CHAPTER 2

The Engagement with Burke
Contesting the 'Natural Course of Things'

> Must we swear to secure property, and make assurance doubly sure, to give your perturbed spirit rest?[1]

The *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published in November 1790, was the first major work of Wollstonecraft's career. An impassioned intervention into contemporary political debate, prompted by her reading of Edmund Burke's *Reflection on the Revolution in France* (also 1790), it marked a shift from Wollstonecraft's earlier educational publications. Her preface to the work relates that the *Vindication* was prompted by 'indignation … roused' by her casual reading of Burke's *Reflections*.[2] But what exactly was it that she read in that dense and complex text which prompted her first major publication, a serious and impassioned work which is still studied today?

Scholarship readily offers a well-known story to answer that question, which approaches both Wollstonecraft and Burke's texts as marking the start of what Marilyn Butler termed the 'Revolution controversy': intense debates between British radicals and conservatives over the nature and significance of the French Revolution, whose early events were unfolding across the English channel.[3] Thus, whilst Wollstonecraft is understood to offer a 'rebuttal' of Burke's *Reflections*, Burke in turn is seen as responding to Richard Price's sermon, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (delivered to the Revolution Society in late 1789 and published in January 1790), which fervently welcomed the early events of the French Revolution by seeing it as the latest manifestation of an 'ardor for liberty' sweeping from America to France to all of Europe.[4] The claim that Burke sat down 'immediately' to write the *Reflections* on reading Price's sermon recurs repeatedly in the historiographic literature, and Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is at least partly understood as a reaction to a personal and political attack on her elderly friend Price, whose sermon she had already positively reviewed in Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review*.[5] The 'Revolution controversy' story

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

thus offers a relatively close-focus context for reading these texts, which foregrounds the differing responses of its various protagonists to on-going events in France.

There are some problems with this reading, however. At first blush, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* appears to deal little with liberty, or indeed with Price. Whilst she chastises Burke for an uncharitable attack on a venerable and religious old man, her work almost casually concedes the utopian nature of elements of Price's thoughts, and mounts what might be read as an almost nominal defence of liberty, which is treated so efficiently and briefly in the early stages of her text that it can hardly be taken as the real focus of her differences with her opponent. Equally, readers who look in the *Vindication* for the first salvo in a battle for 'the political rights that we now take for granted' will look in vain for very much developed thinking about rights at all, despite the foregrounding of that term in Wollstonecraft's title.[6] There is evidence which confuses the picture in relation to Burke's *Reflections* too. 'In reality', he wrote in a letter to Charles-Alexandre de Calonne, 'my Object was not France, in the first instance, but this Country'.[7] And, rather than an immediate reaction to Price, *Reflections* was likely meditated 'over a longer period' with the aim of 'discrediting' Lord Shelburne, patron of Price, Joseph Priestley, and other radical thinkers.[8] Writing privately during the period in which he was composing the *Reflections*, Burke states that whilst he 'intend[s] no controversy with Dr. Price or Lord Shelburne or any other of their set' he nevertheless means to 'set in a full View the danger from their wicked principles and their black hearts' and to 'do my best to expose them to the hatred, ridicule, and contempt of the whole world; as I shall always expose such, calumniators, hypocrites[,] sowers of sedition, and approvers of murder and all its Triumphs'.[9]

Burke had clashed with Shelburne and Price some years earlier, in the context of American colonists' struggles for independence, objecting to Price's definition of civil liberty as the absence of restraint: for Burke, this was 'destructive of all authority'.[10] Although his attack on Price's *Discourse on the Love of our Country* took place within the immediate context of revolutionary events in France, it is likely that Burke regarded his *Reflections* as fighting a new front in a well-established domestic battle over political liberty. He did so by defending the established British order, and, in particular, its very specific political economic settlement. In the process, he made use of the ways that the emergent discourse of political economy understood relations between individual subjects and the polity or nation in modern commercial society. In doing so, he opened a new

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

front in ongoing battles over political liberty and happiness in a society increasingly recognised as, in the words of dissenting poet and essayist Anna Laetitia Barbauld, 'a great mart of commerce'.[11] Such battles now also became struggles over the extent to which the terms, concepts, and language of political economic discourse would be allowed to gain a foothold in contemporary political thought, and tests of strength of the various means of countering it.

Given this, this chapter reads Burke's *Reflections*, and Wollstonecraft's engagement with it, as a key moment in the ongoing reception and shaping of political economy in the early 1790s. It argues that Wollstonecraft's first *Vindication* is not simply to be regarded as a 'political disquisition' but as a political economic one: a direct challenge to the Whiggish political economy which Burke was trying to sure up.[12] In the version of political economy which informs Burke's *Reflections*, any nascent possibility of liberty and independence is threatened by the sacrifice of individual lives and happiness deemed necessary for the maintenance of commercial society's 'mart'. Given that the passage in Burke's text where this is most shockingly explicit was where Wollstonecraft trained her heaviest fire, such themes are likely to be central to the 'rousing' of her 'indignation' by his text. Further evidence of her attention to the relation of individuals to the social and political whole, and the consequences for both liberty and happiness, is apparent in her review of Catharine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790), published in the *Analytical Review* in the same month that the *Vindication* appeared.[13] Wollstonecraft quoted at length Macaulay's exposure of a 'species of idolatry' in matters of government: making 'a deity of the society in its aggregate capacity', and sacrificing, 'to the real or imagined interests of this idol', the 'dearest interests of those individuals who formed the aggregate'. Such a reversal, Macaulay claimed, of the 'plain and reasonable proposition' that society was formed 'for the happiness of its citizens' placed such nations 'at war with the happiness of individuals'.[14] Wollstonecraft appeared to concur in her admonitions against the 'monstrous faith' of even 'civilized societies' who 'made a deity of their government, in whose high prerogative, they have buried all their natural rights'. Here was a powerful view of modern commercial society as an idolised 'aggregate' which failed to serve the rights, interests, or happiness of its individuals.

Defending the British order against such attacks entailed for Burke the justification of its very specific political economic settlement, characterised by historian J. G. A. Pocock as a Whig alliance between aristocratic government and commercial society.[15] In Burke's account, as we shall see, such

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

a settlement sets out the very particular, but also delimited, liberty which may be enjoyed by its subjects: liberty of acquisition within the limits of what their labour might attain. Burke thus sought to counter political narratives which foregrounded liberty by defending the established Whig socio-political and economic order in, as Pocock says, the 'language and categories of political economy', to show the forms of liberty which that order already provides.[16] His opponents' rallying call of 'liberty' would thereby be derailed by changing the terms of the debate, and evoking a necessary submission to the 'natural course of things'.

