

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: CONFORMIDADE E REBELIÃO EM *THOUGHTS ON THE EDUCATION OF DAUGHTERS*

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Resumo

É de extrema importância para os estudos feministas a construção de um cânone não só teórico mas também literário que dê visibilidade a(s) voz(es) femininas que promovem os ideais de liberdade do sexo feminino em um mundo ocidental patriarcal. Nesse contexto o presente trabalho tem por objetivo analisar *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with reflexions on female conduct, in the more important duties of life*, livro de conduta escrito por Mary Wollstonecraft em 1787. Considerada uma das grandes precursoras do feminismo, a escritora inglesa lutou arduamente pelo direito de igualdade entre homens e mulheres, especialmente no que concerne educação formal.

Palavras-chave: Feminismo. Mary Wollstonecraft. Livro de Conduta. Educação.

Abstract

It is extremely important for the feminist studies the construction of a canon not only theoretical but also literary that gives visibility to the female voice(s) that promote the ideals of freedom for the female sex in a patriarchal western world. In this context the present work aims at analyzing *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with reflexions on female conduct, in the more important duties of life*, conduct book written by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1787. Considered one of the greatest precursors of feminism, the English writer strongly fought for the right of equality between men and women, especially in what concerns formal education.

Keywords: Feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft. Conduct Book. Education.

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1 introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft invented modern women, if invention means reimagining the world so as to make a new kind of life possible.

(JUDITH SHULEVITZ, 2001)

The field of feminist studies is rich with examples of brave female authors who, in their own way, raised their voices against the stratified social position women occupy in society. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is one of these remarkable writers who tried to elevate women above the traditional male constructed ideal of “angels of the household”, expression largely used to describe housewives whose only concern was taking care of the family and of their own beauty and sentimental feelings, not caring and not being prepared for deep intellectual discussions.

The Anglo-Irish middle-class girl Mary Wollstonecraft was born in London, the second of six children. Her father was a domestic tyrant who bullied his wife and kids, situation which would inspire her to write against the miserable conditions women find themselves when married to virulent men. After her mother’s death Mary had a difficult time trying to earn a living at the age of nineteen, since her father spent all his money and left her no fortune in order to get a marriage. However, the biggest obstacle to overcome in these first and desperate attempts to obtain some money for the family’s support was her lack of proper formal education.

Most girls were taught at home – rarely very satisfactorily – either by their mothers, or by poorly trained governesses. In the later part of the century, private schools for middle-class girls flourished, but many simply concentrated on helping their pupils to be graceful and well-mannered, readying them for ‘good’ marriages. Wollstonecraft had briefly attended a day school in Yorkshire, but she was essentially self-educated. At one point a neighbouring clergyman lent her books, and she seems to have studied them rigorously, allowing herself nothing ‘for mere amusement, not even poetry’, but ‘concentrating instead on works which are addressed to the understanding’. (WALTERS, 2005: 31).

Having assumed the role of breadwinner of the family, as her brother did not take this responsibility for himself and one of her sisters had to legally separate from a violent husband, Mary tried the sorts of occupation a woman without a dowry in the late 18th century could get: being a governess, tutor, lady’s companion and teacher. She also did some needlework to improve the finances. Together with two sisters and a close friend, she venture at setting up a private school in Newington Green, which soon failed. The fact that they managed to open such school with so little

experience and training shows how female education was not taken seriously in those times, even if one remembers that it was the time when all the claims of *Liberté*, *Égalité* and *Fraternité* proposed by the Enlightenment were spreading from France through Europe. As Mary would notice in the future, this so celebrated equality between all citizens did not consider women.

Women occupy a peculiarly contradictory position within this Enlightenment discourse of improvement. In practice, the education they received was likely to be a carefully restricted version of the curriculum offered to their brothers; at the same time, however, educated women are frequently celebrated as a touchstone of civilization. (JONES, 2000: 04).

