“I feel it coming in the air tonight”: Mephitical Vapors, Pestiferous Plagues, and the

Psychosis of Materiality in Wollstonecraft

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Abstract:

Although Mary Wollstonecraft is most squarely known as the post-Enlightenment progenitor of feminist reason often seen as allergic to the sexual body, this essay argues that throughout her works she evinces more posthuman and malleable forms of materiality and alternative psychic arrangements that subtend any "reasonable" law of the father. Figures of vapor, pestilence, palpable atmospherics, and other instances of dynamic materiality in *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman*, and *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark* evince fluid forms of materiality that bespeak a certain language of psychosis, or the ability to speak underneath or beyond the symbolic order of the father via an alternative Real that is richly flexible, material, and feminist. Such writings can, even more broadly help us rethink the relationship between the symbolic and the Real, the role of psychosis as a literary method, and help us bridge psychoanalysis and new materialism.

Mary Wollstonecraft, during one of her most energetic rebukes in *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, upbraids her own Trumpish king and luxury-addled aristocrats not only for their insane policies but for creating an atmosphere that poisons everyone: “What but a pestilential vapour can hover over society, when its chief director is only instructed in the invention of crimes, or the stupid routine of childish ceremonies?” (18-19). In a philosophical pamphlet so devoted to gaining rights for women (and asking men to actually earn their rights as equitable citizens), such a dispersed, nonhuman figure strangely lurks in such a supposedly humanistic treatise. While she dwells on the aristocrats, soldiers, and coquettes whose lack of virtue corrupts the nation, this figure of vapor, and others like it in her writing, suggest something more than human responsible for the nation’s sickening haze, its miasmatic ambience. Created by its chief dilldocks even as it pervades and alters them, and such contagious materiality suggests a complicated entanglement between matter and humans that redraws *The Vindication* as more than a bid for women’s entrée into Enlightenment humanism.

Inherent in Wollstonecraft’s invective is what Jane Bennett has described as human and nonhuman materials in vibrant assemblage: human actions within the consumerist climate of London create the foul atmosphere of the modern city, an airborne toxic event in which nonhuman vapors take on an infectious life of their own. Yet, Wollstonecraft is already hip to the pharmakon of the post-Revolutionary political climate.[[1]](#endnote-1) As she complicates her own argument: “It is the pestiferous purple which renders the progress of civilization a curse, and warps the understanding, till men of sensibility doubt whether the expansion of intellect produces a greater portion of happiness or misery. But the nature of the poison points out the antidote” (*Vindication* 21). Here, she certainly means the toxic aristocracy and royalty who lead through contagious consumption and the perversion of reason.[[2]](#endnote-2) More deviously, she also intimates the purple erect head of a patriarchal penis, the phallic pestilence that spreads its tyranny through proud ejaculations of power (and venereal disease). Yet, the nature of the poison—the form of new materiality inherent within the mephitical vapor—likewise suggests the nature of the cure: that fresh airs of a dispersed, revivifying new materiality might diffuse this warped pestilence.

The figure of “vapour,” akin to Priestly’s “philogiston” or eighteenth-century notions of aether,[[3]](#endnote-3) both enacts and figures a kind of new materiality that has the possibility of changing our minds, our bodies, and the world. Bennett calls something like this “impersonal affect,” while Teresa Brennan discusses the “atmosphere” of the other as the hormones and pheromones of chemical entrainment; even more recently Luce Irigaray’s *Through Vegetal Being* theorizes air as a material method for universal sharing. Yet, there is another important but neglected strand of thinking about fluid materiality in psychoanalytic notions of jouissance, especially the way Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous think it, as arising from the motions of body and atmosphere. As Irigaray says in *Speculum of the Other Woman*: “Blood, but also milk, sperm, lymph, saliva, spit, tears, humors, gas, waves, airs, fire . . . light” (237). These produce what Lacan calls “jouissance’s beyond” of pleasure and desire, its “superabundant vitality” (*Seminar VII* 237). Not just the repetitive, fricative autoerotics of Irigaray’s two lips touching, not just the dispersed arousal of multiple erogenous zones—certainly not the hard finality of ejaculation—Wollstonecraft eventually envisions the continual excretion all over, everywhere, through every*thing*. Cixous and Irigaray’s softer jouissance, along with Bennett’s affect, uses the conveyance of dispersal inherent in the toxic pestilence, but converts the tyrannic impressment of aristocratic poison into a mutual pleasure thanks to a shared affect of coeval origin and agency.

Her vapors and other instances of dynamic materiality can help us bridge psychoanalysis and new materialism. Affinities between the two have been largely unremarked upon, despite being two prominent discourses in the last fifty years that deal in feminism and affect. Together, they might help enrich our understanding of human and nonhuman entanglement in posthuman studies, to which Wollstonecraft has something substantial to contribute. In perhaps the most recent attempt to connect the two fields, Alenka Zupančič offers a psychoanalytic account of object-oriented ontology in *What Is Sex*? Unlike what we see in Wollstonecraft’s anticipation of new materiality, she maintains a rigid Lacanian perspective that separates objects and subjects. In Zupančič’s account, sexual desire for objects appears to be an apotheosis of the Lacanian *objet petit a*, with roving, symbolic objects as substitutes for human ones that might impossibly fill the hole and crack in the self. Rather than understanding the object as substituting particular inanimate objects for the mother’s lack of a penis, as Freud does, or a maternal phallus, as Lacan does, Zupančič’s objects themselves serve as symbolic proxies for the Lacanian lack at the heart of all selves caused by the lapse between the Real and the symbolic order. Such an analysis adheres to the object-oriented belief in objects being self-contained, withdrawn, and phallic, rather than fluid or porous like Wollstonecraft’s vapors.[[4]](#endnote-4) Perhaps even more problematic is the Lacanian faith in the impossibility of getting beyond the phallic law of the father.