This chapter shows how Wollstonecraft's engagement with Burke carries forward the call for liberty onto new ground by attacking the economic order on which late eighteenth-century society was founded.[17] Repeatedly critiquing the 'idol of property' around which Burke's text revolved, she shows how an economic order founded on property as currently organised produced a society which was oppressive, and an obstacle to liberty. In this line of attack, Wollstonecraft flushes out into the open an argument which, whilst only periodically explicit in Burke's text, is nevertheless deeply informative of it. Sarcastically reading Burke as the unsettled ghost in *Hamlet*, she asks: 'Must we swear to secure property, and make assurance doubly sure, to give your perturbed spirit rest?'[18] This exposure of Burke as governed – or haunted – by his allegiance to property shifts the ground of a political debate which Burke had hoped to hold on his terms, to expose the nature of the political economic settlement which his text defends, to explore the nature of life and liberty under that settlement, and to wrest the debate out beyond Burke's terms. Framed in this way, the liberty which Price had defended and theorised is no longer an abstract political or philosophical question; rather, it is referred to the specific material conditions of life, which are assessed against both the possibility of freedom, and the oppressions which are their consequence. That Wollstonecraft focuses on these issues in a text prompted by Burke's *Reflections* suggests that she finds such questions contained in some fashion in his text. Burke readily concedes that the order of property which he champions is 'unequal', but his argument runs far deeper than this.[19] As we shall see, the delimited form of liberty offered by Burke, the 'freedom of acquisition' whose rewards are not proportionate to the labour expended in its pursuit, is a function of a political economy whose defence requires the servile and miserable labour of one class whilst defining the idleness of another as part of a 'natural course of things'.[20] Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* exhumes the obscured economic substrata to Burke's work, and places centre stage the social, cultural and psychological consequences

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

of the existing economic ordering of society, which Burke sought to both naturalise and make the object of affective bonds. The *Vindication* thus constitutes the next stage in an unfolding political campaign for liberty: an exposition of the oppressions stemming directly from the Whiggish property order which Burke's text obscurely defends.

In this reading, the *Vindication*'s motivating question might be taken as the following: in how many ways does the current economic order of things, in the 'present state of property' as the *Analytical Review* had it, impede the progress of liberty?[21] Its attack on the Whig property order is also invigorated with a more generalised sense of the corruptions of commerce and its erosions of the social fabric. As the next chapter shows, its analysis of the corruptions of wealth and the existing property order is continued in Wollstonecraft's second major work, the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), where the call for a 'revolution in manners' turns a Burkean vocabulary of manners in a new direction, to reject the corrupt morals and manners which Wollstonecraft shows stem directly from the existing property order. The double move of the two *Vindications* is thus first, to flush out into the open the occluded defence of Whig political economy which Burke smuggles into his *Reflections* and to challenge its political oppressions, and then, in the second *Vindication*, to trace its consequences in the moral corruptions of the age, and map out a programme of moral and social reform via the education of women. In the process, the *Vindications* loudly and collectively challenge the norms of Whig political economy obscured, in Burke, by gothic drapery and sentimental veneration of established social and political structures. Against this, Wollstonecraft resists the separation of economic concerns from, on the one hand, questions of liberty, equality, oppression, and happiness, and, on the other, moral and social norms, and insists on the inextricable consequences which stem from the economic structures of society for all forms of social life, for morals and manners. The *Vindications* thus refused to countenance a political economy which, describing itself as the 'natural course of things', sought both to disaggregate an economic order from its political, and social consequences, and to drape itself in an ideology of sentimental attachment which operates against analytical inspection of what Burke would prefer his readers to leave unexamined.

Taking place as it does in written form, in a mode which closely tracks and refutes Burke's work whilst mobilising its own textual strategies, Wollstonecraft's challenge to Burkean political economy was not merely political but also discursive, generic, and linguistic. Part of this is evident in Wollstonecraft's rhetorical and stylistic differences with Burke. 'I shall

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

be employed about things, not words!', Wollstonecraft stated in her second *Vindication*; Burke, meanwhile, 'was nothing if not a rhetorical strategist'.[22] Fundamentally at stake in their exchange was the nature, status, and even accessibility of political economic discourse itself, as Wollstonecraft responded to a text which sought to naturalise existing political and economic settlements whilst barely acknowledging this as its own strategy. The challenge of Wollstonecraft's response to Burke was not simply to address its politics, but also the discursive form taken by its political economic knowledge: its expression, style, and status, as well as its relationship with other forms of knowledge and modes of thinking and writing. At stake in their exchange is thus not only political economy as a theory of economic and socio-political behaviours, but also the very means by which political, social, and moral worlds might be known and represented in writing. A comparison of descriptive landscape writing – a mode long used to represent sociopolitical organisation – in Burke's *Reflections* and Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* shows how the relationship of political economic knowledge to the aesthetic and the affective, on the one hand, and to analytical reason and the imagination, on the other, is in play in these texts.

Political Economy and Landscape Description: Burke, Smith, and Wollstonecraft

Burke's *Reflections* and Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* share open, loose, even digressive modes of organisation. Whilst this has meant that the texts run the risk of being dismissed as disorganised or 'rambling and digressive', it also gave each author a remarkable flexibility in staging and framing their arguments.[23] The use of topographical writing in both texts is one sign of this discursive freedom. Both authors make periodic use of the landscape survey to bolster their arguments, but the nature and function of these passages are markedly different in each text, which yoke landscape writing to quite contrasting political economic ends.

A striking example in Burke's text occurs as he discusses French national prosperity in the period before the Revolution. Writing in 1769, years before the *Reflections*, Burke had perceived the state of the country's finances to be perilous, and even foreseen the Revolution itself: 'no man … who has considered [French] affairs with any degree of attention or information, but must hourly look for some extraordinary convulsion in that whole system; the effect of which on France, and even on all Europe, it is difficult to conjecture'.[24] Such knowledge is repressed from the *Reflections*, however, as Burke's defence of the French *ancien régime*

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

includes a flattering picture of the 'progressive improvement' of the country.[25] Orthodox political economic evidence is cited to support the claim that France enjoyed a 'very respectable degree of opulence': population growth (which for Smith correlated with national prosperity) and Necker's account of the *Administration of Finances of France* (1785), described as an 'accurate and interesting collection of facts relative to public economy and to political arithmetic'.[26] But Burke also produces the following extraordinary sentence:

> Indeed, when I consider the face of the kingdom of France; the multitude and opulence of her cities; the useful magnificence of her spacious high roads and bridges; the opportunity of her artificial canals and navigations opening the conveniences of maritime communication through a solid continent of so immense an extent; when I turn my eyes to the stupendous works of her ports and harbours, and to her whole naval apparatus, whether for war or trade; when I bring before my view the number of her fortifications, constructed with so bold and masterly a skill, and made and maintained at so prodigious a charge, presenting an armed front and impenetrable barrier to her enemies upon every side; when I recollect how very small a part of that extensive region is without cultivation, and to what complete perfection the culture of many of the best productions of the earth have been brought in France; when I reflect on the excellence of her manufactures and fabrics, second to none but ours, and in some particulars not second; when I contemplate the grand foundations of charity, public and private; when I survey the state of all the arts that beautify and polish life; when I reckon the men she has bled for extending her fame in war, her able statesmen, the multitude of her profound lawyers and theologians, her philosophers, her critics, her historians and antiquaries, her poets and her orators, sacred and profane, I behold in all this something which awes and commands the imagination, which checks the mind on the brink of precipitate and indiscriminate censure, and which demands that we should very seriously examine what and how great are the latent vices that could authorize us at once to level so spacious a fabric with the ground.[27]