The time she spent as a schoolmistress in Newington Green made it possible for her to become acquainted with a group of Dissenting Intellectuals who met nearby. One of these intellectuals was the radical publisher Joseph Johnson, who offered her a position as a writer in his *Analytical Review Journal*. Working as a translator and reviewer, Mary Wollstonecraft was finally able to support herself and her family. The more she wrote the more she grew confident and skilled as a writer and, in 1787, she drafted a pamphlet that, according to Walters (WALTERS, 2005:31) was “a well-argued plea for girls to be given the chance to develop their God-given intelligence”. After some improvement and extension, the pamphlet was published under the title *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with reflexions on female conduct, in the more important duties of life*. This was her most clearly autobiographical piece of work, in which it is possible to recognize many of the difficulties faced by the author during her life, and that were portrayed as a way to help other women to avoid the same problems she had struggled against.

As Mary Wollstonecraft’s first book was a didactic text for and about women, the work was well accepted as a pedagogical conduct book designed to give advice on manners, although it contains a lot of subtle rebelling discourse against some wrongs men do against women either in the private or in the public sphere. However, the work she published in 1792 gave her the fame she has nowadays. *Vindication on the Rights of Woman* is a deeper and denser book when compared to *Thoughts*. In her early stage as a writer Mary could not think so radically about politics and, consequently, about the female situation in a broad social perspective. In *Vindication* she goes further in her analysis of the female role in society and on the negative aspects concerning the rights of women during the French Revolution. Apart from that, the author assumes a more sarcastic tone when addressing women’s issues, as a form of calling their attention to far more important matters than just fashion. As Wollstonecraft (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1792:24) says to her readers “My own sex, I hope, will

excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone.”

After writing this book and bearing the consequences of heated public debates with some of the most important political philosophers of her time, Mary Wollstonecraft's personal life took a serious turn. Wishing to see the French Revolution Mary travels to France, falls in love with the American Gilbert Imlay, and gets pregnant with her first daughter. When Imlay grew tired of this relationship, he left them. Because of this rejection, Mary attempted suicide twice, but after the second attempt, she was convinced by her friends to move on. Indeed the author got over her serious depression and eventually fell in love again with the intellectual William Godwin, with whom she could experience love as a kind friendship and not as the devastating passion she had felt earlier. Unfortunately, after some months married to Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft died in childbirth. Her second daughter, also called Mary, would come to be the second wife of the famous poet Percy Shelley. Mary Shelley, the future author of *Frankenstein*, also would put her name in the literary records.

Mary Wollstonecraft was a prolific author, who left as literary heritage pedagogical treatises, novels and works on political philosophy with feminist connotations. It is surprising to observe how she managed to problematize women's social situation in (at) those times and offer solutions to mitigate the deep-rooted popular feeling that women were natural inferior to men. Unfortunately, Mary Wollstonecraft's death resulted in a large discussion not only of her work but also of her character. When her husband William Godwin published her memories after her death, the public badly judged some aspects about her personal life, as having been a single mother abandoned by her lover and having married Godwin when she was three-month pregnant with a second illegitimate child, for instance. As Curthoys (2010) points out:

Her sexual life was seen as shocking at the time and this perception negatively affected the reception of her work. Few nineteenth-century English feminists read her, so unrespectable had she become. (...) It was not really until the 1880s that Wollstonecraft's reputation as a thinker began to revive, and new editions of the *Vindication* were published in the 1890s. (CURTHOYS, 2010: 40)

Indeed, even among feminists nowadays there is a huge controversy about Wollstonecraft. Her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, is usually referred at as a common conduct book that follows the traditional male abstract construct of femininity. Apart from that, Wollstonecraft is also accused of misogyny, since she criticizes women in a very harsh tone for not wishing to improve their minds, especially in *Vindication of The*

Rights of Woman. Even so, Wollstonecraft's legacy and memory survived all these years an???, still, she remains as one of the founders of the feminist movement.