Wollstonecraft’s own writing, not yet bogged down by psychoanalytic doctrine however proleptic of it, entangles human objects and subjects, miasmatic and vaporous materialities in a conceptual swerve that may help us rethink a Lacanian relationship to the nonhuman world.[[5]](#endnote-5) That is, Wollstonecraft certainly acknowledges Romanticism’s proleptic, systematic tendency to see objects as necessary substitutions in a libidinal economy that gets off more efficaciously (and with more than a fetish for singular objects) through a metonymic chain of *objets petits a*. Yet, her anticipatory version of new materialism’s invasive idea—that things have vibrant energies which combine with the human in weird, unexpected, seemingly impossible ways[[6]](#endnote-6)—complicates Lacan’s lamentation of the impossibility of non-phallic jouissance. Wollstonecraft more harmoniously speaks to similar responses from feminist psychoanalysts Kristeva, Irigaray, Klein, Winnicott and Ettinger, yet perhaps goes further than them still, when she evanishes subjects and objects altogether into a swirling eddy of undisclosed materiality. When, in *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, she writes, “my very soul diffused itself in the agitated waves, melted in the freshening breeze,” she loses herself within the air and water that have themselves become almost mere movements, a superabundant vitality that bespeaks an excess of pleasure beyond the phallic and even beyond the human. Such posthuman vibrancy remains undisclosed to the merely human and certainly to the symbolic order which can only run after its flights.

However much such a production of objects and partial-objects is the epistemological bent of the symbolic order, feminist or otherwise, what Wollstonecraft provokes us to ask is whether her an imagined ontological collapse of the subject into a new materiality—which is not repurposed as an *objet petit* a—is a psychotic delusion. How insane is it to think subjects, however much a construct of Enlightenment necro-capital, can disperse themselves into objects, deforming and reforming bodies and minds into new beings?[[7]](#endnote-7) Psychoanalytic accounts of psychosis envision such materiality as a kind of Real that cannot comprehend the law of the father—the straight-jacketed symbolic that defines subjects and objects, even while these same psychotic hallucinations are often shot through with the phallic and patriarchal. Wollstonecraft’s psychosis dreams itself nearly outside the law of the father. In the attempt to subvert the phallus and phallic jouissance, her provocative recombination of different kinds of bodies—and the language that deems them as such—would seem to be an impossible articulation of matter. Her play of language and materiality attempts to subtend the classical Lacanian creed that we cannot get outside the phallus or phallic jouissance, which by the very nature of the Oedipus complex dominates the imaginary and makes our access to the Real the cut of impossibility. Contra Irigaray, who polemically stated women had no access to psychosis only hysteria, because they had no language to declaim another route from the real to the symbolic, Wollstonecraft insists on new materialist relations as a necessary psychotic delusion. This psychosis manifests an insane possibility, from the point of view of Lacan, of another ontology altogether, a convent of pleasure where the symbolically-seeking law of the father has no being and thus no significance. The vaporous posthuman entanglement augurs material alliances beyond paternalistic and humanist biopolitics. Rather than Rousseau’s bad romances or masturbatory desires of ideal women (such as Sophie), Wollstonecraft suggests that imagining our bodies being deliciously smorged with all sorts of bodies, especially nonhuman ones in the natural world, is a nonsensical dream that might actually make possible new ontologies fathomable outside a phallically able, Oedipal economy.

Such a conception of psychosis is not meant to undermine the real pain and mental illness of psychotics, nor is it meant to valorize a slippery alter-ego such as Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-Oedipus who refuses to play by society’s rules. Rather, it is meant to show how thinking outside the paternalistic order, whether in Wollstonecraft’s or our own time, might both appear and be necessarily insane when it locates its transformations of ontology as a reality-, or Real-yet-to-come. More specifically, we can define Wollstonecraft’s new materiality as a delusion of feminine jouissance that works by entangling human and nonhuman, a transformation that brings into being something more than an ontology that occurs “after” the human. This psychosis is, rather, the hallucination of alchemical magic and science, the literal exchange between human and nonhuman, the organic and inorganic that transforms them both. It breaks us free from the ideologies and binaries, especially the gender binaries that Lacan was attempting to move beyond in *Seminar XX*, by imagining an (impossible) jouissance, a pleasure and excess that does not route its pleasure through a gendered or sexed other. The delusion of posthuman, mutual jouissance concocts a self-fulfilling fantasy that imagines the ability to change planetary ontologies into a much more free-flowing, nonbinary world. Here, the binary becomes the symbolic ghosting of those structures that were determined by gender—including humanism, anthropocentrism, sexism, and even, as Claire Colebrook suggests her essay in *Anthropocene Feminisms*, modern capital.

Wollstonecraft’s brief moments of dispersed, flowing excrescence in *The Vindication* serve as foreplay that finally climaxes in the varied endings of *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman* and, more expansively, in *Letters Written during a Short Residence.* That noveloffers us a view into her most closely-thought account of madness, set as it is in an asylum, and can help us draw the terms of Wollstonecraft’s debate about non-phallic jouissance as a form of psychosis. Our introduction to Maria is precisely one at the border of hysteria and psychosis:

One recollection with frightful velocity following another, threatened to fire her brain, and make her a fit companion for the terrific inhabitants, whose groans and shrieks were no unsubstantial sounds of whistling winds, or startled birds, modulated by a romantic fancy, which amuse while they affright; but such tones of misery as carry a dreadful certainty directly to the heart. What effect must they then have produced on one, true to the touch of sympathy, and tortured by maternal apprehension! (161-62)

Here Wollstonecraft depicts the hysterics of the asylum tenants, whose near animal sounds are combined with the psychosis of “fancy.” In Coleridge’s definition of the fancy, this proliferation of groans, shrieks, whistling, startling, and tones of misery offers an associative series of unsynthesized sensations. The hysteric’s “discharge of affect” affects both the other, the passerby, but more noxiously “their own body” as an “indefinite repetition” (Cixous 18). These hysterical effusions are, as Cixous notes, both disruptive and conservative at the same time: they “revolt and shake up the public, the group, the men, the others to whom they are exhibited” and yet they destroy the hysteric in the process (5). Cixous’s commentary on hysteria has affinities to Wollstonecraft’s critiques of sensibility in *The Vindication*, for how the cult of feeling, luxury, and delicacy evanesce women from the male, rational symbolic. Yet, unlike *The Vindication*, in *Maria*, Wollstonecraft indicates affect as a contagious effusion that has the potential to disrupt the public (asylum visitors, conscientious readers) with some disruptive import outside the symbolic from which women are exiled. We might read such affect as revolutionary, if we consider the walls of the asylum as the cages of the symbolic order that imprison women but for their ravaging groans and shrieks that both pervade and move beyond its bars.

