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Mary Wollstonecraft’s Character (R)evolution

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Real character is not one thing, but a thousand things; actual qualities do not conform to any factitious standard in the mind, but rest upon their own truth and nature.

—William Hazlitt, “Of the Knowledge of Character”

The clash of rival “characters” generates many narratives . . .

—David Oakleaf, “Marks, Stamps, and Representations”

“I went looking for my values the other day,” intones a woman’s voice, caring and sincere. Thus opens a public service spot airing on noncommercial television near the turn of the twenty-first century. The aim of this veritable ad campaign for virtue is to remind viewers that “character counts.” As this message reveals, what we tend to mean by character today is integrity or moral fibre, and the way we locate it is to look inside. Our understanding of what character is and where to find it may be traced to the eighteenth century, during which definitions proliferated and, according to recent commentators, concepts of character underwent a shift from public to private. Originally conceived of as reputation or representation—what David Oakleaf terms a “publicly circulated sign” based on arbitrary factors such as birth or status—character increasingly came to denote identity or subjectivity. As the epigraph above from William Hazlitt in 1822 suggests, the emphasis shifted from what one is said to be to who one really is. According to Oakleaf, this shift was the result of a discursive struggle for control of character that intensified in the century’s second half; as he rightly observes, the struggle was political (298; 306–07).
This political struggle over character was played out on multiple levels and was part and parcel of the nation-building process in which England was engaged. Of particular interest to me is the discourse by which the English characterized themselves and their cross-channel rivals, the French, in the later eighteenth century, and especially during the French Revolution. During this half century, English patriots were involved in a struggle for national identity and integrity in which they pitted their nation's character against that of the French; one of the ways they conducted it was to devalue the French character by likening it to that of another group which public discourse on both sides of the Channel typically constructed as 'other' and, in the civic sense, lesser: women. As Linda Colley observes of the eighteenth century's last decades, “there was a sense at this time in which the British conceived of themselves as an essentially 'masculine' nation . . . caught up in an eternal rivalry with an essentially 'effeminate' France.”

One English citizen deeply concerned with representations of national and sexual identity was Mary Wollstonecraft, a woman whose ideas about character evolved and refined themselves in the crucible of the French Revolution. In this essay I explore the intersections between the two in several of her nonfiction works from the 1790s: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), “Letter Introductory to a Series of Letters on the Present Character of the French Nation” (1793), *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794), and *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). Like her fellow English, Wollstonecraft often characterized the French, both implicitly and explicitly, as effeminate. I intend to show that, while the English, prior to and during the Revolution, often deployed gendered characterizations of the French in order to differentiate and disempower the national 'other,' Wollstonecraft, who seemed at times to engage in the same project, had something different in mind. Although she shared with her more nationalistic contemporaries a measure of the distaste they felt for a nation whose habits and manners were in many ways alien, her writing during the revolutionary years reveals an important difference. Swimming against the tide of nationalist propaganda, Wollstonecraft deployed unflattering characterizations as part of her attempt to recuperate character on multiple levels, in the process dismantling the barriers of nation and gender so many of her contemporaries labored to erect. Her arguments concerning nationality and gender feed and reinforce each other: France's struggle to throw off its effeminate character inspired her to urge women to do the same; her critique of sexual character shaped her opinions of the French, which her border-crossing experiences in Scandinavia forced her to revise. In each case her arguments hinge on a vision of character as a sociohistorical construct open to change.

**Manly English, Effeminate French**

The notion of character was crucial to the nation-building and consolidating process taking place in England in the eighteenth century's second half. Despite (or perhaps because of) their geographical, historical, and often literal kinship with the French, the English tended to define themselves in terms of opposition or counter-identity. An outgrowth of intense economic competition and repeated military conflict, this propensity is especially pronounced in nationalist rhetoric from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Basically, this rhetoric depicted the English character as reserved (but impassioned), serious, deep, artless, original, and independent, in contrast with the French character which was seen as effusive, lighthearted, shallow, changeable, artful, and slavish.

These opposed clusters of national traits bear a striking resemblance to the prescriptive descriptions of male and female character used to construct and enforce gender roles at the time. Typically, men were characterized as rational, active, purposeful, and dominant, and women as emotional, trifling, passive, and submissive. English nationalist discourse in the century's last half makes a clear and persistent connection between Englishness and manliness, Frenchness and effeminacy, in effect allowing the discourses of nationalism and gender to “piggyback” and reinforce each other in a process of double-duty disempowerment. While there existed a long tradition of putting down the French, in its earlier years this discourse was not devoid of admiration; this is not surprising, considering the immense influence of French culture and manners on the upper orders and their imitators. But by early 1793, however, public sentiment had taken a reactionary turn. As Revolution turned to Terror, the French were no longer perceived as models or imitators, but rather as murderous potential invaders. By 1797, France's absorption of its European neighbors and its threats to do the same to England had created an atmosphere of intense paranoia whose flames were fed by the government-backed press on both sides. In this atmosphere, public characterizations of the French were more than ever unflattering and clearly intended to
In Rowlandson's caricature, we see a time-honored image of British liberty as a comely matron sitting by the shore of her prosperous island nation, adorned with the typical symbols of freedom and justice. In contrast, her French counterpart is depicted as a blood-thirsty, masculine gorgon trampling the bodies of Citizens she has slain. This image, a perversion of republican iconography undoubtedly influenced by Edmund Burke's unforgettable demonization of the Frenchwomen who participated in the Revolution's early stages, is meant to illustrate what happens when religion, law, and decency—not to mention gender roles—are abandoned to an ideal. And while it doesn't overtly depict the French character as effeminate, it suggests the evils that accrue to a nation whose women escape the domestic sphere—as many, under the promise of liberty and equality, did during the Revolution's early years—to meddle in affairs of state.8

James Gillray's caricature from 1799 (the year Napoleon ascended to first consul) presents yet another contrast, this one sarcastically depicting the outcome of the Revolution's remasculinization of French men (Figure 1.2). This image juxtaposes an effeminate ancien régime courtier, with his obsequious bow and “I am your humble servant,” and a gentleman of the Republic. Outwardly manly with his republican dress and rather phallic staff, the latter invites his counterpart to “kiss my ass.” Although these before-and-after images are at first glance diametric opposites, we must keep in mind an observation common among visitors to France during the 1790s: that, despite the massive alterations the Revolution had accomplished, the French character had not really changed, for while appearances may have altered, the French remained constant in their very fickleness. It is hard to ignore the homoerotic element in Gillray's print, which read as a whole suggests that the French, effeminate and virile alike, are homosexuals. To Gillray's English eyes, neither the simpering courtier nor his brutish republican counterpart is a “gentleman,” and each is “equal” in representing a nation of questionable character—a perfect example of what has been called the “homogenizing rhetoric of anti-French propaganda.”9

“A Strange Spirit of Contradiction”

Mary Wollstonecraft, who was born in 1761 and whose lifetime spanned the decades in which English nationalism came to fruition, made plentiful use of the gendered stereotypes and verbal caricatures that comprised its homogenizing rhetoric. She provides a striking