2 *Thoughts on the education of daughters and the literature of advice*

1.1 The conduct book and the Proper Lady

Throughout history, conduct books have represented what cultures define as acceptable and desirable behaviors. In general, this kind of literature of advice (or literature of conduct) aims at rather young male and female readers who must be taught about what is expected from them in private and public circles. In this manner, they should be able to become the “ideal person”, men and women who perpetuate the moral gender values of a male-centered society.

In order to prepare youth for adulthood, the authors [of conduct books] pay a lot of attention to their future responsibilities. According to the authors, these responsibilities amount to one: their future roles as husband and wife. So, young men must learn a trade in order to become solid providers for their families; young women must learn to manage a household. Although both men and women have to learn how to perform a certain task, the rules of conduct stimulating or urging them to do this differ. (TILBURG, 2001:174)

In order to support these prescribed patterns of femininity and masculinity, writers mustered religious beliefs and rational philosophical and scientific arguments. All of them legitimized the inequality between sexes due to a supposed natural difference that suit each sex to specific roles. Although conduct books were aimed at both sexes, the vast majority of the eighteenth-century prescriptive texts were written especially for the female reader, as a form to spread and consolidate the inferior position of women as a normal, innate and genuine state of nature.

The power of influence of conduct books was such that they were among the most popular and influential treatises on education for young women. They are taught that the most important duty of the female sex is taking care of the family, since the domestic life is presented not only as the most decent way of living for a woman but it is also spoken about as something that every woman on Earth should desire. As Tilburg (TILBURG, 2001:176) affirms “The readers are given the impression that housekeeping will make them either virtuous or pretty, or both. In this way, young women are invited to identify with domesticity.”

However, there are mandatory rules women must take into consideration in order to become attractive for marriage. They should behave in all manners as a “Proper Lady”, a class-based conception spread by the aristocracy

and closely followed by bourgeois, which determines how women are supposed to think, feel and act in social situations. The Proper Lady is the one who respects an exquisite code of sensibility and morality. She knows all domestic arts required from a good wife (painting, singing, piano playing, etc.) and is entirely in control of her own desires. It means that passion is repressed and just kinder feelings are cultivated, such as fraternal love, friendship, loyalty, etc. Thus, chastity is their most powerful good. As Poovey (1984) says in the beginning of *The Proper Lady and The Woman Writer*:

Given the voraciousness that female desire was assumed to have, the surest safeguard against overindulgence was not allow or admit to appetites of any kind. Thus women were encouraged to display no vanity, no passion, no assertive “self” at all. In keeping with this design, even genuinely talented women were urged to avoid all behavior that would call attention to themselves. (POOVEY, 1984:21)

Above all, the Proper Lady primary concern is her husband, to whom she is submissive and to whom she delegates control over all aspects of her life. The Proper Lady reads and improve her mind just with the objective of being a better wife and mother, since, most of the times; she is the one who teaches the kids. She is discrete in her mode of dressing and speaking, showing refinement and good taste in all her attitudes. Women were expected “to suppress or sublimate her sexual and emotional appetites” (POOVEY, 1984:23). They were also supposed to have a sense of modesty that ““will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company”” (POOVEY, 1984:24).

All the qualities mentioned before reinforce the strict control men (fathers, brothers, husbands and male relatives) had over women. Making a desperate effort to become the Proper Lady, women ended up inspecting and supervising each other. In other words, there was no need for men to tell women how they should behave, as most of the women from the middle class attempted to fulfill the model of the Proper Lady, image largely portrayed in conduct books and magazines.

