regarding this truth: “When philosophers come to see that ideas as well as babies need the mother soul for their growth and perfection, that there is sex in mind and spirit, as well as body, they will appreciate the necessity of a full recognition of womanhood in every department of life.”\(^ {161}\) The surest way to emancipate women, she says, is to remind

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157. Ibid.
158. Ibid., 283.
159. Stanton’s ideological parting of ways with Wollstonecraft is evident in her correspondence with Lucretia Mott, and in the articles she would publish about Wollstonecraft’s life and philosophy in her weekly newspaper *The Revolution*.
them of the unique nature of their “mother soul” and prove their indis­ 

pensability as women to the civic world. Women must, Stanton stoutly 

urges, unite in solidarity to “stand by womanhood.”\footnote{Stanton, Letter to Martha Coffin Wright, Highwood Park, March 21, 1871, quoted in Ann D. Gordon, ed., \textit{The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony: Against an Aristocracy of Sex, 1866 to 1873} (New Brunswick, Canada: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 428, quoted in Botting and Carey, \textit{“Wollstonecraft’s Philosophical Impact,”} 717.} Wollstonecraft, 

on the other hand, believed that dissolving “womanhood” in the 

broader ocean of humanity was the way to liberate women; rather than 

fighting for “womanhood,” women were to “obtain a character as a 

human being, regardless of the distinction of sex.”\footnote{Wollstonecraft, \textit{Vindication}, 7, emphasis added.}

The gifted transcendentalist Margaret Fuller had been a fellow 

admirer and defender of Wollstonecraft who engaged directly with Woll­ 

stonecraft’s ideas in her own landmark work \textit{Woman in the Nineteenth 

Century} (1843). Fuller represents a middle ground in which the soul has 

both masculine and feminine elements. Like Stanton, Fuller believes that 

sexual distinctions should be celebrated, not erased; unlike Stanton or 

Wollstonecraft, Fuller believes that such dualism is housed within the 

soul of each man and woman. “Male and female represent the two sides of 

the great radical dualism . . . there is no wholly masculine man, no purely 

feminine woman,” she explains; hence, masculine and feminine qualities 

intermingle in the human soul like fluids.\footnote{Margaret Fuller, \textit{Woman in the Nineteenth Century} (London: H. G. Clark, 1845), 108.} The difference between men 

and women is merely a matter of emphasis; women are characterized 

by a greater degree of “femality,” or the “especial genius of woman,” and 

vice versa for men.\footnote{Ibid., 107.} Only when the soul has completely developed both 

aspects of its nature could one claim that “all soul is the same” in the 

“totality or wholeness of the animating powers.”\footnote{Ibid., 108.} The Sexuality of Nature 

(1853), a book published a few years later by the educator and botanist 

Leopold Hartley Grindon, closely reflects this commingling duality of 

the soul: “For just as mankind in general is of twofold composition, 

consisting of both men and women,” he explains, “so is there a duality 

\textit{Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Women’s Rights and the American Political 

in the soul of every individual . . . a blended male and female.”167 Like Fuller (and Stanton, on an individuated level), Grindon claims that the “healthiest and comeliest condition of the soul is when these two great principles of its being, or its masculine and feminine, are well adjusted; when they are married.”168 By and large, the most common “marriage” in this era, however, would remain between emphatically sexually differentiated beings—not the androgynous elements of the individual soul.

Conclusion

The debate over the sex of the soul would remain alive and well throughout the nineteenth century. As this sampling of commentaries throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries shows, the debate’s terrain is broad and complex. The sex of the soul would remain entangled in related debates over the “natural” order, the nature of embodiment, the influences of society and culture, the nature of God, and other key issues of the time. Advocates defended women’s equality from the point of view of the sexless soul as well as the sexed, just as did critics of feminist thought. Although defenses of the sexless soul would not lead directly to any of the radical reforms or “Utopian dreams”169 that Wollstonecraft had wistfully envisioned, the debate over the sex and nature of the soul continue to both shape and mirror opinions about the social order and the “woman’s question.”

For Wollstonecraft, at least, her feminist aims were closely tied with—if not subsumed in—a utopian vision in which all human beings would be restored to their rational and spiritual identity as sexless souls pursuing virtue and wisdom. As Taylor points out in her seminal study on Wollstonecraft’s religious influences, it is impossible to understand Wollstonecraft’s thoughts without taking into account the religious consciousness that animates her work. Given Wollstonecraft’s centrality to the development of feminism, Taylor explains, analyses of Wollstonecraft’s particular religious understanding can “give us more than

168. Ibid., 29–30.
169. Wollstonecraft, Vindication, 72.
local insights into the religious impulse as it has operated across the feminist tradition." Indeed, it is impossible to understand the history of feminism without discussing the religious ideas that undergirded early discourse. After all, as Sarah Apetrei notes, religion is "not just the envelope for an unconsciously secular or self-serving agenda: it [is] the very origin and goal of feminism." Of course, debates over the sex of the soul would not have been labeled or compartmentalized as "religious" by such women in the past; the sex of the soul was no mere social, political, or philosophical idea but was a question of spiritual, moral, and even eschatological proportions.

Wollstonecraft's wild wish to eradicate sexual distinctions vis-à-vis a sexless soul shorn from earthly baggage still persists as a logical conclusion, fanciful chimera, or misguided aim to many feminists today. In chasing after her own utopian dream, Wollstonecraft crystalizes one of the enduring dilemmas of feminism. Does the liberation of women necessitate the erasure of the feminine? Or is this erasure simply an oppression of another kind? Judging by the responses of her contemporaries, her successors, and today's ongoing debates, neither side of the controversy is without its inherent perils.