Whilst the *Reflections'* digressive mode enables such a topographical excurse, the passage implicitly poses the question of the relation of this rhapsodic survey to earlier claims about French prosperity grounded in the authority of financial and political economic knowledge. A supplemental logic is in play, as though readerly affective engagement is needed to make good some unspoken inadequacy in his earlier assertions. Sublime awe (which 'commands' the imagination and 'checks the mind') is modelled as the response the survey should elicit from its reader, yet Burke is not himself so carried away that he is unable to issue a sharp condemnation of the 'vices' that would 'level' such a 'fabric' to the ground. The passage could

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

be read as the cumulative statement, the apotheosis, of Burke's argument, but, with its dramatic shift of rhetorical gears, it might also be taken as somehow displacing what preceded it. Whilst the passage brings to a conclusion the preceding train of argument, it does so by both transcending and displacing it, offering a rhetorical moment which operates as a kind of alternative proof of the prosperity of France, which the Smithian gesture to population, or the evidence of Necker's financial accounting, could somehow not quite clinch.

Burke's turn to topography as – literally – the ground of his argument illustrates the repeated deployment in the *Reflections* of aestheticised reverie, which plays on the same modes of affective response and moralised sensation which he earlier theorised in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Burke's survey of the material infrastructure which sustained French commerce also recalls the opening chapter of *The Wealth of Nations*, where Smith delineates the numerous forms of labour and trade which contribute to the creation of a worker's woollen coat. Smith's description of this 'homely production' moves from an initial survey of the 'joint labour' of the shepherd, the sorter of the wool, the dyer, the spinner, the weaver, and so on, through to the 'merchants and carriers' who provide the 'drugs' used by the dyer and the shears used by the shepherd. The passage ultimately describes, in tones almost as exhortative as Burke employs, the myriad interconnected forms of labour, transport, and commerce which sustain the production and circulation of goods in market society.[28] The discussion exemplifies the characteristic movement of Smith's text, from observation of individual acts and discrete behaviours, to the larger theorisation of an economic system of production and commerce.

Burke's *Reflections* also mediates between the particular and the general: between the material detail of human experience on the one hand, including particular experiences of history and affective and aesthetic sensation, and, on the other, a generalised system of political economy which it will describe and defend as 'the natural course of things'. There is a crucial difference, however. In Smith's opening chapter, attention to material things provides an entry point into the larger, theoretical supposition of an economic system. But whilst Burke's prospect view mimics a similar mode of political economic insight, the turn from observation of the material world to a developed economic understanding is stalled, as topographical survey halts in the face of the apparently overwhelming surface of things: rather than analysis of the cause or functioning of France's wealth, the affective response of 'awe' is offered. In Smithian epistemology, the imagination

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

plays a crucial role in sketching the theorised 'chain' of connections by which observed objects, and their relations to others, might be explained.[29] In Burke, by contrast, the imagination is halted by an unnamed 'something', which 'commands' and 'checks' the mind, and which requires capitulation to the established political and economic system which has produced 'so spacious a fabric'. Burke's aesthetic reverie thus operates explicitly as the capitulation of reason, and as a block to economic analysis, and his own writing demonstrates what his text repeatedly asserts: that speculation is opposed to manners and sentiment – a claim which Wollstonecraft will strongly counter.

The aesthetic reverie which for Burke takes the place of economic analysis thus embodies his text's claim of the superiority of sentiment to speculation and reason. Such a claim is also embodied in Burke's resistance to any idea of 'digesting' the *Reflections* into 'a Systematic order', preferring to retain the generic fiction of his text as a conversational, gentlemanly letter to a friend.[30] His topographical survey of France bears comparison to the 'prospect view' theorised by John Barrell, which exemplifies the landed gentleman's privileged aesthetic and political oversight, unsullied by dogmatic particulars and interested details; it thus similarly enacts the 'gentlemanly' character of Burke's text.[31] That this topographical prospect culminates in a surrender to the established politico-social order – a veneration of the 'fabric' which others would lay to the ground – evidences the 'rhetorical strategy' which Hamilton detects beneath Burke's 'loose' gentlemanly style: the 'manners' of sentiment and feeling, enacted in the text, modelled by its authorial persona, operate as ideological cover for a supposedly natural political 'fabric'. The 'drapery' of Burke's highly rhetorical 'literary' writing, which addresses itself to the affective response of the reader, short-circuits the rational thought which Wollstonecraft repeatedly identifies as the proper grounds of the subject's relation to the world: as her second *Vindication* especially asserts, to be understood as a rational being is the ground of the liberty which is our right. This relation of reason and liberty is crucial for Wollstonecraft politically but also stylistically. This is shown in her own attention to landscape, which refuses the exhortative, rhapsodic prospect view of Burke for critical attention to particularity and detail. Wollstonecraft nevertheless also finds a place for reverie and imagination, not as a means to affirm what is, but as crucial tools for looking beyond the current organisation of things.

In contrast to Burke, for Wollstonecraft, it is the city which is the real test-case for gauging the nature and effects of late eighteenth-century commercial society. Horace Walpole, welcoming Burke's *Reflections*, hoped

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

that Burke's 'foes' and their 'Amazonian allies' would 'return to Fleet Ditch' from which he suggested they had emerged; although he doesn't list her in their number, Walpole's association of Burke's opponents with the dirty corners of the city anticipates Wollstonecraft's deliberate attention to such spaces in her text.[32] The 'polis' which echoes in the term '*political* economy' recalls the city state which is the original political community in classical thinking, a community whose urban location is never really in focus in the Burkean landscape survey. Smith's definition of political economy – 'to provide a plentiful revenue or subsistence for the people, or more properly to enable them to provide such a revenue or subsistence for themselves; and … to supply the state or commonwealth with a revenue sufficient for the publick services' – similarly emphasises its purpose in provisioning (one way or the other) the needs of the community.[33] But in the last pages of the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft sketches a cityscape which highlights a failure to meet the needs of the community in the commercial city of London, in a critical survey very different from those of Smith and Burke:

> In this great city, that proudly rears its head, and boasts of its population and commerce, how much misery lurks in pestilential corners, whilst idle mendicants assail, on every side, the man who hates to encourage imposters, or repress, with angry frown, the plaints of the poor! How many mechanics, by a flux of trade or fashion, lose their employment; whom misfortunes, not to be warded off, lead to the idleness that vitiates their character and renders them afterwards averse to honest labour! Where is the eye that marks these evils, more gigantic than any of the infringements of property, which you piously deprecate?[34]