1.2 *The conformism with the status quo*

Very much aware of the ideal of the Proper Lady and all the mechanisms that frame the literature of advice, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* when she desperately needed money due to her poor financial situation. Besides, in 1787, she was in her early stage as a writer, and many concepts of the Radical Dissidents Intellectuals she used to meet with had still to be better assimilated. These facts lead to the conclusion that Wollstonecraft wrote a typical conduct book with all its normative functions and didactical discourse. However, it is of extreme importance to remember that the conservative

characteristic of the book do not minimize its relevance to the feminist studies, as it has been said too often. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, as any literary product of its own time, carries specific marks translated by the author, who is also immersed in a cultural context with its own values, judgments, preconceptions and stereotypes. In the words of Rodrigues (2010):

(...) the highly conservative English society was not very open to negotiations regarding the female issue. Therefore, it is understandable that Wollstonecraft herself, despite her “progressive” ideas, not only at the educational level, but also at the political and social one, felt entrapped in the ambiguity experienced by many women in the Eighteenth-Century. The authoress was considered quite ahead of her time, both in her own epoch, as well as in later times. To this contributed her political and social views presented in her works. (RODRIGUES, 2010:02)

Thoughts on the Education of Daughters has twenty-one chapters and, although some of them introduce topics with advanced ideas for this kind of literature, most of the chapters keep the conventional subjects that were supposed to interest women. To illustrate this traditional way of writing to women we can mention the following chapters: Chapter V – Dress, Chapter XI – Love, Chapter XII – Matrimony, Chapter XV – On the treatment of servants, Chapter XVIII – Benevolence, Chapter XIX – Card-playing, Chapter XX – The theatre, Chapter XXI – Public places.

The main and most visible trace of conformism with the moral commandment of the eighteenth-century refers to the primary motherly role women exercise in society. In the chapter where she speaks about marriage Wollstonecraft (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 58) asserts, “To prepare a woman to fulfill the important duties of a wife and mother, are certainly the objects that would be in view during the early period of life”. In the previous chapter on the importance of reading, she also claims (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 56) “No employment of the mind is a- sufficient excuse for neglecting domestic duties, and I cannot conceive that they are incompatible. A woman may fit herself to be the companion and friend of a man of sense, and yet know how to take care of his family.” These quotations show how the author, in her first work, viewed women as a complement of men, in the sense that the female identity is constructed according to what men need and want. It is clear that even self-improvement must not consider inner desires or urges a woman feels, since every step women take towards their moral or intellectual development must firstly take into consideration how men’s lives may be affected by it.

The children are also a point of ultimate concern to women. The first three chapters of *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* deal only with this subject and

chapter VIII treats only about boarding schools. Under the titles of Nursery, Moral discipline and Exterior accomplishments, the author clarifies women about the importance of taking good care of their children. On the chapter Boarding schools, Mary Wollstonecraft develops the idea of home education as the being best option for girls. This is considered the idea she immediately threw away as soon as she got in contact with the intellectuals that supported the French Revolution later in her life. She emphasizes, “If a mother has leisure and good sense, and more than one daughter, I think she could best educate them herself; but as many family reasons render it necessary sometimes to fend them from home, boarding schools are fixed on.” (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787:57.)

Another aspect vigorously supported by Wollstonecraft is the asexual image of womanhood. Uncountable books, magazines and periodicals of that century professed the necessity of controlling female sexuality as “women were considered the guardians of morals and good manners, assuming, thus, an essential role in the maintenance of both the domestic and the social stability.” (RODRIGUES, 2010: 02). Wollstonecraft strictly paints the picture of rational and sensitive women whose feelings for men do not include passion and their sexual consequences, which is condemned as a cause of misfortune for women. Even married women are not allowed to demonstrate their natural affection for their husbands.

Dignity of manners, too, and proper reserve are often wanting. The constant attendant on too much familiarity is contempt. Women are often before marriage prudish, and afterwards they think they may innocently give way to fondness, and overwhelm the poor man with it. They think they have a legal right to his affections, and grow remiss in their endeavors to please. There are a thousand nameless decencies which good sense gives rise to, and artless proofs of regard, which flow from the heart, and will reach it, if it is not depraved. It has ever occurred to me, that it was sufficient for a woman to receive caresses, and not bestow them. (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 97.)

