

The significance of the representation of women in John Singleton Copley's painting *The Death of Major Peirson, 1781, (1783)* to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, (1792)*: Female form as visual cypher

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*Abstract: This article analyses Mary Wollstonecraft's play on the theme of reform. In particular, her critique of the reductive representation of women, which John Singleton Copley's artwork highlights. Discussion revolves around Copley's painting *The Death of Major Peirson, 1781 (1783)* and a foray into Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)*. Copley uses women 'as sign' which reveals his perception of limited female societal roles, illuminating broader perceptions and a 'masculine production and consumption' system that excludes 'woman'.¹ Through Wollstonecraft's examination of the relations between the sexes, she reveals the complexity of the feminine experience and how female potential simmers beneath contemporary expectation of feminine conduct. Copley employs women to signify fear, despair, and cowardice as a visual device. Their depiction as fleeing the *Battle of Jersey* offers insights into the perceptions of women at the time. Copley's portrayal also visually adds to Wollstonecraft's compelling argument for equality.*

The theme of political and social reform permeates Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)* and brings 'the issue of women's rights for a short moment in the 1790s into the general debate about civil rights'.² One of the repeated ways the writer communicates this theme is by weighing women's conduct and manners against their moral and intellectual strength. In his painting *The Death of Major Peirson, 1781, (1783)*, John Singleton Copley's choice of composition; use of colour and tone, his situation of the female form, their dress; background; props and

¹ Lynne Pearce, *Woman, Image, Text: readings in Pre Raphaelite-Art and Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 15.

² Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and A Vindication of The Rights of Men*, ed. by Janet Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. xv.

gesture all combine to emulate Wollstonecraft's preoccupation with the implications of an emphasis on courtesy and outward appearance. In this way his painting echoes Wollstonecraft's content. Both works join the 'private and public', bringing the revolutionary notion that the 'political and personal are one'.³

This idea is used to significant effect in both works. The tension that this dichotomy brings to each artefact illuminates how each of their messages differ. Copley uses images of women that lean towards the private and domesticised, to act as a foil and to enhance the artist's stylistically grandiose message of Peirson's public heroism. As Mark Salber Phillips explains, 'The proper home for the "great style" was amongst public concerns, where heroic images formed a natural accompaniment to ceremonies of power, whether sacred or secular, mythic or historical'.⁴

Thus, Copley's images appear mediated by his stereotypes and prejudices and those of the broader contemporary audience. Wollstonecraft's critique examines how an emphasis on the everyday family duties of women, such as those depicted in Copley's painting, can influence the broader political picture. In its depiction of the women's terrified escape, as opposed to participating in the key event, the painting reduces women to mere vessels of 'sensibility,' which according to the author, negates their 'reason'.⁵ Thus, with Wollstonecraft's critique in mind, the painting can be seen as an example of how 'the men [...] who have laboured to domesticate women, have endeavoured [...] to weaken their bodies and cramp their minds'.⁶

When examining Wollstonecraft's discourse alongside Copley's artwork, as Peter Burke explains, it becomes unthinkable 'to ignore the topic of gender when analysing images'.⁷

Both Copley and Wollstonecraft understood the meaning that could be derived from gesture and

³ Wollstonecraft, p. xix.

⁴ Mark Salber Phillips, 'History Painting Redistanced: From Benjamin West to David Wilkie', *Modern Intellectual History*, 11, 3 (2014), 611–629 (p. 612).

⁵ Wollstonecraft, p. 134.

⁶ Wollstonecraft, p. 134.

⁷ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), p. 219.

external impression, the convergences of which in each interpretation provide insights into a wider commentary on women's equality.

