

SCIENZA & POLITICA

per una storia delle dottrine



Elements for a Feminist Genealogy of Indignation: Mary Wollstonecraft's «Most Melancholy Emotions of Sorrowful Indignation»

Elementi per una genealogia femminista dell'indignazione:
le «più malinconiche emozioni di dolorosa indignazione»
di Mary Wollstonecraft

Aurélie Knüfer

aurelie.knufer@umpv.fr

Université Paul-Valéry – Montpellier

ABSTRACT

By examining the meaning and function of indignation in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* from a feminist perspective, this article contributes to the philosophical history of the notion. It shows that this foundational text for feminist philosophy offers a complex and nuanced problematisation of indignation. Wollstonecraft gives it a prominent place among the affects that should accompany philosophical activity, while also describing its tensions, limitations, and dangers. Her work thus helps us grasp indignation's equivocal character.

KEYWORDS: Mary Wollstonecraft; Indignation; Feminist Philosophy; Moral Emotions; History of Concepts.

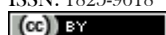
Prendendo in esame il significato e la funzione dell'indignazione in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* di Mary Wollstonecraft da una prospettiva femminista, l'articolo contribuisce alla storia filosofica di questo concetto. Mostra che questo testo fondativo della filosofia femminista offre una problematizzazione dell'indignazione complessa e sfumata. Wollstonecraft le assegna un posto di rilievo tra gli affetti che dovrebbero accompagnare l'attività filosofica, mentre ne descrive tensioni, limiti e pericoli. La sua opera permette quindi di cogliere il carattere equivoco dell'indignazione.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Mary Wollstonecraft; Indignazione; Filosofia femminista; Emozioni morali; Storia dei concetti.

SCIENZA & POLITICA, vol. XXXVIII, no. 74, 2026, pp. 79-88

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1825-9618/25879>

ISSN: 1825-9618



The project of tracing a genealogy of indignation, including both defences of it and the criticisms and condemnations to which it has regularly been subjected, is highly topical. In a recent essay, the journalist Salomé Saqué points out that «indignation has been getting a bad press lately» and notes the consistency with which, in France, right-wing and far-right newspapers and media outlets attack «indignation»¹: any struggle against discrimination and oppression that can be associated with this term is systematically discredited and dismissed as the irrational outbursts of violent youth, supposedly resulting from their indoctrination or lack of education. In response to these attacks, the journalist argues that indignation is, on the contrary, an ethical and political faculty: the movement of rational beings who love justice, are capable of empathy, and demand dignity for all. She considers it to be one of the driving forces behind collective mobilisation, struggle, and social progress. This dispute is not new: it was already underway when Stéphane Hessel's pamphlet *Indignez-vous!* (*Time for Outrage!*) was first published in 2010, leading to the emergence of the «Indignados» movement on the international stage. However, we can nevertheless hypothesise that its origins go back further.

How did indignation come to be the subject of such controversy? How did its defenders and detractors conceive of it? What political power did they attribute to it? What strategic importance did they attach to it? A few studies have taken this concept as their subject, reflecting the growing interest of philosophy and social sciences in the question of emotions in politics³. However, it has not yet been the subject of a major investigation in the field of the history of philosophy⁴. This article aims to contribute to such an undertaking, by arguing for the need to adopt a feminist perspective on the question.

When applied to concepts specific to political theory, the methodology of feminist history of philosophy can take several forms⁵. For example, it can focus on bringing out the masculinist, androcentric, and even racist nature of certain concepts⁶. But it can also examine how these concepts have been defined, appropriated, and used by philosophers committed to the defence of women. The aim of such a

¹ S. SAQUÉ, *Résister*, Paris, Payot, 2024, p. 74. She writes: «For example, in 2022, when calls to boycott the World Cup in Qatar emerged, BFM TV lamented an “indignation of variable geometry”, while *Le Point* explained that “indignation at every turn is totally counterproductive”. *Valeurs actuelles* railed against a “youth spoon-fed on grand indignations” in connection with ecological and anti-racist struggles, and *Le Figaro* deplores a “permanent indignation that transforms the public space into a vast hubbub”. All translations into English are our own, except where indicated otherwise.