These ululations are answered by Maria’s vision of her baby: “Her infant’s image was continually floating on Maria’s sight” (*Maria* 162). The conjuring of infant’s image interrupts these hysterics with a piece of the symbolic, yet one that is not entirely stable there, as it variably exists, “continually floating on” the horizon of sight. Here, Wollstonecraft separates herself from Irigaray’s famous dictum that women cannot become psychotic because they lack a proper signifying system that is not borrowed from a phallic signifying economy, “because she remains an outsider, herself (a) subject to their norms” (*Speculum* 71). Maria’s flimsy delusion of her babe keeps her both intoxicatingly fevered and sane at the same time. This first object manifests the baby as a maternal possession—the infant as the only piece of the symbolic a mother has intimate knowledge of and thus the right to possess as she grows through revolutionary breast feeding. The infant likewise presents a double of the mother, who, in gestation and early maternity, is temporarily inviolable should the biopolitical order wish to succeed. This language of the symbolic momentarily offers the entangled infant-and-mother as the delusion of a being outside the Oedipal order and yet within the maternal symbolic. Similar to Ettinger, Wollstonecraft offers a glimmer of a maternal Real in a matrixial borderspace of interaction and co-creation. Rather than the interactions between babe and mother producing iterative part-objects, in *Maria* they flicker as the delusional dream of a symbolic that might glancingly exist outside the law of the father. The baby, of course, is born within George Venebles’ grasp as his paternal property, yet Maria can still fleetingly imagine the infant as *new*born, without the stain of the Oedipal.

Such psychosis, moreover, reveals Maria to be neither simply insane nor rational but intensely aware of the law of the father. In one sense the loathsome Venables has wrongfully imprisoned her, and yet her supposed madness marks, for Wollstonecraft, women’s position within the patriarchy, as subject to the men castrated by their fear of women’s freedom and desires (and men’s own feminizing desires).[[8]](#endnote-8) The asylum, “a most terrific ruins,” with its “fallen column and mouldering arch,” figures the patriarchal institution and its imaginary crumbling into disarray (*Maria* 161). These cracks in the foundation of the patriarchy signal the threat of castration always immanent to the law of the father, or the cut of signification within the Oedipus Complex that resists psychosis. Here, psychosis, in a classical Lacanian sense, would represent desire that has not been routed through the supposedly inevitable Oedipal order and its symbolic. Wollstoneraft’s arch critique of that order can be found in the paranomasia of the ruin as both an exaggerated symbol of castration in the fallen institutional building and also as a form of hyperbolic sexual fulfillment in its most destructive to women. Yet, it likewise houses those beings unleashing of drives, like Maria’s delusion, nearly untouched by the Oedipal cut. The mouldering asylum also gestures to those chaotic drives of men who believe that women’s independent desires and proclamations of independence to be hallucinations, an imaginary that is deemed impossible because it has no relation to the symbolic ruled by the phallus. Maria emoting inside the asylum presents not simply the impossible dream of feminine jouissance inside a phallic economy and an institution always already vexed by its own castration. It *also* evinces the existence of the necessary and existing feminine psychosis of desires not routed through the ruined cracks in the phallic order. Another way to think of this psychosis might be a speculative or science fiction that is not based on a science-to-be-made-real but a sheer desire for a Real, non-phallic jouissance, marked by a yet-impossible nonbinary symbolic, figured in the novel, as we shall see, by its multiple, alternate endings.

Wollstonecraft’s female desires and psychotic delusion turn, again, into a pharmakon of cure and toxin, when Maria and Darnford fall in love virtually. While the transmission of marginalia in books they share, couriered by Jemima from one cell to another, presents an affect that collapses boundaries between readers, writers, books, and their affects. Once converted into a more heteronormative desire, however, their jouissance becomes caged by the law of the father. The desire passed back and forth in such writing—the excess of text, ink, and feeling—offers an incipient jouissance, an exciting surplus of signification and textual materiality. Such an excess of writing paves an entrance into the Real. It does so not only through the virtual hallucinations of each captive imagining the other or through the exchange of affects, personal and impersonal, concatenated by the exchange of marginalia. A shared atmosphere of human fantasy and affect, books as things in circulation, marginal notes, and the ruins of the asylum create a posthuman assemblage through the circulation of partially ineffable affects wrought by both fantasy’s psychotic signification and materiality’s collapse of it. The paratextual marginalia is not a supplement to the proper symbolic (the tales and histories they read and analyze) but rather an instance of signification that carries the Real, posthuman materiality of affect (the *sub rosa* warmth, liveliness, and intensities), which alter the text and its symbolic function. Text and paratext are smorged together in an assemblage of human-book-marginalia that generate shared affects that are not simply human. These affects, in their virtual and posthuman transmission, bypass the symbolic of the institutions of heteronormative marriage, sexuality, and Oedipal law.

The fantasy of jouissance as intellectual exchange—enacted through the book, its proliferating commentary, and affective exchange—marks a desire for the literary animacies of books, and the merger of humans and nonhumans in contact with them. Mel Y. Chen has recently written of animacies as the affective movements shared by people and things that mark their mutual animation, without an *objet petit a* or a substitution of either nonhumans or humans for an abyssal, originary lack. Jouissance, for Wollstonecraft, occurs through the literal cross-cut or, as Darnford’s name suggests, the hidden crossing of human and nonhuman. We see this playing out as Maria translates herself into marginalia inside a book, an animacy that circulates to and from Darnford by way of entanglement with Jemima’s oral, yet no less material, presence. Their comingling with the book and annotations is a kind of literary animacy, or what Nathan Snaza has recently called “animate literacy.” As he describes it, “some animals make marks that circulate in various media with affective agency and that are in turn attended by other animals” producing “collisions among bodies and agencies—many of them nonhuman” (Snaza 4, 7). Wollstonecraft’s attention to the collisions of marginalia, not unlike the epistolary form she had already experimented with, foments a literal circulation of affect within the assemblage of text + commentary + hand + asylum + keeper + inmates + fantasy.

Arguably, it is when Maria and Darnford get together as a human dyad (without Jemima) that they fall into desire predicated on the *objet petit a*, because they are substituting themselves for what seems to be a lack, but which is really a mistaken understanding of the need for the human-nonhuman smorgy. Wollstonecraft intimates here that the way to outrun symbolic traps is to integrate the nonhuman. Another way to put this would be that the phallic symbolic is human while a nonphallic symbolic would need to be posthuman. Wollstonecraft might be thinking, as Lacan does, in terms of a desire that is nearly always subtended to something external to the subject. Yet, and this is where she departs from Lacan, such an object is neither withdrawn from other forms of materiality (is not an “object” in the sense of having perforated boundaries), nor does it act as a substitute for an originary lack. Rather, a posthuman, shared materiality becomes a medium that materially shapes desire’s signifiers, ontologies of desire, and its constitutive elements.