The Death of Major Peirson, 1781, (1783) is painted in oil on canvas and depicts the final French attempt to seize the largest of the British Channel Islands, Jersey. The battle scene shows the French resistance in Royal Square. In their last stand they surround the statue of George II. In the centre, a pyramidal configuration shows Peirson, dying valiantly in the arms of his men who support his body. In a rare for its time example of a positive and prominent portrayal of a person of colour, Peirson's death is avenged by his servant Pompey. To the right of the painting, 'a young boy, a woman holding a baby, and a nursemaid' flee the musket fire, bayonets, swords, and the smoke-filled commotion just at the point when Peirson meets his fate. In Copley's words, they are 'flying in terror and distress from the scene of blood'.⁸ His men attend to his needs at his last breath. Thus, the painting provides an abundant vista into the world of Copley and Wollstonecraft. Both live in, what Eric Hobsbawm rightly terms, 'The Age of Revolution,' where an 'ideology of an individualist, secularist, rationalist belief in progress' can be traced.⁹ Wollstonecraft's estimation of 'reason, virtue and knowledge that distinguish the individual,' echoes such sentiments. However, divergences within these beliefs can be seen in Wollstonecraft's offering of different paths to those seemingly open to the women which Copley has depicted.¹⁰

Through its implicit glorification and idealisation of British military success, this painting indicates the ways in which women's images were employed to signify the unheroic, the unthinking, the childlike, and the fragile. In elevating the events and actions of the men, Copley reduces the women's exploits and portrayals to a more simplified and lowly status. Copley thus forges a narrative that visibly and historically places the British military at the apex of a carefully curated discernible hierarchy. As Jane Kamensky explains, it 'was important, visually and narratively, that

⁸ Kamensky, p. 326.

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848*, (London: Abacus, 1977), p. 15.

¹⁰ Wollstonecraft, p. 76.

the protagonists be convincing as real people rather than types,' hence the 'score of preparatory studies for *Peirson*' which survive.¹¹ It is telling that only one reviewer 'mentioned in passing' the 'female inhabitants of the town'.¹² In Wollstonecraft's words 'cyphers of women give consequence'. In this case, to Copley's politicised artistic agenda.¹³ Therefore, whilst instructing the public on the nature of the British authority and the quelling of an attack in Jersey, the painting acts as a conduit for visual propaganda that places women on the periphery, socially, historically, and politically. It achieves this symbolically via compositional and technical elements.



Figure 1. John Singleton Copley, *The Death of Major Peirson, 6 January 1781*, 1783, oil paint on canvas, 28 x 39 cm, Tate, Britain, London.

There exists a tension, as Phillips explains, that emerged from history painters striving 'to create heroic images' whilst 'Hume, Voltaire and Gibbon sought ways to familiarize the past'.¹⁴ This was owing to 'contrary impulses of distancing and familiarization'.¹⁵ A mix of 'grandeur and ordinary

¹¹ Kamensky, p. 319.

¹² Kamensky, p. 326.

¹³ Wollstonecraft, p. 90.

¹⁴ Phillips, p. 615.

¹⁵ Phillips, p. 613.

history' leaned 'toward the ideal'.¹⁶ Within this leaning towards idealisation, pictorially, the women become victims of an overly simplified representation. The familiar scene of earthbound domesticity operates, in the painting, as a temper to the loftier distancing. As Phillips explains, 'history painting retained its identity as an art form enlarged by public concerns, albeit in an epoch in which historical sensibilities were turning towards the representation of everyday life'.¹⁷ Thus, this painting's imagery uses women as familiar symbols of daily life and of helplessness to highlight and pay homage to the might of the British men. As Kamensky explains, the models for the feminised group are members of Copley's family. Thus, it is 'also a family picture, featuring a woman and a growing boy who had fled the terror of the American War years before'.¹⁸ Copley's timorous women complement Peirson's representation to ensure he 'was figured accurately' as 'one among many [...], of Britain's gallant sons sacrificed upon the altar of a losing war'.¹⁹