Although insisting on the ideal of distant woman, the author tries to show some reason and good sense when she recognizes that “To attempt to raise ourselves above human beings is ridiculous; we cannot extirpate our passions, nor is it necessary that we should, though it may be wise sometimes not to stray too near a precipice, lest we fall over before we are aware” (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 97.). Nevertheless, the insistence on this image of coolness as an important quality for women, especially married ones, has a reason; aside the conservatism of that century. Wollstonecraft witnessed the French Revolution and became familiar with their ideals of equality. Besides, in her private life, she was a Woman who saw many women

(including mother and sister) being mistreated by bad husbands, who had been imposed on them by their families or even had been wrongly chosen under the excuses of love and passion. It is natural that the author dreams of an idealized marriage based on the friendship between two partners who are moral and intellectually equal.

Wollstonecraft not only depicts the family as a fundamentally political institution but also applies liberal notions of justice to it. (...) she brings the values that liberals believe should govern the public realm to the private world of love, romance, and family life by promoting the ideal of marriage as friendship. (...) she envisages a form of marriage that incorporates the major features of the classical notion of higher friendship such as equality, free choice, reason, mutual esteem and profound concern for one another’s moral character. (ABBEY, 1999: 01)

So not to misunderstand Mary Wollstonecraft, it is important to keep in mind that she does not neglect sex as if it did not exist at all between married couples. As Abbey affirms, “It would be misleading to say that Wollstonecraft has a prudish or negative view of sexuality, it is the case that her model of marriage as friendship seems unable to accommodate any robust and enduring sexual relationship between married partners” (ABBEY, 1999: 09). The fact is that Wollstonecraft believes sexual attraction or even just love per se, put marriage at risk. “Love, unsupported by esteem, must soon expire, or lead to depravity” (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 83.).

Another noteworthy point in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* is the religious aspect presented throughout the author’s discourse. Wollstonecraft not only describes the ideal of the Proper Lady but also prescribes how women should find strength to control their passions and how they should find comfort in case everything in their lives goes wrong (meaning being unmarried and poor or married with an unfit husband). According to her, religion is the only way to prevent a woman from becoming entirely unhappy and depressed when facing the adversities of life.

Principles of religion should be fixed, and the mind not left to fluctuate in the time of distress, when it can receive succour from no other quarter. The conviction that every thing is working for our good will scarcely produce resignation, when we are deprived of our dearest hopes. How they can be satisfied, who have not this conviction, I cannot conceive; I rather think they are not religious; nay, more, there is no true sentiment without it, nor perhaps any other effectual check to the passions. (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787:102.).

When referring to the author’s religious beliefs, it is relevant to view Wollstonecraft as “a devout dissenting Christian who we can place in a long Enlightenment

tradition of Christian humanism that was critical of institutional Christianity.” (CURTHOYS, 2010: 35.) As this article will explore later on, the same religious perspective that guides Wollstonecraft is also used to confront the social establishment that offers women so little space and importance in society. However, so far it is visible that she uses religion as a tool to help women in distress. Following the long-term tradition which professes humble submission to God’s Will, Wollstonecraft “emphasizes the pleasures of resignation, in terms which invoke the consolations of a private religious sensibility rather than those of worldly power or political resistance.” (JONES, 2002: 124). Indeed, one of the hobbyhorses of Wollstonecraft is the pursuit of virtue, which can only be achieved if good manners and proper behavior are attached to a strong sense of religiosity.

The main business of our lives is to learn to be virtuous; and He who is training us up for immortal bliss, knows best what trials will contribute to make us so; and our resignation and improvement will render us respectable to ourselves, and to that Being, whose approbation is of more value than life itself. It is true, tribulation produces anguish, and we would fain avoid the bitter cup, though convinced its effects would be the most salutary. The Almighty is then the kind parent, who chastens and educates, and indulges us not when it would tend to our hurt. (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 77.)