It may be important to remember that Wollstonecraft’s critique of phallic human fantasies derive from the dirtier aspects of Rousseau’s sensibilities. As she writes in *The Vindication*:

Even his virtues also led him farther astray; for, born with a warm constitution and a lively fancy, nature carried him toward the other sex with such eager fondness, that he soon became lascivious. Had he given way to these desires, the fire would have extinguished itself in a natural manner; but virtue, and a romantic kind of delicacy, made him practise self-denial; yet, when fear, delicacy, or virtue, restrained him, he debauched his imagination, and reflecting on the sensations to which fancy gave force, he traced them in the most glowing colours, and sunk them deep into his soul. He then sought for solitude, not sleep with the man of nature; or calmly investigate the causes of things under the shade where Sir Isaac Newton indulged contemplation, but merely to indulge his feelings. (91)

In this famous passage, Wollstonecraft avoids chastising Rousseau for the warmth of his feelings and the liveliness of his fancy, but she criticizes the delicacy that leads to abstinence. The movement through self-denial to self-debauchery (via the imagination) and then to sleep later forms the template for P.B. Shelley’s “Alastor,” as it signifies the failure of egocentric, masculine desire. It does not, as some Wollstonecraft critics would have it, suggest that the virginal philosopher shies away from sexual desire itself.[[9]](#endnote-9) Rather, she worries over Rousseau’s fantasies of desire, how the object of desire can become conflated with the *objet petit a*. Such object confusion creates within the imagination a fantasy of woman as other and, concomitantly, the desire to be a woman in order to become the hole at the heart of a knot that slips the noose of patriarchal law that nonetheless desires the evanishing, feminine object. This fantasy, most problematically, can only be enjoyed through the vigorous and frequent recapitulation of the proliferating fancy of the other as absent object lacking or failing to meet the strictures of the Oedipal order.

As opposed to such debauched imagination, Maria, Darnford, and Jemima’s sequential autobiographical tales set out to identify the symbolic and the castrating sign of the oppressive father, as they respectively tell of imprisonment in marriage, militarism, and prostitution. These stories, though they offer critiques of the patriarchal order, when they retell the woes of phallic law may perversely reinforce the more hetero-norm-core desires, and they subsequently cause Maria and Darnforth to have unprotected prison sex and to veer into a potentially reproductive marriage plot. The consummation of phallic desire diverts Maria away from the jouissance found in the marginalia’s shared posthuman affect, that textual assemblage of vibrant matter, and locates her back in the phallic imaginary of protection and property and inevitably leads to a capitulation to phallic institutions. This plot, which replaces the possibility of non-phallic jouissance with real, hetero-sex, is the inverse of the sequence within *Letters Written during a Short Residence,* where Wollstonecraft’s real sex and actual child with Gilbert Imlay are replaced by a posthuman textual jouissance. Here Wollstonecraft entangles herself and the image of Fanny with Scandanavian skies, forests, and waterways. Such enmeshment with the non-verbal environment offers the possibility, though not the eventuality, of subtending the symbolic order and entering the realm of the Real. In *Maria* we can see the reinstitution of phallic desire in Darnford’s release from the asylum after he re-establishes his phallic power in consummation and the freedom to desert Maria, not to mention his potential betrayal of her in some of the novel’s potential endings archived by Godwin. What we might see as the polymorphous desire of the marginalia and the triadic friendship between Darnford, Maria, and Jemima, becomes caged by the cultural and legal demands that, as David Sigler has argued, constitute desire through sexual difference and constrain sexual identity. While Maria, Darnford, and Jemima already constitute a perversion of the psychoanalytic triad (mother-father-child), they collapse into the dyadic fantasy of Maria and Darnford’s restitutional heteronormativity. Such control of enjoyment encourages perversion and cultivates archetypal fantasies of gendered others, as the dyad becomes installed into a romance plot that leaves much to be desired in the way of female independence.

Even so, the text does not completely evanish the earlier polymorphousness of the triangulated marginalia, as if the text, once familiar with another form of jouissance, cannot help to proliferate itself. Maria and Darnford’s desire made real within their psychosis almost autonomously diffuses a dissipating Real that exudes the story’s impossible, multiplicitous, indeterminate endings. While most *denouments* assume the infant has died and Maria falls prey to the law of the father that condemns her by the literal patriarchal law in divorce proceedings, the return of the vision of her infant resurrects the hallucination of a jouissance outside the phallic symbolic. At least one ending imagines that Jemima brings her back to Maria, and the three of them create a female homosocial space safe from either Venebles or Darnford. The idea that the babe might not be dead, or even might haunt the text and the family history it presents, offers an undead symbolic of the future of a non-heir who might recreate the symbolic altogether, however deranged our (and Maria’s) wish for her existence.

The survival of the child amid the mad, bad, and dangerous asylum hysterics attests to Wollstoncraft’s early intimation that feminine delusion may be a necessary psychosis, one which wards off paralytic hysterics that would permanently imprison one inside the asylum’s institutional phallic order. Such a non-phallic imaginary, it seems, can be created within the interstitial space of the asylum, but its existence, the possibility of its ontology, will always be labeled psychotic by the law of the father. Thus, if we were to take Wollstonecraft’s point of view, the Lacanian insistence in the impossibility of non-phallic jouissance (and its impossible symbolic) is itself another decrepit asylum built by acquiescence to the phallic law. This law of the father assumes that sanity adhere to the naturalization of a two-sex, gendered romance as much as the separation of human subjects and nonhuman objects. It is the immense creativity of language and being itself, which we shall see most fully in *Letters*, that has the capacity imagine something other, something attached to all number of creative, porous processes themselves. The novel thus resists heteronormative closure in its desire for impossible futurities, in an excess of a speculative symbolic, that surfeits the Real through Wollstonecraft’s literary imagination.