Symbolically, the artist employs women as signifiers of an active male and dominant narrative characterised by valiance. The painting is a conduit for what Mark Salber Phillips terms 'a full measure of the heroic'.²⁰ The females are portrayed as driven from the conflict in passive flight thus heightening the masculinised central action. One way in which Copley achieves his message of British male valour is by not adhering to historical accuracy. Phillips explains that Sir Joshua Reynolds, first President of the Royal Academy from 1768, built an idea of history painting as a genre on 'the painter's liberty to "deviate from vulgar and strict historical truth, in pursuing the grandeur of his design"'.²¹ According to Reynolds, the factually correct recording of events, 'However they bind the Historian, have no dominion over the Poet or the Painter'.²² Copley exemplifies this attitude in his fictional portrayal of Major Peirson as perishing as a noble hero. Rather than reflect actual events, Copley incorrectly shows Peirson's dramatic demise at the moment

¹⁶ Phillips, p. 612.

¹⁷ Phillips, p. 615.

¹⁸ Kamensky, p. 327.

¹⁹ Kamensky, p. 319.

²⁰ Phillips, p. 612.

²¹ Phillips, p. 614.

²² Phillips, p. 615.

of British victory.²³ Thus, in Copley's illustrated fabrication, Major Pierson can be extolled as having given the ultimate sacrifice, just at the key moment in the conflict.

Therefore, compositionally, a drive to represent a patriarchal ideal, via an emulation of the conventions of historical painting, appears to have birthed this encoded image. A specific ideology can therefore be deciphered. Not only is there an emphasis on the pious and victorious British men but one that is accentuated by the positioning of women as faint-hearted. As Wollstonecraft explains, women are 'reckoned a frivolous sex'.²⁴ This is epitomised by their running from a scene of great importance.

The implicit messaging of the ideal courageous male victors is recognisable in the immersive compositional elements of the 'Christian sacrifice [...] lovingly offered,' in Copley's representation of Peirson's death. Phillips identifies the 'minor battle in Jersey' as 'fitted out with Raphaelesque borrowings'.²⁵ Copley's painting communicates Pierson's selfless courage through the artwork being modelled on the Renaissance tradition of the deposition from the Cross. Peirson in death offers the ultimate sacrifice visually. The composition aligns Peirson's dutiful piety to an emulation of the Son of God. The tip of the triangular arrangement is marked by the soldier's dark hat. He loses grip of Peirson's corpse which falls into the foreground, an angst-ridden Adjutant Harrison supports the slumping body and head of the dying Peirson with a merciful hand reminiscent of the Virgin.²⁶

The red blood against white suggests Christ's crucifixion wounds. The positioning of figures evokes a corresponding 'iconography of Christian sacrifice' in which 'a moment of spiritual heroism,' is depicted.²⁷ Via the composition, the male action in the picture is coded as magnan-

²³ 23 John Singleton Copley, *The Death of Major Peirson, 6 January 1781*, 1783, oil paint on canvas, 28 x 39 cm, <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/copley-the-death-of-major-peirson-6-january-1781-n00733>> [accessed 10 February 2022].

²⁴ Wollstonecraft, p. 74.

²⁵ Phillips, p. 613.

²⁶ Jane Kamensky, *A Revolution in Color, The World of John Singleton Copley*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), p. 318.

²⁷ Phillips, p. 615.

imous and ennobled, whilst the female action, coded as cowering and scared, places deeper emphasis on the principal spectacle.

By manipulating historical fact and by evoking Christian iconographical visual tropes, Copley's painting underscores the widely held reductive perception of women. In Copley's goal to glorify Peirson's death, the women are used to signify an unappealing approach in opposition to the portrayal of the glorious death of Major Peirson. Copley's painting can be seen as a covert criticism of revolutionary leanings in its parallels with the American War of Independence (1776) occurring just five years earlier than the depicted Battle of Jersey. It is also a pictorial reassertion of British rule in the face of France's opportunistic assault. The painting's subtext can also be read against the surface of meaning of an anti-French failure and pro-British success, in terms of male authority and the enforcement of female obedience or subordination. The depicted feminine 'sickly delicacy' can be read as echoing the weakness of the French, portrayed as fleeing and scared from the British who are signified as masculine, strong and vanquishing victors.²⁸