Still related to ways of finding comfort in troublesome situations, a very interesting piece of advice that Mary Wollstonecraft gives refers to the habit of reading and studying as another tool, along with religion, to help dealing with a difficult marriage. This is an ambiguous recommendation. On the one hand, she is going against the system, telling women about the importance of reading as a mechanism of healing inner wounds; on the other hand, she is telling women to keep submissive so they can stay virtuous and praiseworthy.

In a comfortable situation, a cultivated mind is necessary to render a woman contented; and in a miserable one, it is her only consolation. A sensible, delicate woman, who by some strange accident, or mistake, is joined to a fool or a brute, must be wretched beyond all names of wretchedness, if her views are confined to the present scene. Of what importance, then, is intellectual improvement, when our comfort here, and happiness hereafter, depends upon it. (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 101.)

It gets very understandable how and why Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* the way she did. Conforming to the *status quo* of that time was not just a matter of social imposition, but it was also a matter of belief, and the author believed in many

things about gender that were prescribed in her century. It is true that she matured as a person as well as a writer, and later on she got more demanding in relation to women’s rights, but, so far, she showed a great deal of conformity to the system.

1.3 *The rebellion against the system.*

The great disadvantage of studying Literature of advice, in especial conduct books, is that they are seen just and simply as manuals of manners which reflect the mainstream social ideology of the 18th century and early 19th century. However, as the critic Hanley (HANLEY, 2007: 31) states, “Didactic texts for women are interesting and complicated textual artifacts, even when they function to disseminate established masculine discourses regarding women’s roles.” Indeed, *Thoughts on the Education of daughters* is complicated in the sense that, to some extent, it escapes its traditional role of teaching women to behave properly.

To begin with, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* presents some titles that, at first glance, denounce its attempts to allow female readers to think about serious and problematic matters. The following title, mentioned as example, show how the author does not offer a book just for entertainment: Chapter IV – Artificial manners, Chapter X - Unfortunate situation of females fashionably educated and left without a fortune, Chapter XIII – Desultory thoughts, XIV – The benefits which arise from disappointments, Chapter XVII – On the misfortune of fluctuating principles. The words “unfortunate”, “disappointments” and “misfortune” already make the reader foresee the darker and heavier side of the book. The preface itself reinforces the nonconformist voice that pervades the work as a whole.

In the following pages I have endeavoured to point out some important things with respect to female education. It is true, many treatises have been already written; yet it occurred to me, that much still remained to be said. I shall not swell these sheets by writing apologies for my attempt. I am afraid, indeed, the reflections will, by some, be thought too grave; but I could not make them less so without writing affectedly; yet, though they may be insipid to the gay, others may not think them so. (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 03)

Regarding her attitude in the Preface, Hanley (HANLEY, 2013: 212) affirms, “[it] suggests that women are capable of making general observations and synthesizing them based on an entire corpus of extant advice to daughters”. Hanley continues in the same line “In this sense *Thoughts* educative voice enacts the kind of reasoned reflection that daughters should be developing as critical readers.”

Another interesting point is that along *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, the reader also can detect Mary Wollstonecraft's religious discourse not only as a sign of conformism but also as a sign of rebellion, in the sense that she uses her religious dissenting discourse to promote equality between men and women.

Mary Wollstonecraft's text is similar to the traditional conduct manual that promotes the self-control and the obedience, qualities considered fundamental to attract a husband. However, at the same time, she challenges the traditional notion of the "proper lady" by including in her work traces of religious dissent when advocating the souls' equality. Therefore, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* reveals dichotomies, such as submission and rebellion; spiritual gentleness and rational independence, domestic duty and political participation. (RODRIGUES, 2010: 12)

By encouraging women to realize that they were not different from men in the eyes of God, since all are humans created with an immortal soul with its own needs, Wollstonecraft questions the authoritative religious perspective that put women into an inferior rank. As she says in a very ironic way "If we were born only "to draw nutrition, propagate and rot," the sooner the end of creation was answered the better; but as women are here allowed to have souls, the soul ought to be attended to." (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787:93). This is the classical passage where the author criticizes early marriages; going against the well spread and established idea of unions between youngsters. As her ideal of womanhood requires maturity, Wollstonecraft cannot conceive young girls that had just left boarding schools properly assuming the role of wife and mother. Therefore she strongly advise women not to marry too young otherwise they would be neither good wives nor good mothers, and the family, as the nuclear cell of society, would be in danger of acquiring bad habits that would, in the future, damage society by extent.