Wollstonecraft's observations look past the Burkean 'boasts' of population and commerce to see, as in a Hogarthian visual satire, misery in 'pestilential corners', from 'idle mendicants', to complaining poverty, to the vitiation of character through unemployment, to (a little further on) 'the sick wretch, who can no longer earn the sour bread of unremitting labour', who 'steals to a ditch to bid the world a long good night', or lies, 'neglected' by 'mercenary attendants', in a hospital.[35] Her 'eye' which 'marks these evils' is capable of noting the particular details of lived historical experience, even when it is hidden in 'corners' or a 'ditch', but she is also quick to link such sights to their economic causes: the loss of employment due to fluxes 'of trade or fashion', the illness brought on by 'unremitting labour'.[36] These 'evils' are 'more gigantic than any of the infringements of property', which Burke 'piously deprecate[s]', she asserts, countering Burke's veneration of property with the alternative perspective of an 'eye'

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

alert to the moral and social failings of the city. Like Burke's survey of pre-Revolutionary France, Wollstonecraft's view of London culminates in an affective turn, not to sublime 'awe' however, but with the suggestion that '[s]uch misery demands more than tears'. The 'pause' she takes to 'recollect' herself and 'smother the contempt I feel rising for your rhetorical flourishes and infantine sensibility' is represented by a double line of dashes, the typographical marking of such a necessary self-recollection.[37] Unlike Burke's rolling vision, contained within the multiple clauses of an endlessly expanded sentence, Wollstonecraft's survey is piecemeal, even fragmented, and its climax is not aesthetic surrender contained within and marked by syntactical cadences, but a self-made fracture in the 'fabric' of her text, which marks both horror at what has been witnessed, and contempt for a Burkean defence which would seek to justify it.

Wollstonecraft's puncturing of her text disrupts the smooth delivery of its descriptive acts; it reminds the reader of the historical particularity of the individual writing the text, who must 'pause' to gather herself, and, by extension, that of the text itself. By rupturing the readerly relationship to the text, the historically situated act of reading is also foregrounded; its author's need to 'recollect' herself to manage her emotional response to her words models the possibility that the reader, too, may have an affective response to the text, without prescriptively setting out what that response might be. For Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, descriptive acts ('a sort of philosophico-economic Phenomenology') underlie eighteenth-century political economy, central to its generation of a political economic knowledge which 'acts as if it were the description … [of] "*the world of needs*"'.[38] Through descriptive acts, in other words, political economy constructs a knowledge of civil society as a 'system of needs'.[39] The implicit claim of descriptive acts in political economic writing is to convey the reality of the world as it is, yet description constitutes a creative, constructive, persuasive act which seeks to elicit the consent of its reader, whether in Smith's account of the worker's coat, or in Burke's description of France.[40] Wollstonecraft's disrupting of her text breaks its bond of believability with its reader, and exposes its writerly nature, its situatedness, and the particularity of its perspective; rather than drawing its reader into crediting its description of the world, it frees the reader to believe or not, as personal judgement dictates. At the same time, her London cityscape shows how description can operate critically and dialogically to expose how a mode of knowledge which claims to understand the world as a system of needs fails to meet them. If Burke exhorts his reader to venerate a 'spacious' social fabric, Wollstonecraft describes what that fabric fails to provide,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

highlighting the failures of the promissory narrative underpinning commercial society. If description contributes to the construction (Smith) and defence (Burke) of political economy, in Wollstonecraft's hands it also enables a glimpse of some of its tragic effects.

Wollstonecraft admitted that 'Utopian reveries' at times informed Price's writings.[41] But she is not afraid to sketch alternative possible futures herself, although these are not the 'Arcadia[s] of fiction' to which, as she says, the imagination often turns, when 'revolt[ing]' from what 'is often … disgusting in the distresses of poverty'. Whether in her political treatises (as in the attack on 'stupid novelists' in the second *Vindication*) or in the prefaces to her fiction, she consistently and repeatedly attacks writing which lures the reader into artificial and unreal worlds, insisting instead on the responsibility of representation to depict the world as it is.[42] She attacks the attempt to turn from 'the distresses of poverty' in another landscape sketch, depicting a 'rich man' who 'builds a house' finished with 'art and taste', and surrounds it with 'sweeping pleasure-grounds, obelisks, temples, and elegant cottages, as *objects* for the eye', as well as (in a pointer to the source of such wealth in slave plantations) with trees grown 'to recreate the fancy of the planter'. Against such a vision, Wollstonecraft suggests that, if 'the heart was allowed to beat true to nature',

> decent farms would be scattered over the estate, and plenty smile around. Instead of the poor being subject to the griping hand of an avaricious steward, they would be watched over with fatherly solicitude, by the man whose duty and pleasure it was to guard their happiness, and shield from rapacity the beings who, by the sweat of their brow, exalted him above his fellows.[43]

This description, however, is presented in the subjunctive, as only a conditional possibility. Wollstonecraft cannot see, but only 'almost imagine' the paternal figure she depicts 'gathering blessings as he mounted the hill of life': so precarious is the vision that even imaginative sight is only partially achieved, and it struggles against a bracing alternative: the '[d]omination' which 'blasts all these prospects', whether in the form of the Acts of Enclosure which increase the 'property of the rich' and prevent 'the industrious peasant' from 'steal[ing] a farm from the heath', or laws of primogeniture, which prevent 'large estates' being 'divided into small farms'.[44] Wollstonecraft's sharp critique leavens a vision which might otherwise slip into the cloyingly nostalgic or the sentimental cliché (as the idealistic father-figure threatens to do); it maintains instead a descriptive opening where the imagination can depict not an impossible utopia, but an alternative reality which might just be possible. At this moment, we

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

are far from a more fully-fledged enactment of imagination's capacity to move beyond a description of what is, and figure forth what might be. But there is enough in these final pages of the first *Vindication* to suggest how the battle with the 'champion of property' will reach beyond rhetorical combat, and beyond the reason, understanding and knowledge which the second *Vindication* so vaunts, towards the capacity of the imagination to reach forward to what is not yet real, and figure forth new ways of thinking, being, and knowing.