Copley's emphasis on visual messaging was in part owing to his early development as a portrait artist and as one engaged in historical paintings. During his years painting in Boston, according to Paul Staiti, 'publicly Copley seems to have wanted to appear neutral' politically.²⁹ He boarded a ship for London on June 10, 1774, still believing that America belonged 'safely in benign British hands and that a "Civil War," as he termed it, was an evil greater than English taxation or control of American affairs'.³⁰ He left 'an American culture under rapid transformation' and 'a new world that, for a time, radically politicized all people and all objects and that would not have had much patience with Copley's non-partisan elitist art'. Visual signification was a skill necessary where Copley learnt his craft. As Staiti explains, 'visual certification of character and class was especially

²⁸ Wollstonecraft, p. 74.

²⁹ Paul Staiti, 'Accounting for Copley' in *John Singleton Copley in America*, ed. by Carrie Rebor, Paul Staiti, Erica E. Hirschler, Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., and Carol Troyen, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), p. 45.

³⁰ Staiti, p. 47.

important in a colonial society in which position could not be secured by inherited title'.³¹ Through his portraiture in Boston he learnt as Saiti explains, that identity could be synthesised.

Gesture, props and outward appearance render what Wollstonecraft terms women's 'sweet docility of manners,' an essential function of the painting's implied meaning.³² Wollstonecraft identifies women's gentle demeanour as the opposition of 'strength, both of mind and body'.³³ It is as if the depicted women 'were created rather to feel than to reason'.³⁴ The women's evident fear shows a 'susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste,' which to Wollstonecraft are 'synonymous with epithets of weakness'.³⁵ The author states that women, 'Fragile in every sense of the word' their 'fears[...] shew a degree of imbecility'.³⁶ It is their 'soft and fair,' conduct in the painting which illustrates Wollstonecraft's point that 'all the power they obtain, must be obtained by their charms and weakness:

Fine by defect, and amiably weak! *³⁷

Copley makes ample use of the semblance of feminine fragility. The dimly lit, more domestic grouping in the righthand foreground of the painting contrasts starkly with the brilliant central public spectacle. Dressed in fine attire, wearing a skirt of pink, silk taffeta, the most prominent woman holds a baby. Her face turns in fright towards the battle. The small toe of her expensively buckled shoe emphasises her finery. Her headdress, tied with a matching pink sash, pale petticoat, and stockings are pristine, indicating wealth. To Wollstonecraft this type of display of 'an air of fashion' signals 'but a badge of slavery and proves that a soul has not a strong individual character'.³⁸

³¹ Paul Staiti, 'Character and Class', in *John Singleton Copley in America*, ed. by Carrie Rebora, Paul Staiti, Erica E. Hirschler, Theodore E. Stebbins Jr., and Carol Troyen, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), p. 74.

³² Wollstonecraft, p. 73.

³³ Wollstonecraft, p. 73.

³⁴ Wollstonecraft, p. 132.

³⁵ Wollstonecraft, p. 73.

³⁶ Wollstonecraft, p. 132.

³⁷ Wollstonecraft, p. 132.

³⁸ Wollstonecraft, p. 81.

However, Copley utilises the women's 'insipid softness, varnished over with the name of gentleness,' in order to stress the chivalry of the men.³⁹ The gaze of the babe in arms, also dressed in a gown and bonnet, follows the mother's. Both figures direct the viewer's eye to the chief tableau. In a blue suit with a lace collar at his neck, an equally well-dressed young boy stares straight out of the painting. His attire's similarity to Thomas Gainsborough's *The Blue Boy*, (1770), attributes gravitas to Copley's rendition. The only compelling stare to break the fourth wall, his features register the horror behind him. Visual emulation of Gainsborough instructs viewers to take notice. Copley's boy's tiny hand clutches his mother's white, delicate, sheer shawl which hangs almost out of his reach on her shoulder. The gauzy insubstantiality of the protective shawl echoes the vulnerability of the cluster of figures. Behind her, flinging her arms up in despair, is a more modestly dressed female servant. The ensemble acts as a conduit via which unpalatable emotions such as fear, anxiety and terror can be registered but assigned to the feeble and cowardly.