Wollstonecraft more fully explores the freedom to play with delusions of feminine, even nonbinary jouissance in *Letters*. Autobiographically, we might think of these letters as a hiatus between Wollstonecraft’s two suicide attempts that struggle with the absence of her “real” personal object of desire (or Imlay’s repudiation of her as a desiring subject). In psychoanalytic terminology, we might say that she successfully substitutes various nonhuman or partial objects as an even greater epitome than Imlay or her self-representation of the *objet petit a*. Yet, while the actual letters sent to Imlay never arrive at their intended destination, their vagrancy eventually allows Wollstonecraft to rewrite them into a love letter to a jouissance freed from all of the following: a human object, the symbolic law of (Fanny’s) father, any singly object, or indeed the notion of a discrete, self-enclosed object that would try to but fail to substitute for the lack at the heart of the phallus. Parted, however unintentionally, from her human desire and its biopolitical teleologies, the narrator lets her desires roam in, around, and through a series of landscapes and subjects that she cannot quite define. She successively meanders into more vibrant materials that occasionally flow one into another, whose entanglement itself momentarily obviates the lack and absence at the heart of psychoanalytic desire.

*Letters* dialectically oscillates between sociological, ethnographic observations about Scandinavia and some intense mutual masturbation of Wollstonecraft and nature itself. This pleasure occurs most intensely when the speaker experiences jouissance with the landscape as she literally exchanges materiality with it. She describes this phenomenon through language that slips and slides through its substitutive signifiers. Having established her “desultory manner” quite soundly by the time she arrives in Norway, the speaker of the letters, particularly when describing nature’s materiality and the affects circulating within these scenes, rises to a lyrical lilt whose *écriture* creates something of a posthuman jouissance. Resounding a fairly keening pitch while looking down upon the ocean from a precipice outside Tønsberg, she writes,“With what ineffable pleasure have I not gazed—and gazed again, losing my breath through my eyes—my very soul diffused itself in the agitated waves, melted in the freshening breeze, or, taking its flight with fairy wing, to the misty mountains which bounded the prospect, fancy tript [sic] over new lawns . . .” (*Letters* 50). She follows this description, in the next paragraph, with the very quotable line, “I endeavoured to calm an impetuous tide—laboring to make my feelings take an orderly course.—It was striving against the stream” (50). This feminine gush may partake in the vibrations of sensibility so often wrought through metaphors of swiftly titling winds and waters. Yet, here, the description also registers that gush and pull of desire—the pleasures of gazing and losing breath, the diffusion and loss of the subject into others, a series of objects that are themselves already indiscrete. The agitated waves, the freshening breeze, the fairy wing, misty mountains, and new lawns all bespeak a fluxing materiality, perhaps something closest, in psychoanalytic terms, to what Bracha Ettinger would call a part-object or part-subject. The intermingling of the human and nonhuman occurs, or leads to, those maternal tides of labor and laboring, as Wollstonecraft’s chiastic description of one in terms of the other—the tide as female ejaculation, the speaker’s body as literally melting into thin air. The laboring to make and unmake feelings, those new materialist impersonal affects, that matter and energy that circulates through human and nonhuman, entangles them both into something more than the feminized natural body of part-objects and part-subjects.

As I’ve argued elsewhere, Wollstonecraft, like many other women writers of the Romantic period often uses this type of personification not to anthropomorphize nature, but to intertwine irretrievably human and nonhuman—on a material level, not just metaphorically.[[10]](#endnote-10) At a later moment, in the forests of Tønsberg, Wollstonecraft takes the reverse tactic of personifying the trees: “Not nymphs, but philosophers, seemed to inhabit them—ever musing; I could scarcely conceive that they were without some conscious existence—without a calm enjoyment of the pleasure they diffused” (*Letters* 57). Sounding rather like F. W. Schelling writing of plant souls, the speaker pose trees as musing philosophers who spread their consciousness and musings through diffusion.[[11]](#endnote-11) Though to diffuse could be material or immaterial, the word may hint at least, or anticipate two material meanings arising, according to the OED, at the start of the nineteenth century—to cause two substances to intermingle or to spread one’s limbs out. Such a dispersal literally, physically extends pleasure mutually enjoyed through a posthuman jouissance. That is, a surplus of enjoyment transpires in the diffusion of human and nonhuman, through intertwined play of materialities and é*criture*.

While such apostrophes begin in anthropomorphic play, they end in something much more mutual and entangled, as language enables pleasure to pass over (or through) the (Oedipal) symbolic and *objet petit a*, or the speaker’s desire to be amused by the phallic philosopher. Instead, we end in a nebulous pleasure jointly enjoyed through the intermingling of language and materiality, human and nonhuman pondering. As Zupančič writes, “language cannot be neatly separated from the Real,” just as jouissance blurs the lines between animal and human: “enjoyment is what disturbs this animal, wakes it up to a different reality, wakes it up to metaphysics (or politics), makes it do all kinds of strange ‘human’ or inhuman things” (69, 90). In these passages in *Letters*, Wollstonecraft balances between, on the one hand, extreme the extreme disruption caused by unbridgeable difference and, on the other, a drastic merging or assimilation into identity. We might turn to Michael Marder’s notion of “vegetal democracy,” a common soul that adheres to “the principles of inherent divisibility and participation” in plant life “which traverses all other modes of living while preserving their differences,” constituted by a “giving itself without reserve to everyone and everything that lives” (51, 52).

In this moment of seeming Romantic intersubjectivity, what begins as the synthesthesia of losing breath or air through the eyes, or receiving the tree’s airy thoughts, becomes a blurring of subject and object, as Wollstonecraft’s soul diffuses into the waves, and, finally, her material deliquescence, her affect, becomes one with the tide. This vivacious tongue-lashing of Wollstonecraft’s—what she calls her ineffable pleasure—is no mere sublimation of her panting desire for an absent Imlay, the name of the father, the He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, who would identify her (feminine) sex and sexuality as subordinated to the phallic. Neither is such pleasure simply a form of feminine jouissance “beyond the phallus,” defined against the phallus, along the lines of Lacan’s intimations in *Seminar XX*. Rather, this is Wollstonecraft at her most psychotic, who imagines her soul leaves her body and diffuses—materially, spiritually—into the scene—both the moving affect of breeze and waves as well as the scene’s own fluid symbolic.