² S. HESSEL, *Indignez-vous!*, Paris, Rue de l'échiquier, 2025. The text, originally published in 2010, has sold several million copies and been translated into some forty languages.

³ Among the few works that have taken indignation as their subject, we can mention S. PARÍS ALBERT, *Philosophy, Recognition and Indignation*, «Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice», 25, 3/2013, pp. 336-342. In the wake of the «Indignados» movement in Spain, Sonia París Albert examines the meaning of «recognition» in the context of a «philosophy of peace» and «debates on the relationship between non-violent social movements and social justice», p. 336. She links her investigation to a genealogy of «recognition». Another relevant article is C. GALLI, *Indignation, Today*, trans. C. Casarino, «Cultural Critique», 87/2014, pp. 203-212. Galli analyses manifestations of indignation in contemporary Italy, marked by the triumph of neoliberalism and endemic corruption. Finally, we should mention L. KAUFMAN, *Indignation*, in G. ORIGGI (ed), *Passions sociales*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2019, pp. 328-335. Laurence Kaufman examines the different forms of indignation, as well as their effects in the public sphere, through the lens of cognitive science and sociology.

⁴ In a 2006 article, Pierre Zaoui outlined a genealogy of «indignation», going back to Roman antiquity: P. ZAOUÏ, *Colère et indignation*, «Vacarme», 37/2006, pp. 66-68. He considers that, whereas in antiquity «anger» and «indignation» were contradictory, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards «we perhaps see this ancient contradiction shatter, not in favour of a resolution, but of a much more complex constellation of contradictions» (p. 67).

⁵ For a general overview of the feminist history of philosophy, see C. WITT – L. SHAPIRO – C. VAN DYKE – L.L. MOLAND – M. ROBINSON (eds), *Feminist History of Philosophy*, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2000), Fall 2025 Edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2025/entries/feminism-femhist>.

⁶ V. MOZZICONACCI, *Apprendre à philosopher en féministe*, Paris, La Dispute, 2025, pp. 139-147.



study is not only to do justice to women philosophers for their contributions that have been marginalised or erased from history, but also, and above all, to gain a deeper and richer understanding of concepts, taking seriously the plural and conflictual nature of any genealogy⁷.

To this end, a focus on the work of Mary Wollstonecraft can be justified in two ways. Firstly, we know the role and importance of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*⁸ in the history of feminist philosophy⁹, and in that of philosophy in general¹⁰. Secondly, this foundational text happens to contain a complex and nuanced problematisation of the very concept of indignation. Admittedly, Wollstonecraft does not develop this subject at length, yet right from the opening lines of the work she gives it a prominent place among the affects that should accompany philosophical activity. She also counterbalances her defence of a specifically philosophical indignation with a description of its tensions, limitations, and dangers. Thus, before indignation became the subject of political polarisation, Wollstonecraft presented herself as an indignant philosopher while highlighting the pitfalls of such a stance. It is this equivocal character of indignation that reading *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* should help us to understand.

1. Being Indignant «As a Philosopher»

The concept of indignation, in the form of the noun «indignation» and the adverb «indignantly», appears about fifteen times in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The noun «dignity» also appears about thirty times. Finally, there are four occurrences of the verb «dignify», relating to human character, the mind, or feelings. In addition to this significant number of occurrences, we must emphasise the importance that the philosopher attaches to indignation in her critique of inequalities between men and women. The introduction to the work begins with these words:

After considering the historic page, and viewing the living world with anxious solicitude, the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation have depressed my spirits, and I have sighed when obliged to confess, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial¹¹.