The image visibly evidences a perception of women that fails to treat them, in Wollstonecraft's words 'as rational creatures'. Instead, the running women, conspicuously aligned with the infant and youngster, pictorially epitomise what Wollstonecraft terms 'a state of perpetual childhood,' and the idea that they are 'unable to stand alone'.⁴⁰ Gesturally, the women's portrayal illustrates a childlike 'shrinking from trials,' borne out by Copley's use of the females to evince what Wollstonecraft terms, the 'parasitical tenacity' with which women 'piteously' demand 'succour,' from 'their natural protector' who 'extends his arm, or lifts up his voice, to guard the lovely trembler'.⁴¹ Escaping the scene alongside the infants, both women adopt the role of innocent bystanders caught in the fray. Wollstonecraft notes that the 'epithet' of the 'innocent' is normally applied to children but 'when applied to men, or women, it is but a civil term for weakness'.⁴² Visibly endangered

³⁹ Wollstonecraft, p. 92.

⁴⁰ Wollstonecraft, p. 73.

⁴¹ Wollstonecraft, p. 132.

⁴² Wollstonecraft, p. 85.

and in flight with attendant children, the women in Copley's painting embody those according to Wollstonecraft, that struggle to 'take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?'⁴³

Copley's use of colour further underpins feminised incapacity. In muted hues, dark tones, cool pastels and greys, the small family scene in the gloom is bleached of colour and thus appears less vibrant. This peripheral and dampened tint juxtaposes the painting's central core, a riot of brightness, light, colour, and vitality. The foremost event uses warm, sunlit yellows, sulphurous oranges, and impasto vermillions to signify action, life blood, alertness and lively energy. The outliers are rendered in blues, antique rose and wan paleness which signify the passive, saddened and submissive. The colours' hues are vivid and saturated in the central circumstance and dull and unsaturated in the action on the fringes. Tonally, the outermost family group is unilluminated, even dingy. This is visually reminiscent of Wollstonecraft's question to 'M. Talleyrand-Périgord, late Bishop of Autun [...] you force all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain immured in their families groping in the dark?'⁴⁴

Copley's continued use of darkness via his choice of background also conveys the idea of women's submission. A tall, imposing, dim and shadowy wall painted in tones of murky ochre and inky raw umber, stands behind the fleeing figures. Visually, through its configuration of the figures, coupled with the colour and tone of this barrier which encloses the family group, their limited means of escape is emphasised, thus suggesting possible imprisonment. Here, Copley uses the women pictorially as what Wollstonecraft terms 'convenient slaves', in this case, in service to the picture's artistic device and technical detail. The painting depicts British soldiers as free to participate fully in the light and the main action autonomously. This focal scene is juxtaposed with the outlying group. The leading figures are set against a romanticised background. Billowing flags, in golds, reds and blues carrying the Union Jack, against a backdrop of silvery tinted smoke, signify liberty for the British from their assailants and would-be occupiers, the French.

⁴³ Wollstonecraft, p. 74.

⁴⁴ Wollstonecraft, p. 67.

In contrast, the women can be seen in the shadows as visibly close to capture. Dependence on the men is implicit in the arrangement of the figures against the background. The women's gesturally, colour-coded and tonally signified helplessness underscores their dependency on the British victory to ensure their safety and freedom. Borne from the 'political French' and 'industrial (British)' revolutions, which may have had their most 'immediate precursor and stimulator in the American Revolution of 1776', the painting can be seen as a propagandist vehicle in response to British failure in the American War of Independence.⁴⁵ The painting celebrates a triumph over the failed French attack launched in response to the perceived threat a British governed Jersey posed to French and American shipping.