Such psychosis, the ability to talk with the elements, to be them, speaks to a broader trajectory of feminine writing that we can trace from Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets*, where the lunatic in sonnet LXX “lies / Murmuring responses to the dashing surf” (8) through Shelley’s “Witch of Atlas,” whose mother, in her own alien jouissance, “was changed into a vapour / And then into a cloud,” and finally into a star (65-66). These works neither naturalize women’s coincidental intimacy with nature nor reveal a hole that is women’s relation with nature, which the psychotic world of delusional fantasy will come to fulfill (Lacan, *Seminar III* 45). From a Lacanian perspective, we might say that the Wollstonecraftian subject recognizes herself as not a symptom of man, or a compensatory, sentimental other, but rather as no subject at all, a lack that nature attempts to recover. In order to swerve from mistakes like Maria’s with Darnford (and Wollstonecraft’s catastrophic disaster with Imlay), the speaker of the *Letters* turns from any realization of her sex as a subject pregnant with the desire to recognize a father and procreate. Combatting the inhumanity of the always already binaristic imaginary, she becomes partially nonhuman, or something other than human altogether. Her entanglement with nature speaks to another ontology entirely—the ability to shift her shape and being from one always in relation to the phallus, always liable to or resisting its penetrating ways, to something vaporous and labile, already intermingled with a being alien to sexed desire or gendered lacking.

Such an inkling of the dynamically material nonhuman is already present in Irigaray and Cixous. In *Speculum*, Irigaray is, perhaps hyperbolically skeptical of women’s ability to evince a psychosis that would produce a symbolic outside the paternalistic order. Hysteria, she says, women’s cough and catarrh, her bodily symptoms of repression of herself as a symptom, is all women have left. However unable women supposedly are to arouse their signifiers and get it up to enunciate the symbolic, Irigarary eventually masturbates her way out of the imaginary using a fluid materiality where women lack sexual self-identification and really lack everything but the slip and slide of their being. In the chapter on “Volume-Fluidity,” she writes: “Lips of the same form—but of a form that is never simply defined—ripple outwards as they touch and send one another on a course that is never fixed into a single configuration. This will already have taken place without the consent or assent of any object, or subject. This is an other topo-(logy) of jouissance” (*Speculum* 230). Not only is the woman not one, due to her two lips constantly touching themselves, not only does she break the double-specularization of woman and mother, not only does she never close up into a volume (233, 239), but she excretes and flows into multiple forms of matter. “Blood, but also milk, sperm, lymph, saliva, spit, tears, humors, gas, waves, airs, fire . . . light” (237). This excrescence not only overwhelms a woman’s sexual identity as a reproductive vessel, not only threatens to deform the man with his tumescent phallus, not only undoes subject boundaries, it surely remits a dynamic flow of matter. Rather than a Medusan castration into stone that can never kiss or reach jouissance, Irigaray’s airs, like Wollstonecraft’s, anticipate a posthuman new materiality that flows, differentially, through many kinds of matter.

Irigaray, Lacan’s student, is surely working from his challenge to get beyond the phallic jouissance, yet her series of fluids intimates how matter might overflow the boundaries of the phallus so as to negate them as an originary reference point. Moreover, her linguistic play, like Wollstonecraft’s sentences in *Letters*, which continue without the dialectical or cyclical structure of her periods in *The Vindication*, suggest not so much an object-oriented list of things but rather a series of already intermixing and flexible forms of matter. By the time Irigaray reaches her “light,” it no longer has reference to darkness or castration, but instead is the epitome of matter as energy that pervades all things. Here, we can bring Irigaray, and Wollstonecraft with her, full circle to Schelling’s definition of light in his nature philosophy.

Wollstonecraft’s passages might likewise bring to mind Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection, as another post-Lacanian attempt to explain the double intertwinement and repudiation of the other. As Kristeva writes in *Powers of Horror*: “‘subject’ and ‘object’ push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject” (18). Wollstonecraft’s use of the nonhuman in *Letters*, however, trespasses on the mother-child symbiosis, and the dark, loathesome feminine that must be sloughed off. Bracha Ettinger’s post-Lacanian-Kristevan-Kleinian analysis of the matrixial border space, where part-objects are created, mingle, and re-created, offers yet another post-Lacanian attempt to move past the phallic imaginary. While Ettinger’s theories anticipate new materialism’s iteratively, co-produced materialities, such part-objects still reference the late intrauterine encounters that serve as a foundational, human referent for “the shareable dimensions of subjectivity” and a “multidimensional change and exchange on the borderlines of [human] perceptibility” (Ettinger 64.5). Zupančič’s consideration of the inanimate world (and of object oriented ontology) similarly attempts to show how Lacan jouissance’s intersection at the abyss of the Real and the lack within the signifier might entwine human and nonhuman. She claims that life “is an interruption, a disturbance of the inanimate, a gap appearing in it” much as the sexual is the “ ‘crack’ shared (and repeated) by different drives,” jouissance being the “‘glue’” that binds “the original negativity (call it primal repression, one-less, minus, rift, or crack” to various signifiers and the Real, “where a ‘new signifier’ could eventually intervene” in the phallic order (Zupančič 97, 116, 117).

Wollstonecraft’s descriptions of nature in her *Letters* and its ineffable pleasure even more thoroughly attempts to leave the phallic behind. Her model leverages a synesthetic admixture of materialities (breath, waves, light) whose elemental nature moves underneath the human or maternal body to augur a pervasive, shape-shifting changeability. Perhaps her biggest intervention is the way that different materialities, which have no static or fixed shape, succeed, suffuse, and alter one another. The imbrication of human with nonhuman undoes either sexual dimorphism or the gender binary that shapes the phallic order in the first place.

It is no coincidence that Wollstonecraft follows this jouissance with declaration that she will no longer strive against the stream. As one metaphor touches, and flows into, another, the human and nonhuman materials slide with, against, and through each other in a material unconscious, but one evoked through symbolic play that bypasses any sedimented imaginary. Air, light, waves, affects, tides, streams combine with some “humid eyes,” heavy breathing (“I pause, again, breathless”), and “vivacity of youth” to boot. Wollstonecraft’s symptoms may be directed toward her own body, yet they suggest how subjectivity might give way to Bennett’s human-nonhuman assemblage, joined by shared affect, those material movements among and between bodies. While Bennett does not give much idea as to how one material might recombine with another, Karen Barad’s new materialism theorizes that phenomena (objects or subjects) do not exist as such until created or “cut” through apparatuses that create, and recreate, them into various materialities. For Barad, even “the ‘past’ and the ‘future’ are iteratively reworked and enfolded through the iterative practices of spacetimemattering” (Barad 315). In this account, time, space, and matter are all iteratively recreated through intractions of matter that is not already ontologically defined. While Barad terms these intractions “cuts,” where matter can be cut apart and together, Wollstonecraft’s liquid suffusions seem to bypass such a phallic methodology of change based on disruption, cracks and holes, or cuts—severing one from another. Not necessarily based on gradualism, she augurs a change endemic to a shifting, excessive jouissance, an openness to mixing materialities.