These lines should not be read as mere subjective confessions. Rather, they should be considered in their normative dimension, insofar as they outline a philosophical ethos in which «indignation» must occupy a central place. Accordingly, Wollstonecraft states in Chapter 2: «As a philosopher, I read with indignation the plausible epithets which men use to soften their insults»¹². With these few words, Wollstonecraft accomplishes three things. Firstly, by claiming the status of «philosopher», she rejects the male appropriation of this activity and affirms the possibility

⁷ M. FOUCAULT, *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire*, in M. FOUCAULT, *Dits et Écrits I, 1954-1975* (1971), Paris, Gallimard, 2001, pp. 1004-1024.

⁸ M. WOLLSTONECRAFT, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in J. TODD – M. BUTLER (eds), *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Vol. 5*, London, Routledge, 2016.

⁹ M. GARCIA, *Philosophie féministe. Patriarcat, savoirs, justice*, Paris, Vrin, 2021, p. 303.

¹⁰ M. LE DEUFF, *Le sexe du savoir*, Paris, Aubier, 1998, pp. 184-187.

¹¹ M. WOLLSTONECRAFT, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 73.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 103.

for a woman to be recognised as such¹³. Secondly, she rejects the division between reason and affect that generally defines philosophy. Thirdly, she makes indignation a legitimate affect. By linking indignation and philosophy, then, she simultaneously gives legitimacy to the former and redefines the latter by extending its boundaries. In Wollstonecraft's view, philosophy is not, and should not be, a purely theoretical activity. It always emerges from a passionate foundation; it develops, and must develop, accompanied by certain affects¹⁴. It should not be confused with contemplation carried out by a disinterested and disembodied spectator: it is the manifestation of a subject's engagement in the world. The emotions aroused by the spectacle of injustice and violence are the starting point for all philosophical inquiry.

In fact, the first paragraph of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* outlines the successive stages of a method. Indignation is what is felt by those who are already affectively committed to understanding society and history, in an attitude of «anxious solicitude». One must first have observed and studied the world with concern in order to feel indignation, which is presented here as an affect mixed with sadness and despondency. Then, following these lines, Wollstonecraft shows how, after experiencing the «depression» characteristic of indignation, she turned to books in order to shed light on the causes of the indignity to which women's attitudes or characters have been reduced: «I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools». Indignation is therefore a passion that must give rise to political and social inquiry and transcend itself in the examination of the causes of present circumstances.

2. From Dignity to Indignation

But what exactly is the nature of indignation? We tend to reduce it too quickly to its passionate and individual dimension. However, although Wollstonecraft never gives a formal definition of it, everything indicates that she attributes a mixed nature to it: it lies at the boundary between reason and passion, and it is this subjective experience that connects the individual to others. This is what emerges in this text from the brief outline she provides of its origins and of the conditions under which it arises. When discussing the education of women in chapter 3, Wollstonecraft states:

if they be really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves; or, like the brutes who are dependent on the reason of man, when they associate with him; but cultivate their minds, give them the salutary, sublime curb of principle, and let them attain conscious dignity by feeling themselves only dependent on God. [...]

These may be termed Utopian dreams. – Thanks to that Being who impressed them on my soul, and gave me sufficient strength of mind to dare to exert my own reason, till, becoming dependent only on Him for the support of my virtue, I view, with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex¹⁵.

¹³ On the question of women claiming for themselves the title of philosopher, in Mary Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries, see M.L. WALLACE, *Mary Hays's «Female Philosopher»: Constructing Revolutionary Subjects in Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, in A. CRACIUN – K.E. LOKKE (eds), *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 233-260.

¹⁴ On this point, see B. TAYLOR, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 105.