When a woman's mind has gained some strength, she will in all probability pay more attention to her actions than a girl can be expected to do; and if she thinks seriously, she will chuse for a companion a man of principle; and this perhaps young people do not sufficiently attend to, or see the necessity of doing. (...). Attention to the education of children must be irksome, when life appears to have so many charms, and its pleasures are not found fallacious. Many are but just returned from a boarding-school, when they are placed at the head of a family, and how fit they are to manage it, I leave the judicious to judge. Can they improve a child's understanding, when they are scarcely out of the state of childhood themselves? (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 95)

Just as Mary Wollstonecraft so arduously defends the ideal of a Proper Lady, she strictly criticizes what she calls "The Fine Lady", who is right the opposite of the previous one. While the Proper Lady shows good taste and dresses accordingly, the Fine Lady abuses of "the whole tribe of beauty-washes, cosmetics, Olympian dew, oriental herbs, liquid bloom, and the paint which enlivened Ninon's face." (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787:38). The author reminds the readers that "Too much of a girl's time is taken up in dress. (...) The body hides the mind, and it is, in its turn, obscured by the drapery. (...) Dress ought to adorn the person, and not rival it." (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 35). It is true that many conduct books also professed simplicity of dressing and habits as a remarkable quality of women, but Wollstonecraft discusses this idea further, claiming that women who pay too much attention to their looks do not manage their families well. This dispute between the Proper and the Fine Lady is well in *Thoughts* is well described ahead:

And in eighteenth-century moral discourse more generally, the opposition between superficiality and substance, ostentation and retirement, is all-pervasive. *Thoughts*, however, offers a conventionally gendered version of that retiring ideal. It moves from "The Nursery" in the first chapter, to "Public Places" in the last, and from the ideal mother to her dangerous alter ego, the "fine Lady": the female embodiments of substance and superficiality who inhabit those spaces. It begins with the rational duty of mothers (...) It ends with warnings against the frivolous woman of fashion, sound in neither mind nor body, (...) (JONES, 2000: 127).

The author also refers to this over self-attention as an impediment to women's proper study, a very *avant-garde* idea in her time. She criticizes schools for girls because "the manners are too much attended to in all schools; (...) The temper is neglected, the same lessons are taught to all, (...) few things are learnt thoroughly, but many follies contracted, and an immoderate fondness for dress among the rest. (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 57). As she lashes out against women's behavior concerning their studies and their futile attitudes, Wollstonecraft has been accused of misogyny even nowadays for many critics. This accusation gains force especially when her position as a poetic persona is discussed, since she seems not to consider herself as a woman, but only as a female Christian who has very hard words for women in general. As Hanley (HANLEY, 20123: 23) explains "In *Thoughts* she always refers to what a "woman", a "mother" or a "young woman" should do, reserving the collective "we" for moments when she seeks to align herself with religious or philosophical observations". It is relevant to point out, however, that even men are also criticized when it comes to their futile behavior, especially in the field of love. As

Wollstonecraft (Wollstonecraft, 1787: 81) bitterly remarks “There are quite as many male coquets as female, and they are far more pernicious pests to society, as their sphere of action is larger, and they are less exposed to the censure of the world.”