Wollstonecraft is quick to guard against readers supposing—and desiring to suppose—that she is speaking entirely of sex itself—of two bodies involved in the sensual instant gratification she is so quick to resist in *The Vindication*. A few sentences later she directly addresses the reader: “My bosom still glows, —Do not saucily ask, repeating Sterne’s question, ‘Maria, is it still so warm?’ Sufficiently, O my God! has it been chilled by sorrow and unkindness—still nature will prevail—and if I blush at recollecting past enjoyment, it is the rosy hue of pleasure heightened by modesty; for the blush of modesty and shame are as distinct as the emotions by which they are produced” (*Letters* 50). In repudiating the Sternian innuendo about her breast being “still warm” and tumescent with the friction of love making, she entreats a modesty that invokes the “rosy hue” of jouissance—an excess of pleasure that is not necessarily tied to sexed bodies but extends into the nonhuman air-sun-sea assemblage of dawn. This figure, of course, alludes to her earlier, now-famous passage describing the “rosy tint of morning” that involutes Fanny Blood, Fanny Imlay, the dawn, not to mention the “Blood, but also milk, sperm, lymph, saliva, spit, tears, humors, gas, waves, airs, fire . . . light” that circulates among them.

The grave has closed over a dear friend, the friend of my youth; still she is present with me, and I hear her soft voice warbling as I stray over the heath. Fate has separated me from another, the fire of whose eyes, tempered by infantine tenderness, still warms my breast; even when gazing on these tremendous cliffs, sublime emotions absorb my soul. And, smile not, if I add, that the rosy tint of morning reminds me of a suffusion, which will never more charm my senses, unless it reappears on the cheeks of my child. (*Letters* 39)

Although we might be tempted to view such a provocative scene as the first of several reverberations of same-sex desire (or a feminine gaze) in *Letters*, as Debra Weiss has, we can understand the multiple substitutions in the passage (Fanny Blood for Imlay; Fanny Imlay for Fanny Blood; the rosy hue for all of them) to be not about the repeated substitution of a feminine for a phallic sexuality but rather a material movement from the “transient sensations” to the posthuman “warbling” of Fanny Blood as bird, through the “fire,” “warmth,” and “rosy tints” of a posthuman materiality that circulates through all as a mutual “suffusion.”

Repeatedly, Wollstonecraft’s emotions drive her to talk of death (or immortality), which further inclines her to figure a release into a dynamic, suffusing state of nature. The death drive and sex/life drive intertwine and propel her into a jouissance where the delusion of unifying with the pulsing waves or winds bespeaks no *petit mort* of phallic jouissance but a winged freedom of movement untethered to any particular body, or any body as a discrete, enclosed system of materialities. After tromping through a burned forest in Norway, she writes, “I cannot tell why-but death, under every form, appears to me like something getting free—to expand in I know not what element; nay I feel that this conscious being must be as unfettered, have the wings of thought, before it can be happy” (*Letters* 88-89). Lest we assume that these “wings of thought” are a stock metaphor, here the speaker imagines herself, through the ungirding of jouissance, becoming another being combined with undisclosed elements and evidenced by nonhuman wings. Like Fanny’s own “warbling,” the narrator’s “wings” recreate her as epistemologically free, but more directly, perhaps as part human-part bird, as ontologically altered.

After this moment, she rushes onto the cascade, and the “impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cavities which mocked the exploring eye, produced an equal activity in my mind” (*Letters* 89). Such epistemological shifts, anticipating and sourcing “Mont Blanc,” at first attest to an analogy between the everlasting flows of nature and mind. Yet, such a seeming parallel track between nature and mind soon intermingles body and nature: “it seemed as impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me—I stretched my hand out to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come” (89). Once again the entanglement of human and nonhuman moves through the jouissance of both that means death to the phallic human into a “life to come,” a being on the make. For all Godwin’s posthumous casting of Wollstonecraft after her death as an overwrought woman of sensibility, “a female Werther,” he might have gotten it right when he describes her as “a serpent upon a rock, that casts it slough, and appears again with the brilliance, the sleekness, and the elastic activity of its happiest age” (*Memoirs* 88). Underlying such emotions, sorrow or happiness, is the serpentine sloughing off and turning of an elastic new materiality. Her speck of new life comes not through her sexed autobiography, even with Godwin, but within the material life of her *être écrivain*.

For Cixous as well, nonbinary being and gender come together. She writes that the hysteric “goes in the direction of animality, plants, the inhuman … [and] embodies somewhere an incompatible synthesis—bisexuality” (Cixous 8). Wollstonecraft’s delusion, wrought as it is at once through the symbolic and the Real, certainly goes in the direction of the nonhuman but rather than bisexuality or Romantic androgyny, I’d characterize her jouissance with nature as a discovery of a nonbinary sexuality. Nature is not the ever-loving Big Other tied to an Old Testament God or his New Son. Nor does it substitute for the *objet petit* *a* of Imlay’s spurned attention, Wollstonecraft’s denial of her sexuality or its sloughed revivification with Godwin. Rather, she finds a jouissance in an alternative Real that shatters the specularization of the imaginary through the sinuous and changing shapes of her description. When her breath moves through her eyes, she replaces specularity or Enlightenment vision with the haptics of breath, air, waves—movement that entails suffusion, and diffusion. She breaks a potentially sexualized imaginary and the binaristic, dimorphic logic that might constitute the *Letters* as her last desperate pleas to Imlay in order to reconstitute herself as a nonbinary being with a posthuman sex and sexuality that subverts human heterosexuality.