We have mentioned that indignation should be the starting point for philosophical inquiry, and give it its direction, but we should add that this is only possible for a person whose mind has been sufficiently cultivated and who knows how to «exercise» their own reason. It is only when women become autonomous, when they rely solely on their relationship with God in their rational activity, that they can feel «indignation» at the offences committed against them. We find here, with a few essential modifications, the motto proposed by Kant a few years earlier, summing up the spirit of the Enlightenment: «*Sapere aude!* Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding»¹⁶. For Wollstonecraft, however, this courage is provided by the subject's relationship with divine transcendence. For women, «attain[ing] conscious dignity» means breaking free from their dependence on men, such that they are dependent only on God. This second form of dependence does not negate autonomy but, on the contrary, makes it possible: the relationship with the divine frees women from their subjection by restoring to them their own power to act.

The capacity for feeling indignation is not possessed from the outset: it stems not only from the autonomous use of reason, but also from reflective activity. Indeed, it is not so much rationality itself that is decisive here, but rather the recognition of it. Furthermore, the «awareness» of their own dignity that women acquire by freeing themselves from their subjection to men is what enables them to subsequently identify the injustices done to other women. The indignation that Wollstonecraft says she felt when she saw the «mistaken notions that enslave my sex» is the result of her prior awareness of her own dignity. In other words, one must recognise one's own dignity in order to be able to perceive its denial in others. The transition from the individual experience of oppression to the recognition that women as a group are suffering from a common denial of their rational abilities is made possible by the «awareness» of one's own dignity. In this context, indignation appears in its intersubjective dimension: it is the expression of a subject who, having «attain[ed] conscious dignity», is affected by the oppression suffered by others (who are not necessarily aware of their suffering), rebels against that oppression, and demands that everyone be allowed and encouraged to take part in that same movement. The emergence of a sense of belonging to the female «sex» («my sex») coincides with the experience of indignation, or is even produced by it.

What emerges here is the idea of the political power of indignation: it is the moment of transition from an attitude of individual resistance to oppression to the perception of the collective nature of the offences committed against women, and to a sense of solidarity with those who are still deprived of dignity.

3. Indignation against Society

Despite the importance of indignation as the affect specific to beings who have attained «conscious dignity» as the foundation for their engagement in philosophical activity, and as a moment of recognition of belonging to a social group that has been deprived of dignity, it can nevertheless take harmful forms. In two places in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, indignation is presented as an affect that can lead to the negation of social bonds.

¹⁶ I. KANT, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* (1784), in I. KANT, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. M.J. GREGOR, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

The first chapter of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* can be read as a feminist defence of reason, progress, and civilisation. Faced with the vices, violence, inequalities, and the artificiality of customs characteristic of European civilisation, some may be tempted to reject the pre-eminence of «reason», «knowledge», and «virtue» in order to defend a return to the «night of sensual ignorance»¹⁷, that is, towards a state of nature or «barbarism». To counter the lack of courage shown by «many men»¹⁸, it is necessary to return to first principles and highlight the true causes, both historical and accidental, of the evils affecting civilisation. In other words, society must be defended, not as it currently stands, but as it could become if it were founded «on the nature of man»¹⁹, that is, on the progressive or perfectible nature of reason. Wollstonecraft sums it up as follows: «Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally: a crowd of authors that all *is* now right: and I, that all will *be* right»²⁰.

The main opponent in this chapter is Rousseau, and it is precisely his «indignation», among other affects, that is at issue. Wollstonecraft actually presents a genealogy of his philosophy – and primarily of the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*²¹ – in the sense that she explores its emergence in his passions and affects. According to Wollstonecraft, Rousseau's system can be understood only by going back to its author's «lively sensibility». It has often been said that, by highlighting Rousseau's «sensibility», Wollstonecraft turns against him the very stigma that is usually directed against women: that of insufficient reason and excessive affect. According to this reading, Wollstonecraft simultaneously «feminises» Rousseau while asserting the virile power of her own rationality²². However, such a reading overlooks the dialectic between «reason» and «passion» that Wollstonecraft defends more broadly as the source of all human progress. It is not specifically Rousseau's «ardent soul»²³ that Wollstonecraft deplores, nor the fact that his observation of society affects and distresses him powerfully. And indeed it is surely a failure of affect that underpins the conservatism of the masses who consider that «all *is* now right». Conversely, when used properly, passions allow us to «unfold our reason»²⁴. Rousseau's error, or rather his fault, was to have renounced this development in and through the struggle against his passions. Faced with the evils of civilisation, he began to «doubt» the benefits of «the expansion of intellect»²⁵. Then, without further examination, he «stigmatize[d], as vicious, every effort of genius»²⁶ and advocated a return to the state of nature:

Impressed by the view of the misery and disorder which pervaded society, and fatigued with jostling against artificial fools, Rousseau became enamoured of solitude, and, being at the

¹⁷ M. WOLLSTONECRAFT, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 87.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 81.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 82.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 84.

²¹ J.-J. ROUSSEAU, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), Paris, Flammarion, 2008.

²² Catriona MacKenzie has clearly shown that the long-dominant interpretation of Mary Wollstonecraft's philosophy has been to define autonomy as the negation of passions by reason. She states: «Wollstonecraft [...] struggled to develop an account of women's moral agency that would incorporate a recognition not only of women's capacity to reason but also of their right to experience and give expression to passion, including sexual desire». C. MACKENZIE, *Reason and Sensibility: The Ideal of Women's Self-Governance in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft*, «Hypatia», 8, 4/1993, p. 36.

²³ M. WOLLSTONECRAFT, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 84.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 83.

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 87.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 84.



same time an optimist, he labours with uncommon eloquence to prove that man was naturally a solitary animal²⁷.

Disgusted with artificial manners and virtues, the citizen of Geneva, instead of properly sifting the subject, threw away the wheat with the chaff, without waiting to inquire whether the evils which his ardent soul turned from indignantly, were the consequence of civilization or the vestige of barbarism. He saw vice trampling on virtue, and the semblance of goodness taking place of reality; he saw talents bent by power to sinister purposes, and never thought of tracing the gigantic mischief up to arbitrary power, up to the hereditary distinctions that clash with the mental superiority that naturally raises a man above his fellows²⁸.

The «indignation» that Wollstonecraft attributes to Rousseau, the movement by which he «indignantly» turns away from the superficiality and pretence of his contemporaries, is therefore not in itself blameworthy. Like his other affects and impressions – «fatigue», «disgust», «contempt»²⁹ – it is criticisable only because he did not place it at the service of a theoretical effort to understand the nature and causes of present injustices. As a result, his philosophy is not initially driven by affects that it would gradually help to overcome; instead it reduces itself to those affects, and aims to justify them. His defence and promotion of «solitude», that is, of man in the natural state, is merely the theoretical expression of his «fatigue», his «disgust», and his indignant rejection of the vices of his contemporaries.

There is another, perhaps even more problematic form of indignation, which appears to be the opposite of Rousseau's, in that it stems from an excess of rationality. It is mentioned at the end of Chapter 5, when Wollstonecraft discusses certain educational theories of her time. While the first four sections of the chapter are devoted to educators' contempt for the education of women³⁰, the last section attacks Lord Chesterfield's views on the education of boys³¹. Although this topic might seem less relevant to the matter at hand, she finds his arguments so troubling from a moral and political point of view that they warrant her critical attention: since she is arguing for the principle of identical education for girls and boys, the risk is that a particularly harmful male model of education – as advocated by Lord Chesterfield – could be universalised.

Lord Chesterfield's system is presented as «the art of acquiring an early knowledge of the world»³². The aim is to reveal to young men from the outset the «infirmities» of human nature, to show them the immorality and vices of their peers, in order to teach them how to defend themselves and protect themselves effectively against them. By showing human nature as it is, preventing any form of illusion, and discouraging any sort of passion and enthusiasm, it undertakes to instil prudence in young people.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 83.

²⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 84–85.

²⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 83, 84, 87.