The 'Natural Course of Things'

One presence detailed in the London cityscape at the end of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* is an 'idle mendicant'. The term 'mendicant' might refer to a beggar, but more specifically, it could also refer to a monk seeking alms. This possibility recalls a crucial passage in Burke's *Reflections*: his response to the French revolutionary government's appropriation of monastic property to fund its new currency, the assignats.[45] The passage brings to the fore the particular nature of the politico-economic order which Burke is defending in the text, and especially its foundation on an alliance between property and commerce. Commentators on *Reflections* often note that Burke recognised that events in France 'menaced the Whig conception of government and society', but the specificity of this threat isn't always elaborated. Burke's response to the assignats, however, betrays a deep-seated anxiety about the potential effects of credit on which the Whig commercial property order itself relied.[46]

The most famous passages of *Reflections* include the sensationalised psycho-sexual drama of the attack on Marie Antoinette's bedchamber at Versailles, and the lament that 'the age of chivalry is gone', but revolutionary political economy is also given striking treatment:

> every thing human and divine sacrificed to the idol of public credit, and national bankruptcy the consequence; and to crown all, the paper securities of new, precarious, tottering power, the discredited paper securities of impoverished fraud, and beggared rapine, held out as a currency for the support of an empire, in lieu of the two great recognized species that represent the lasting, conventional credit of mankind, which disappeared and hid themselves in the earth from whence they came, when the principle of property, whose creatures and representatives they are, was systematically subverted.[47]

Burke's horror at the 'paper securities' of the assignats is of an overturned hierarchy: the gold and silver 'representatives' of property have been

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

overthrown by the tottering 'idol' of public credit and its paper currency. Wollstonecraft did not directly respond to this passage, but her admired Macaulay did, and was perplexed as to why the new French paper currency so disturbed Burke, when it echoed what Britain's own financial revolution had established a century previously: a system in which government-backed credit circulated and was itself bought and sold.[48] Indeed, Burke himself had acknowledged, in his survey of France discussed in the previous section, that the British credit-based economy was a key factor in British economic superiority over France by the end of the eighteenth century.[49] The existence of such a system is occluded in Burke's would-be Shakespearean personification of value as gold and silver, creatures hiding in the ground. But the horror which the assignats elicit from Burke derives from their severing of the foundational link between value and property which Burke honours, as his own 'idol'. This founding bond of the Whig commercial order, between landed aristocracy and commerce, property and value, is dismantled by the assignats, offering a vision of credit operating uncontained by such constraints. Running through the passage, and perhaps seeping into the whole text, is horror at a political economy where land no longer determines value, and where property stimulates circulation and itself circulates. Underlying the passage is a recognition that the transmutation of a political economy founded on aristocratic property and commerce into one in thrall to the circulation of goods was already well under way in Britain too. Burke's horror at the assignats, his reaching for a retrograde language of money as gold, thus acts as cover for what his text will later concede: that the mobility of property, and the 'wheel of circulation' powered by servile labour which is its 'spring of action', is already an unchallengeable 'natural course of things'.[50]

Throughout *Reflections*, Burke makes extensive use of pejorative rhetoric to attack markets, and gives prominence by contrast to a faux-archaic discourse of chivalrous gallantry. This makes it difficult to perceive that his text is defending a Whig political economy in which property, including mobile property, is part of a system of government in which subordination and servile labour sustain the property system. George III apparently thanked Burke for speaking up for 'the cause of the Gentlemen', but as we shall see, what *Reflections* defends is not a gentlemanly system at all, but a labour economy in thrall to the circulation of goods.[51] The harsh outlines of what this means for 'the body of the people', and specifically for the possibility of liberty, are made clear in the *Reflections*' closing peroration, when an attack on the French revolutionary government (including the actions of Talleyrand, to whom Wollstonecraft was to dedicate her second

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

Vindication) broadens to outline what for Burke are the proper relations between 'acquisition', order, and government. It is evident that 'the power of acquisition on the part of the subject' is a rare and delimited form of liberty which is allowed to the subject as part of the maintenance of the order of the larger political whole. 'To be enabled to acquire' Burke states, 'the people … must be tractable and obedient…. [They] must not find the principles of natural subordination by art rooted out of their minds. They must respect the property of which they cannot partake'. And finally, they

> must labour to obtain what by labour can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportioned to the endeavour, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice. Of this consolation, whoever deprives them, deadens their industry, and strikes at the root of all acquisition as of all conservation.[52]

The theft (in Burke's eyes) of clerical property thus brings into relief his sense of a property order which subjects labour and mystifies 'the people'; it demonstrates too how a political economy of the production and circulation of goods sits at the heart of Burke's art of government. According to the 'principles of natural subordination', the people are yoked into a system of labour and acquisition whose 'success' is 'disproportioned to the endeavour', and where the only consolation is that promised after death. Liberty, the rallying cry of his opponents, can scarcely hope for a presence in Burke's vocabulary here, squeezed out as it is by the demands of a property system where labour and acquisition provide the defining grounds for subjecthood.

Wollstonecraft quoted this passage, and more, in the final pages of her *Vindication*, in contrast to her usual practice of confining references to Burke's text to her footnotes. She attacked its contempt for the poor, its 'tyrannic spirit' and 'factitious feelings', as well as its 'hard-hearted sophistry' and the 'specious humility' of its 'submission to the will of Heaven'.[53] Macaulay also singled it out for critique.[54] Against Burke's unspoken sense of the 'exclusive' right of the rich to pleasure, Wollstonecraft asserts the 'right' of the poor to 'more comfort than they at present enjoy', regardless of any consolations of the next world, and offers her vision, discussed above, of the 'decent farms' 'scattered over the estate' of the rich man, a vision which looks away from an economy founded on alienated labour and the circulation of goods, to agrarian contentment, a prospect which allures her a number of times in her writing, as later chapters will show. Yet Burke's commitment to the 'wheel of circulation' and the 'natural course of things', with the consequences they carry for those in 'innumerable

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

servile … occupations' is even more explicit elsewhere in *Reflections*, in a crucial passage expounding on what was for Burke the deeply troubling appropriation of monastic property by the National Assembly.

Because, in his mind, monastic property stands for all landed property, Burke's argument involves what otherwise reads as an odd defence of the purported idleness of monastic life, through which he also justifies the idleness of a landed capitalist. This idleness, Burke says, 'is itself the spring of labour; this repose the spur to industry': a claim which rests on the assurance that the landowner's profits are properly reinvested.[55] In such terms, the idleness of the monks is fully justified; indeed, they are 'as usefully employed' as the 'many wretches' who are 'inevitably doomed' to work

> from dawn to dark in the innumerable servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly, and often most unwholesome and pestiferous occupations, to which by the social œconomy so many wretches are inevitably doomed. If it were not generally pernicious to disturb the natural course of things, and to impede, in any degree, the great wheel of circulation which is turned by the strangely directed labour of these unhappy people, I should be infinitely more inclined forcibly to rescue them from their miserable industry, than violently to disturb the tranquil repose of monastic quietude […] no consideration, except the necessity of submitting to the yoke of luxury, and the despotism of fancy, who in their own imperious way will distribute the surplus product of the soil, can justify the toleration of such trades and employments in a well-regulated state.[56]

Burke's defence of monastic property (and all landed property) reveals much about the economic system (the 'natural course of things') which operates here as the grounds of nature and justice. That system, of extraordinarily unpleasant labour ('servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly … unwholesome and pestiferous'), is justified by necessity and by utility – the phrase 'usefully employed' is repeated three times immediately prior to the quoted passage. As the experience of 'miserable industry' shows, human happiness is explicitly sacrificed to utility, a moment of ideological slippage which shows exactly why 'these unhappy people' cannot be rescued. But beyond utility lies something further. The drive or motor of utility is 'the yoke of luxury, and the despotism of fancy', to which it is necessary to submit, to maintain the 'great wheel of circulation' and 'distribute the surplus product of the soil'. In the earlier prospect view of the French nation, the imagination had enjoyed a kind of pleasurable aesthetic consumption of signs of French prosperity, but was still capable of being commanded, 'checked' on the 'brink' of 'indiscriminate censure' and required to respect the existing political 'fabric'. Here however, the tables are turned: now

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

the imagination's authoritarian relation, despotic fancy, runs the show, requiring a necessary submission to its 'imperious ways', and its tyrannical demands for 'luxury' and consumption, more than a mere aesthetic pleasure which might be checked, will instead drive the wheel of circulation and the production of goods. Putative despot presiding imperiously over a consumer economy of goods, or useful scapegoat for the 'utility' of the 'social œconomy', fancy's supposedly irrefutable demands mean that many varieties of miserable labour must be tolerated even in a 'well-regulated state'.