Among all the traces of rebellion in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, one could say that the most important moments of non-conformism are related to female education. She starts examining the difficult situation of young ladies who receive a good education but cannot marry because they do not possess enough money to attract a husband. Within this perspective Wollstonecraft stands against the humiliating position unmarried women face in the world, since neither are they fit to fulfill too hard domestic works (as servants) nor are they able to find financial stability as teachers, lady’s companions or governesses. As she observes in the following classical extract:

Few are the modes of earning a subsistence, and those very humiliating. Perhaps to be an humble companion to some rich old cousin, or what is still worse, to live with strangers, who are so intolerably tyrannical, that none of their own relations can bear to live with them (...) A teacher at a school is only a kind of upper servant, who has more work than the menial ones. A governess to young ladies is equally disagreeable. The children treat them with disrespect, and often with insolence. (...) The few trades which are left, are now gradually falling into the hands of the men, and certainly they are not very respectable. (WOLLSTONECRAFT, 1787: 69).

However, it is important to remember that Wollstonecraft cry for help in the field of Education is limited to middle class girls. As Rodrigues (RODRIGUES, 2010:07) says, “The women of the working class had an active working position, but without educational or civic aspirations or conscience. (...) the working women remained dependent on men, either in the family or employment entity.” Although not aiming at women who worked in industry or were too much below her social level, Wollstonecraft really worried about women’s Education, since she could only see a decent future for women if they could earn their own living (in case of being unmarried) or if they could be proper wives (which would be possible with a good Education). This concern about Education turns out to be Wollstonecraft outstanding characteristic as a writer, which led her to write her treatise about women’s rights in the future.

3 final considerations

The influence Mary Wollstonecraft exercises in the literary academy nowadays is undeniable, especially in the field of feminist studies, although she is a name found

in other lines of research such as history and political philosophy. Even though rejected for a long time both by male academics (due to her polemical ideas concerning the role of women in society) and by female writers (due to her controversial personal life), Wollstonecraft achieved immortality as one of the founders of feminism thanks to key texts such as *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. However, it is also important to take into consideration her earlier texts, like *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*. This text was too much criticized for its pedagogic tone based on traditional male constructs of femininity. What some critics fail to understand is that this book is a typical conduct book for women written by Wollstonecraft when she was beginning her career as a writer and was still cultivating her mind about the place women should occupy in society. Therefore, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* follows the rules that modeled the eighteenth-century ideal of male and female genders. One of these rules, for example, was that women should be educated at home, preferably by their mothers. At the same time, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* carries the seed of rebellion that will mark her later works.

Some thinkers began to wish broader and more relevant objectives regarding their participation in society, writing several works, demanding equality at the educational level. One of such works was *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), by Mary Wollstonecraft, which contributed greatly to the development of the awareness that it was essential to offer women a more complete education, one that would aim at more than domestic skills. (RODRIGUES, 2010: 02)

The author goes beyond the simplistic topics of the time (how to be a Proper Lady, what to wear, how to speak, what to talk about, etc.) and introduces her concern about women’s education, as mentioned by Rodrigues. One could see it as contradiction, but her own lifestyle justifies this inclusion in her pedagogical text. Mary Wollstonecraft, although strengthening the ideal of the Proper Lady, still did something herself that was very unladylike: the very act of writing. As Poovey (POOVEY, 1984: vii) says, “(...) the Proper Lady possessed sufficient cultural authority to suffocate a woman’s desire to write, even desire itself. The woman who wanted to write could obey the Proper Lady (...) or (...) could engage in strategies of resistance, from accommodation to subversion.”

Education was Wollstonecraft main concern because she experienced a hard life that could have been better if she had had access to a better Education. In her famous chapter about the unfortunate situation of women without a fortune, she denounces the poor conditions women are thrown into when they have no husband and no money. Describing the horrors of working as a teacher, lady’s companion and governess, the author speaks to

middle-class girls who have few options of making their living since society has no interest in properly educating them to be independent.

Mary Wollstonecraft did not suffocate the woman writer she became, although struggling to be one of the Proper Ladies she so much describes in her first work, which ends up being a balance of conformism and rebellion. Fortunately, she never gave up writing and she became one of the first women to stand up for women's rights.

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