³⁰ Wollstonecraft examines the works of Rousseau, Dr Fordyce, and Dr Gregory in succession. In the fourth section, she examines the works of several female theorists and writers, lamenting that their proposals are as misogynistic as those of their male counterparts. These female writers include Germaine de Staël, Madame Genlis, and Hester Chapone.

³¹ Mary Wollstonecraft is undoubtedly referring to the following work: P.D.S. CHESTERFIELD, *Lord Chesterfield's advice to his son on men and manners, or a new system of education, in which the principles of politeness, the art of acquiring a knowledge of the world, with every instruction necessary to form a man of honour, virtue, taste and fashion are laid down in plain, easy, familiar manner*, London, Richardson and Urquhart, 1775.

³² M. WOLLSTONECRAFT, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 175.

In Wollstonecraft's view, such a programme is unnatural in that it runs counter to the progressive impulse of all forms of life³³. Presenting the spectacle of human vices to young people at an early age amounts to giving them a kind of knowledge that should be reserved for old age, as the fruit of personal experience³⁴. Everyone should learn for themselves about the existence of «human infirmities», and the non-conformity of actual human characters with the ideal of virtue. Admittedly, the passionate love and excessive friendship for «deified» beings that are generally experienced in youth will inevitably lead to «disappointed hope»³⁵, but as they can give rise to emulation and enable the expansion of the faculties, these illusions are nevertheless necessary. In preventing their formation, by immediately giving individuals a «mean opinion of human nature», one will educate beings who will not rise much above «the common standard» and who, being concerned primarily with their own safety, will never exhibit «great virtues»³⁶.

But the problem is not only related to the truncated development of individuals. It concerns the type of relationship that someone who has not gradually and independently rid themselves of their «false views of life» can have with their fellow human beings³⁷. The education promoted by Lord Chesterfield in his text is dangerous because it prevents the emergence of any «social feeling» or «humanity» in young people³⁸. What Wollstonecraft deplores is thus the feeling of «omnipotence»³⁹ instilled by a wholly masculine form of education, that is, the certainty of being able to know and judge others from a position of superiority and exteriority.

In the final pages of the chapter, she distinguishes between two types of subjectivity, resulting from two forms of education respectively: one that rejects passions outright, and one that allows them to develop and follow their natural course during youth. To this end, she proposes a thought experiment, and adopts the point of view of a being – in this case, a man – educated according to the principles of Lord Chesterfield. She then describes how the «world» must «appear» to such an individual: «Let me now as from an eminence survey the world stripped of all its false delusive charms»⁴⁰. The objectivity of someone who perceives «each object in its true point of view» leads this being to regard his fellow human beings as vain creatures, «pursuing shadows, and anxiously wasting their powers to feed passions which have no adequate object»⁴¹. He perceives the world as «a pantomime [which] is daily performed for the amusement of superior beings» and is «diverted» by a spectacle that he holds in contempt, and with which he believes he has no connection. In short, the rationality of such a subject excludes all forms of understanding and empathy.

Contrary to such an educational programme, Wollstonecraft advocates a form of education that gives everyone a key to interpreting the vices of others, thanks to the memory of their own experiences. Indeed, a «young person» must «have struggled with his own passions before he can estimate the force of temptation which betrayed his brother into vice»⁴². Wollstonecraft argues that this sort of experience,

³³ She writes: «everything around us is in a progressive state»; *ivi*, p. 177.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 176.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 177.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 179.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 177.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 179.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 180.

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 181.



which is the only means to prevent reason from becoming «a solitary flight», lays the foundation for the way in which one can, and should, react to the most atrocious crimes:

When we hear of some daring crime – it comes full on us in the deepest shade of turpitude, and raises indignation; but the eye that gradually saw the darkness thicken, must observe it with more compassionate forbearance. The world cannot be seen by an unmoved spectator, we must mix in the throng, and feel as men feel before we can judge their feelings. If we mean, in short, to live in the world to grow wiser and better, and not merely to enjoy the good things in life, we must attain a knowledge of others at the same time that we become acquainted with ourselves – knowledge acquired any other way only hardens the heart and perplexes the understanding⁴³.