Burke's overall tone here is of regretful capitulation to the unavoidable sacrifice of human lives: his is the sorrowful head-shaking and hand-wringing of the overseer of the 'great wheel of circulation', unavoidably complicit in a system of misery and unhappiness because its disturbance would be 'pernicious'. Unlike the plantation owner who has retired to the 'Arcadia' of his landscape garden, he is at least looking directly at what Howard Caygill has termed the 'violence of production', whose 'conflict' is otherwise 'relegated from civil society'.[57] Yet the gentlemanly persona of reasonably modulated regret merely clothes an underlying inflexibility, present in the language of necessity and fate which pervades the passage (the 'inevitable' 'doom' of the 'wretches'; the 'natural course of things'; submitting to the imperious 'yoke' and to 'despotism'.) And *that* fatalistic system, in turn, is presented in language which, as a would-be bolster to its authority, carries the mark of political economic discourse. Two of Burke's key phrases are directly borrowed from political economy's sourcebook, Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, but the way these are used, to present labour's tragic predicament, caught in the wheel of circulation as in the wheel of fate, offers a picture quite absent in the Smithian source, which typically emphasises the motivation of the economic subject by describing labour as acting in its own self-interest, in pursuit of self-betterment. The phrase 'the natural course of things', on which Burke's by-standing apologia rests, is used at least eight times in *The Wealth of Nations*; it also appears in the prized 1755 manuscript in which Smith staked his claim to a theory of economic system precisely as allowing the 'natural course of things' to take place.[58] Crucially, however, Smith's argument against government intervention in the operation of trade and commerce never argued against regulation to prevent the forms of labour misery which Burke decries. By contrast, Smith was alert to the vulnerability of workers to cabals of merchants fixing the prices of labour or commodities, and he set out at length the responsibilities of government towards its subjects, which should include (anticipating Wollstonecraft) a system of national

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

education. The phrase 'wheel of circulation' also appears in *The Wealth of Nations*, but it is used very precisely in a technical account of the circulation of money, not, as in Burke, to describe the circulation of goods as a figure for the economy in general.[59] In Burke, the phrase is abstract, general, and figural: a metaphor for political economy itself. Less descriptive and more imperative than in Smith, Burke's 'wheel of circulation' writes political economy as a tragedy, presenting the unstoppable production of goods as a wheel on which human lives are visibly broken.

Burke's weighing of 'servile, degrading … unwholesome and pestiferous occupations' against the 'useful employment' of 'lazy' monks 'no otherwise employed than by singing in the choir' recalls a passage in Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (from which much of his economic thinking grew), which similarly compares the labour of those in different social stations. Smith's survey runs from the 'luxury and ease and plenty' of the 'rich and opulent merchant', through to the clerks who do his business and the artisans who provide the commodities he enjoys, before arriving at the 'poor labourer' who 'supports the whole frame of society and furnishes the means of convenience and ease of all the rest', and who 'bears on his shoulders the whole of mankind'.[60] The comparison in Smith serves to emphasise the disparity between those at the hard end of the social division of labour and the comfort and convenience of those at the top; the passage as a whole is marked both by a recognition of the social and economic load carried by the workers, and an absence of the tones of regretful necessity that so marks Burke's writing. As Corey Robin points out, Burke's difference from Smith constitutes a fork in the ongoing development of political economy: where Smith is alert to how capital uses power (economic, legal) to extort more from labour, Burke overlooks labour in his late thoughts on value, instead linking value to free market mechanisms, and characterises capital, not labour, as the actuating principle behind 'the whole machine'.[61]

If property founds Burkean political economy (and can even be defended at its limit case, when provocatively associated with idle, singing monks), Wollstonecraft's response, as we see in Chapter 3, mobilised an alternative valoration of individual effort, extending a Smithian recognition of the economic value of labour into a moral, even aesthetic acknowledgement of effort, self-development, and improvement. In class terms, as Gary Kelly has argued, this can be read as a valoration of the meritocratic principles of the professional middle classes; in moral and religious terms, it describes the duty each individual should feel to act virtuously to emulate God; and it is related too to the effortful psychic strivings which, in aesthetic theory, accompany the sublime.[62] But Wollstonecraft's immediate response

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

to Burke's condemnation of 'unhappy' multitudes to 'pestiferous' labour was clear. 'To suppose that, during the whole or part of its existence, the happiness of any individual is sacrificed to promote the welfare of ten, or ten thousand, other beings – is impious', she stated; the 'happiness of the whole must arise from the happiness of the constituent parts'.[63] Her words recall Macaulay's warning against making an 'idol' of the 'aggregate capacity' of the society, especially when this involved the sacrifice of 'those individuals who formed the aggregate', a reversal of the 'plain and reasonable' logic by which society is formed 'for the happiness of its citizens'.[64] Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* would also repeatedly align the interests of private individuals and the state, which she sees as linked through virtue rather than the 'yoke' of luxury.

Wollstonecraft's attack on Burke's idolisation of the 'aggregate' over the happiness of individuals brings back into focus the human populace whose needs are foundational to political economy as defined by Smith. Indeed, her alternative account of human nature, and its capacity for happiness, is central to her countering of Burke's depiction of humanity yoked by necessity to labour through the despotism of its own desires. Attacking his 'endeavour to make unhappy men resigned to their fate' as the weak effort of 'short-sighted benevolence', she extoled instead a 'masculine godlike affection' which 'labour[s] to increase human happiness by extirpating error'. Instead of an ineffectual gospel of resignation, humanity should exert its powers in efforts to 'increase human happiness', in a task involving both 'enlightened understanding' and 'the impulse of feelings that Philosophy invigorates'. The very constitution of human nature directs us to such efforts, for 'the sight of distress, or an affecting narrative' produces a response of 'sympathetic emotion', and 'emotions that reason deepens' are 'justly terms the feelings of *humanity*'.[65] Differentiated from a 'vague' sensibility, it is in such 'active exertions of virtue' that our humanity (both our capacity for benevolence, and our identity as a species) consists.