In direct opposition to Copley, Wollstonecraft suggests that 'subordination' constitutes the very sinews of military discipline'.⁴⁶ She writes that 'subalterns' are pushed forward whilst 'they scarcely know or care why'.⁴⁷ Thus, according to Wollstonecraft, the soldiers, like Copley's depicted women, are passively forced on a path dictated by random events within the battle. This element of chance, apparent in the genuine nature of Peirson's death occurring early in the battle, supports Wollstonecraft's view.

Copley's artistic alterations to the truth underpin Wollstonecraft's point on the dangers of concentrating solely on surface aspects. Wollstonecraft regards the army as 'a set of idle, superficial young men, whose only occupation is gallantry, and whose polished manners render vice more dangerous, by concealing its deformity under gay ornamental drapery'.⁴⁸ Copley's use of the female guise as counterpoint to spotlight British military force also suggests how women were visually used as code to indicate male power. Copley highlights notions of power by painting the women and children as a feminised group, added as an adjunct outside the main masculine action. The painting controls the battle's portrayal to convey a specific view of British male domination.

⁴⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848*, (London: Abacus, 1977), p. 15.

⁴⁶ Wollstonecraft, p. 81.

⁴⁷ Wollstonecraft, p. 81.

⁴⁸ Wollstonecraft, p. 81.

The women's images operate to facilitate this representation. Whilst situated outside the dominant endeavour, the women supplement the painting's patriarchal essence. As Mary Beard explains, 'you cannot easily fit women into a structure that is coded as male'.⁴⁹

Wollstonecraft's observations unearth Copley's deviations from 'strict' and 'vulgar' historical veracity to which Reynolds alludes.⁵⁰ She also explains that in 'foreign wars and intestine insurrections, the people acquire some power in the tumult, which obliges their rulers to gloss over their oppression with a shew of right'.⁵¹ Therefore, the battle as seen through the lens of Wollstonecraft's assessment might be viewed as one in which, 'despots are compelled to make covert corruption hold fast the power which was formerly snatched by open force'.⁵² Rather, in her view, any seized power can only be tyrannical. Thus, Wollstonecraft's evaluation questions the validity of Copley's portrayal. Peirson's Christ-like corpse as a metaphor for the glory of war becomes debatable.

Wollstonecraft explains, 'Nothing can set the regal character in a more contemptible view, than the various crimes that have elevated men to the supreme dignity'.⁵³ The painting portrays the women as akin to the writer's observation that 'slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent'.⁵⁴ To the author, women, in their enslavement, become corrupted in that, 'the being who patiently endures injustice, and silently bears insults, will soon become unjust, or unable to discern right from wrong'.⁵⁵

Therefore, Copley's painting holds a wealth of meaning concerning truth and legitimate interpretation of its visual code. Copley employs women as an accessible means by which he juxtaposes and thus communicates the stalwart British victory. The artist prescribes how the battle and

⁴⁹ Mary Beard, *Women and Power, A Manifesto Updated*, (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2018), pp. 86-87.

⁵⁰ Phillips, p. 614.

⁵¹ Wollstonecraft, p. 82.

⁵² Wollstonecraft, p. 83.

⁵³ Wollstonecraft, p. 80.

⁵⁴ Wollstonecraft, p. 67.

⁵⁵ Wollstonecraft, p. 156.

moreover Peirson's death should be viewed. This command of information is not only relevant for Wollstonecraft and Copley but is of interdisciplinary value in fields such as history, sociology and politics. Whilst Copley's external artistic hand of control pervades the historical, social and political interactions in the painting, Wollstonecraft attempts to disrupt these systems that impress themselves on human beings.

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