There are other passages that do similar laboring, all of which occur during Wollstonecraft’s meditations on nature. Preparing to depart for Gothenberg, the speaker meditates on a summer’s evening, wondering “what … is this active principle which keeps me awake?” (*Letters* 11). Watching her child sleep and thinking of home, Wollstonecraft shifts into the register of natural science: “I have then considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind; —I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself” (12). This talk of energy, animation, and matter continues during Wollstonecraft’s passage critiquing embalmment in Norway as “worse than natural decay”: “‘Ashes to ashes!’ thought I—‘Dust to dust!’” (48). This contemplation wanders to a theory of new materialist reincarnation, where matter becomes other forms of matter, and embalmment is denigrated as preserving a form (and in ways that anticipate the necessity of material decay into the elemental within Shelley’s “Ozymandias”):

Life, what art thou? Where goes this breath? this *I*, so much alive? In what element will it mix, giving or receiving fresh energy?—What will break the enchantment of animation—For worlds, I would not see a form I loved—embalmed in my heart—thus sacrilegiously handled!—Pugh! my stomach turns.—Is this all the distinction of the rich in the grave?—They had better quietly allow the scythe of equality to mow them down with the common mass, than struggle to become a monument of the instability of human greatness. (48)

Here, death could be seen be a form of symbolic castration that levels supposedly natural hierarchies. It more radically, however, suggests a fluid continuity between forms, like those of the two-sex model or the human itself, which seem as monuments but, in fact, reveal a vital instability. The speaker’s breath once again mixes with some new “element” in a reciprocal “giving or receiving” that revivifies with “fresh energy.” Wollstonecraft celebrates material forms as blend with other elements, in a shape-shifting, matter that produces new being. This new exclamatory jouissance, formed as it is through a question about elemental interactions, suggests a polymorphous intermixture of multiple potential materialities, whose act of entanglement would produce something new and already instable. This jouissance gestates new ontologies outside the binaristic, phallic order (through neither masculine heat nor agential force) but by way of the nebulously elemental recomposing. This method constitutes the Shelleyan magic of reanimation, the creation of new life through posthuman, not human, means, through a jouissance whose linguistic structure and bodily form have decomposed into the potentiality of unbeholden matter.

Such psychosis, I want to argue, constitutes a kind of new materialist witchcraft. New materialism is the delusion of magic then and now that has a far more trenchant past and future than Victor Frankenstein’s obsession with Cornelius Agrippa. The new materialist swerve toward Deleuzean immanence has been frequently chastised for its new agey, non-dialectical religiosity by Marxists such as Christopher Nealon.[[12]](#endnote-12) Yet, we might understand such delusions of grandeur as necessary psychotic delusions in the age of the Anthropocene. These symbolic, topological conjurations do not simply disrupt the symbolic with the Real, or intertwine imaginary, symbolic, and real. As Lacan writes of the sinthome, “language eats into the real” (*Seminar XXIII* 21). Delusion is a provocative thing because it is not an illusion but an epistemological error that allows Wollstonecraft to exit her imaginary, however temporarily, and enter the alternative Real. The Real here is an omnipresence of the universal without excising difference, and which is, nonetheless, reachable through the delusion of transcorporeal materiality. This is the power of positive, delusional thinking, the transformation of the feminist Lacanian psychoanalyst into the Irigaray of *Speculum* and *Vegetal Being*, the shape shifting of the Wollstonecraft so antagonistic to luxurious sensibility into the Wollstonecraft of airy, blushing suffusion and posthuman jouissance in *Letters*. Wollstonecraft’s jouissance is, differently, the coming that is present and future in the eternal orgasm of being, which exists within the continual material motion of coming itself. Posthumanism, like new materiality, then may be the delusion of ultimate nonbinary human-nonhuman relations, the eternal, consensual, mutual orgasm that keeps changing, in revolutionary ways, body and being.

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1. For more on climate, atmosphere, and weather as a political and social atmospherics, see Mary Favret’s *War at a Distance*, Michelle Speitz’s essay on air in *Romanticism and Speculative Realism*, and, in a transatlantic context, Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake*. See also Anne-Lise Francois’ recent work on nonhuman life and atmospherics, represented by her lectures at Columbia University on Sept. 26, 2017 “Fire, Water, Moon: Supplemental Seasons in a Time without Season” and at Brown University, March 21 2016, “‘In the cowslips peeps I lye’: Rousseau, Clare, Climate Change and Telling the Time of Day.” Many thanks to Libby Fay for these last references. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Wollstonecraft may also be referring to, satirically, the lead-based cosmetics still used by men and women in the eighteenth century as well as the various medicinal cures that may have been to blame for King George III’s decline. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Steve Mentz on “Philogiston” in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert’s *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For my reading of the withdrawn object as phallic in its individualism even as it induces a phallic desire to penetrate its allure, see my essay “Surfing the Crimson Wave: Romantic New Materialisms and Speculative Feminisms” in *Romanticism and Speculative Realism*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a thoroughly Lacanian reading of Wollstonecraft and indeed the Romantic conflict between non-gendered, disoriented forms of enjoyment and sexually differentiated, constrained desire, see David Sigler’s *Sexual Enjoyment in British Romanticism*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Here I am thinking of Jane Bennett’s seminal contribution in *Vibrant Matter* that nonhuman things have agency, that human and nonhuman things join in assemblage, and that they interact in confederation via impersonal affect endemic to humans and nonhumans. The fluctuating materiality that Wollstoncraft works with, however, might be even more nebulous and fluid than Bennett’s things, which tend to remain discrete entities. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. With the term “necro-capital,” I am citing Achille Mbembe’s *Necropolitics*, and his notion that rather than a biopolitics that controls life and reproduction, Enlightenment capitalism was built on the right to kill and enslave, thereby constituting the subject itself through a power to kill or to elude such death. While Mbembe’s work tracks the ways that enslaved Africans encounter social and/or ontological death, this essay considers Wollstonecraft’s volition or submission to the collapse of the subject. How such a dispersal might emanate from Romantic-era white privilege or perhaps offer a response to the already problematic nature of the necropolitical white subject has become a project of my subsequent inquiry. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. By “women’s freedom” I mean the mother’s phallic power, or the phallic woman who has in some sense stolen or otherwise envaginated the phallus. The inmates’ lofty cries likewise signify a desire that roves outside the phallic order, yet perhaps also men’s desire to be castrated, to have the phallus stolen from them, or to have the symbolic order shaken by women’s alleged perversions. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Cora Kaplan, “Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism,” and Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*. For alternative versions of Wollstonecraftian sexuality, see Orrin N. C. Wang’s chapter on Wollstonecraft and Rousseauean masturbation in *Fantastic Modernity*, and Chris Washington’s article on Wollstonecraft and the Anthropocene, “The Last Sex on Earth,” forthcoming from Romantic Circles *Pedagogy Commons*. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “Surfing the Crimson Wave: Romantic New Materialisms and Speculative

    Feminisms.” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Michael Marder’s *Plant Thinking* and William Davis’s chapter on Schelling and the becoming of the world soul in *Romanticism, Hellenism, and the Philosophy of Nature*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Christopher Nealon, “Infinity for Marxists.” See also Julia Kristeva on the mystical abject in *Powers of Horror*. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)