This account of a human nature strongly characterised by a capacity for sympathetic feeling differs markedly from the despotic needs attributed to it by Burke. It illustrates Wollstonecraft's understanding of the relations between human nature and 'Philosophy', between the impulses of feeling which characterise humanity (in both senses) and the operations of reason and the understanding which ultimately should be used to build or reform human community. This is the account of human nature which should, she suggests, direct political actions towards human happiness; the contrast with Burke's capitulation to the 'natural course of things' is dramatic. As we will now see, Wollstonecraft returned to the condemnation

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

of what she called Burke's 'system' in the final paragraphs of her text, denouncing its sacrifice of 'Nature and Reason' to 'authority', and drawing on the words of the blinded Gloucester in *King Lear* to suggest that 'the gods … seem to kill us for their sport'.[66] The *Lear* reference makes explicit Wollstonecraft's grasp of the essentially tragic nature of Burkean political economy, in which individuals are passive sufferers of the forces of history, and contrasts with her own conviction of the capacity of reason and the feelings of humanity to work together in pursuit of human happiness. Caught between the two alternatives lies a struggle over the nature and purpose of writing itself, and its own relationship to human happiness, and to human fate.

Value, Feeling, and Writing

Wollstonecraft leaves the readers of her *Vindication* with words from Shakespeare's *King Lear* ringing in their ears: a tragedy which turns on the inequitable division of property within families, both in the initial unequal division of Lear's kingdom between his daughters, and in the subplot which motivates the illegitimate Edmund's attack on the inheritance of the legitimate Edgar. Property in *Lear* is the object of passions which tear families apart within and across generations, and which ultimately destabilise the nation. Such passions cause criminality, horrific injury, madness, and war; even Gloucester's insight that the 'the gods … seem to kill us for their sport' comes at the cost of a blindness which also symbolically connotes his failure to see his illegitimate son with the same eyes as his legitimate heir. Frans de Bruyn has remarked that tragedy, the preeminent genre for writing the failure of the struggle for human happiness, is Burke's 'fundamental form'; Wollstonecraft's *Lear* reference suggests that she too recognises how the trope of tragedy works to naturalise political economy in the *Reflections*.[67] In this context, the 'wheel of circulation' which so determines the lives of workers recalls the wheel of fate which, as Ronald Paulson has shown, has been associated with tragedy since medieval times; Paulson further suggests that 'the basic mythos of tragedy' has always been used to 'keep mutability under control'.[68] The necessary turning of Burke's wheel of circulation also controls mutability, operating to resist and exclude its very possibility, even at the explicit price of human lives. But if the wheel of fortune connotes change as tragedy, the wheel of circulation announces the instantiation of a specific political economy which passes itself off, under the guise of the tragic, as fate or nature. Meanwhile, whilst classical decorum restricted tragedy to characters of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

high social rank, Burkean political economy enables tragedy to extend a more socially inclusive embrace. And where tragedy has been a genre used to narrate and understand change, and is thus often oriented to history or the past, here it is redeployed to colonise the future: the 'necessity of submitting to the yoke of luxury, and the despotism of fancy' seemingly refuting the possibility of future alternatives. Along with the familiarity of its outlines, and its elevated generic status, tragedy is thus useful for Burke's rhetorical strategy in *Reflections*: to elicit, and valorise, affective response from his reader, especially in relation to what he presents as the theatre of recent historical events. Burke's depiction of the subject's place in his 'system' can thus be maintained with the yoke of sentimental feeling and the tears so often elicited by the tragic unfolding of human fate.

Wollstonecraft's challenge to all this, however, is to suggest that the Burkean tragic 'system' reads the human predicament through the wrong generic lens, not least in its irreligious lack of optimism and the failure of its humanity. Her challenge to the 'tragedy' of Burkean political economy is thus also a resistance to a mode of knowledge which seeks to abstract a 'science' of wealth and prosperity away from a foundational concern with human happiness and well-being. In this context, it is helpful to recall John Guillory's account of the disciplinary history of political economy and its emergence from Scottish moral philosophy and the 'science of man' project. For Guillory, political economy's inability to 'solve the problem of the relation between the individual subject and market society' (a problem writ large in the 'necessary submission' to the 'wheel of circulation') provoked the discursive disaggregation of political economy from moral philosophy, as well as that of aesthetics, to which experiential questions of individual taste, sensation, and affect were relegated.[69] From this fracture stemmed two opposing discourses of value grounded, on the one hand, on systematised accounts of labour or the market, and on (variously more or less subjective) accounts of affect, on the other. Burke and Wollstonecraft's texts are situated prior to, or perhaps at the moment of, such a bifurcation between market and aesthetic value, at a time when, in Robin's words, 'the crucible of value' was 'heated to the highest degrees by the French Revolution'.[70] For Thompson, political economy's formation itself 'constitutes a gradual working through of this crisis' in value.[71] In this analysis, political economy is founded on a problem of form which brings with it a discursive break, from a conglomerated 'science of man' to a specialised mode of knowledge, one constituted by abstractions distilled from human experience, and from which, by the same token, the question of the human is alienated.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

Burke and Wollstonecraft both mobilise writing to address this crisis in value, though with enormously differing strategies. As we have seen, Burke mobilises sentiment, affect, and aesthetic and rhetorical effect to address the question of the individual's relation to the social order in market society, as reflected in various figures which recur in his text: the 'little platoon', the mortmain, the 'relation in blood'.[72] Equally, he seeks to use writing in general, including his own gentlemanly persona, as author of a letter to another gentleman, to fix value and opinion in the public sphere (even whilst, as in disavowal of such an ungentlemanly act, that intervention is presented as a personal, private communication). For Wollstonecraft, as her attention to the interstitial spaces of the commercial city – its ditches, hospital rooms, and 'pestilential corners' – suggests, the relation between the individual and the social whole in late eighteenth-century commercial society is one through which many can too easily fall, as the effects of poverty, unemployment, beggary, trade fluctuations, and illness attest. Burke's text obliges its reader to acquiesce in the silent fiction that the political tract she is reading is really a private letter: to read the text requires a concession to its strategies. This unspoken arrangement between text and reader echoes the uninterrogated historical settlements between authorities and subjects which the text itself presents. In her fierce, *ad hominem* attack on Burke in the early pages of her *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft refuses to acquiesce to such unreal social relations, repeatedly referring his textual persona back to his biographical person, using details from Burke's life and references to his Parliamentary speeches to challenge an authorial persona which would perhaps prefer, like Marie Antoinette herself, to hover 'just above the horizon' of such earthly specifics.[73] If one of Wollstonecraft's central contentions with Burke is that his version of market society is an affront to the common feelings of humanity, it makes sense to begin her exposition with the personal failings of the man from whom such an account stems. In contrast to Burke, Wollstonecraft's investment in the human is not stylistic or figural: it eschews aesthetic or rhetorical effect to directly and critically address the authorial person himself, as though to signal, amidst its 'crisis', that the human is her ground of value.