The indignation referred to here is not quite the same as that mentioned by Wollstonecraft in the introduction and chapter 2. It is not a movement that rejects the denial of one's own dignity or that of one's oppressed social group. Rather, in this passage from Chapter 5, it is understood as the immediate reaction of a subject to the spectacle of a vicious act committed by an individual or group. But here again, regardless of its object, it is not indignation itself that is criticised by Wollstonecraft. When faced with the most terrible crimes, the first and spontaneous reaction of a rational and virtuous subject may well be one of rejection, amounting to a lack of understanding and compassion for the perpetrator or perpetrators. Indignation can therefore be understood as the subject's affirmation of their incommensurable difference from the person or persons they are judging. However, from both a moral and political point of view, such a position should not be maintained over time. The moment of indignation must be followed by deep and personal understanding, compassion, indulgence, or tolerance. The issue here is not whether or not to punish the perpetrators of crimes, but rather to ask what affective dispositions should be cultivated in individuals to ensure that social bonds are maintained, even when some people overstep the bounds of vice. Contrary to the principles promoted by Lord Chesterfield, the education advocated by Wollstonecraft is supposed to ensure that indignation does not become a fixed, rigid, closed-minded stance, but gradually gives way to a more subtle and comprehensive perception of individuals. When she asserts that «the world cannot be seen by an unmoved spectator», it must be understood that indignation, insofar as it focuses on the monstrosity of crime, stands in the way of knowledge of the world and does not allow it to be properly understood. In order for it not to permanently blind the subject and separate them from humanity, it must be preceded by first-hand experience of passions and vices; the «spectator» must themselves have already been «moved», and have learned to recognise themselves as a vulnerable subject.

Conclusion

Indignation therefore appears, in Wollstonecraft's view, to be a deeply equivocal affect. It is variously presented as an experience that every subject necessarily goes through in the struggle for recognition of their own dignity, a «melancholy emotion» felt by those who become aware of the general denial of the autonomy of reason among beings of their «sex», the driving force behind philosophical inquiry, and the cement that binds together an oppressed social group, yet it can also take

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

on a harmful – elitist and anti-social – form. Wollstonecraft's concerns about it are not so much related to the anger that it may contain or give rise to, but rather to its capacity to convey or fuel an attitude of coldness, contempt, and refusal to recognise that we belong to a common nature.

It is undoubtedly because of this anti-social tendency of indignation that Wollstonecraft takes care to specify, in the introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the singular form of indignation that she herself experienced as a philosopher: «the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation». The philosophical indignation that Wollstonecraft says she felt is not that of a being who would exempt themselves from the world by virtue of the superiority of their reason. It is that of a woman who, having experienced, and still experiencing indignity, sympathises, with the current or possible suffering of other women, without resigning herself to it.

At the same time, we can also understand why, even though she places indignation at the beginning of her own trajectory, she did not go so far as to make it a central theme or a political slogan. In a world where rationality has been captured and distorted by men, precisely because it has been separated from passions, promoting indignation risks «hardening the heart» and increasing misunderstanding and ignorance.

It may be precisely because of the way Wollstonecraft highlighted the equivocal nature of «indignation» that some of her successors, such as Anna Wheeler⁴⁴ and Harriet Taylor⁴⁵, accorded it only a very marginal place in their works. But that is another story, one that should be examined in the context of a feminist genealogy of indignation.

⁴⁴ W. THOMPSON, *Appeal of one half the human race, women, against the pretensions of the other half, men, to retain them in political, and thence in civil and domestic slavery* (1825), London, Virago Press, 1983. Anna Wheeler is the co-author of this text.

⁴⁵ J.E. JACOBS (ed), *The Complete Works of Harriet Taylor Mill*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1998.