The problem of political economy's tragic instantiation in Burke – its sacrifice of humanity to circulation's 'great wheel' – is part of what Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, which references *Lear* in its second last paragraph, and has 'God' as its final word, seeks to remedy. The human heart and human feeling are central to the solution, but so too is the reclaiming of form, writing, and representation, which collectively offer the possibility of redirecting human knowledge itself. As we shall see in later chapters,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

this problem was to preoccupy Wollstonecraft across her career. Her analysis of *Reflections* makes clear that the relationship between feeling and form, writing and humanity, has been fundamentally corrupted in Burke, and this schism goes to the heart of the political and cultural wrongs of the time, as well as to the fraud which he attempts on his readers. Thus, when Wollstonecraft asserts to Burke that for misery 'to reach your heart' it must 'have its cap and bells; your tears are reserved … for the declamation of the theatre, or the downfall of queens', she is not simply accusing him of lack of feeling, but of reserving feeling, the mark of the human, for a formal and separate realm of aesthetic response, enacting a boundary between that and real life, so that, whilst the fall of the queen (rendered an artificial spectacle through the rhetorical constructions of his text) should, in his view, elicit a loud lament, the misery of multiple workers is justified through the complex and unchallengeable formulas of political economic arithmetic.[74] The satirical print *Don Dismallo Running the Literary Gantlet* (*sic*, Figure 2.1), published in late 1790, literalises and personalises Wollstonecraft's point here, showing Burke dressed in the costume of theatricality, wearing the cap of the jester or fool, whilst he 'runs the gauntlet' past various of his literary and political opponents, who are clothed, in striking contrast, in the ordinary dress of the day.[75] A similar accusation of compartmentalising, of separating artificially elicited sentiment from the real horrors of the world, recurs in Wollstonecraft's attack on colonial women – 'fair ladies' – who return to their sensibility novels to 'exercise their tender feelings' having just overseen the brutal whipping of their slaves.[76] And, as mentioned earlier, a distinction between fake, artificial feeling, such as she sees is cultivated by many novelists, and the authentic feeling of genius recurs in the prefatory matter to her own fiction, both *Mary* (which predates the *Vindications*) and the later *The Wrongs of Woman*. Her late essay, 'On Poetry', meanwhile, also turns on a distinction between artificial or fake sentiment and natural feeling.[77]

The attack on Burke as a purveyor and cultivator of false feeling is thus in line with what will become a recurring critique in Wollstonecraft's take on contemporary culture. Burke's text is especially invidious because of its author's evident strategizing of feeling: bending his reader's sentimental response to his rhetorical purpose to ensure that feeling bows (as the authorial persona does) to the wheel of circulation, and thus more broadly making the writing of human feeling subservient to the mediation of economic necessity. In this, Burke's text enacts a hierarchizing of the relative discourses of political economy and literary or aesthetic ones. Despite the foregrounding of many formal rhetorical and literary features in his text, its

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003



Figure 2.1 'Don Dismallo'

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

repeated deployment of the figural, and its address to the affective response of its reader, such devices have no value in themselves, but are determined by their functional role in relation to Burke's defence of the 'natural course of things'. To read Burke's text for its literary art would be entirely to miss his point: rather, the literary, rhetorical, and aesthetic are deployed to 'beautify' the social and economic order, to gloss and drape Burke's political economic purpose. In her response to the *Reflections*, Macaulay denounces Burke's attempt to establish the 'happiness' of society on 'prejudice, opinion and the powers of the imagination'.[78] Wollstonecraft too calls her opponent out on this in the 'Advertisement' to the *Vindication*, but her vocabulary focuses more specifically on Burke's weaponising of affect, accusing him of presenting 'sophistical arguments' in the 'questionable shape of natural feelings', and of clothing his 'devious' thoughts in 'specious garb'.[79] 'Natural feelings' have been strategised, made an art or artifice or device, alienated from human life, the real contours of which Burke's text seeks to disguise, sentimentalise, or 'drape'. Against this, Wollstonecraft's prefatory note to the *Vindication* offers a mini-narrative of authentic feeling – her own – in a personal history of the origins of her response to Burke, which lie, indeed, in the growth of her own feeling. From turning the pages of Burke's text more 'for amusement than information', her 'indignation was roused', and the 'effusions of the moment' thus prompted, swelled to such a 'considerable size' that the idea of the *Vindication* was suggested.[80] Burke's strategy of securing his audience by mobilising 'specious' feeling has spectacularly misfired, at least in this case, a failure ensured by the strength of Wollstonecraft's own feelings and her confidence in them as grounds of judgement, and as authorising – compelling – her writing.

Despite the foregrounding of these themes in her 'Advertisement', few commentators on the *Vindication* have paid much attention to the fact that Wollstonecraft devoted significant space, at both ends of the text, to these questions of how we read, think, and feel, and to the mutual relations of wit and judgement, reason and fancy, understanding and the imagination. Such concerns are central to Wollstonecraft's challenging of Burke's mediation of political economic matters, because feeling, humanity, reason, imagination, and reading are all critical elements in the defence of the liberty and happiness which he threatens. Her remarks are thus more than an admonishment of Burke's style – 'pomp of words' thought it is.[81] Engaging with his text prompts her to consider the dangerous power of feeling, if disconnected from its proper roots in reason and understanding, and how readily written texts might play to that. Her remarks thus show

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003

that, beyond winning an argument with Burke, Wollstonecraft is thinking too about the obstacles which print culture (the tools of which she herself uses) faces in the hoped-for advance of reason. As well as challenging his political economic narrative, then, she reflects too on the strengths and weaknesses of the textual weapons they both use, and how writing and feeling might serve (or hinder) her. Soon after accusing Burke of needing '[m]isery' to be costumed in 'cap and bells' for it 'to reach your heart', she levels at him an aphorism taken from Rousseau's *Letter to d'Alembert on Theatre* (1758) which might well have served as an epigraph to her text, encapsulating as it does her perception of Burke's artful and immoral manipulations: '[t]he tears that are shed for fictitious sorrow are admirably adapted to make us proud of all the virtues which we do not possess'.[82] As Rousseau had in his *Letter*, an important discussion of the political role of spectacle in modern society, Wollstonecraft resists Burke's separation of the aesthetic and affective from political and economic life and asserts the possibility that feeling and happiness might not be alienated from, but reconciled with, the material conditions of human experience. Her own writing will seek to reintegrate feeling – not the 'mechanical instinctive sensations' but 'emotions that reason deepens, and justly terms the feelings of humanity' – into lived experience, rather than separate it out into a separate sphere of representation or signs.[83] At the same time, feeling – the gauge or measure of 'human happiness' or 'humanity' – can operate as a critique of oppressive laws and customs, and perhaps even generate a 'revolution in manners', especially among women, as we shall now see.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 19:53:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009395823.003