International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Scandal by Arrangement: Institutional Shame in Wollstonecraft's Maria and the Platform Age

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Abstract

Studies of female public shame tend to begin with an audience and its feelings. This article begins instead with the arrangements that decide who is believed, who is exposed and whose reputation can be traded. Reading Mary Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman (1798), it argues that scandal is not merely circulated by institutions but produced by them, through three allocations: of credibility (Fricker), of visibility (Foucault) and of circulation (Ahmed). The article traces these allocations through Maria's confinement, Jemima's testimony and the novel's trial for criminal conversation, then tests them on two modern cases: the 1998 release of the independent counsel's report on Monica Lewinsky, a juridical mode of institutional shame, and the 2013 dismissal of Justine Sacco, a commercial one. It contends that platforms shift the weight from state to market without abolishing the structure Maria diagnoses, and it proposes institutional shame as a concept for reading scandal as made rather than found.

Keywords: shame, institutions, credibility, Wollstonecraft, Maria, criminal conversation, platforms

Maria Venables is shamed before Wollstonecraft's novel begins. When the heroine appears, she is already confined in a private madhouse, separated from her infant daughter and unable to speak with authority. Nothing she has done explains her condition. A husband in debt, a legal order that makes a wife's property and person his own, and a keeper willing to hold her for a fee do (Wollstonecraft, 1798).

Most accounts of female shame run in the opposite direction. A woman transgresses, a community responds, and shame follows. Even critical accounts tend to be affect-first, asking how shame feels and moves, or audience-first, asking why crowds punish. Both leave an earlier question unasked: who built the conditions under which a woman's act, or her mere existence, could become a scandal at all?

I answer with the concept of institutional shame. It names shame that is produced, not merely distributed, by arrangements that allocate three goods unequally: credibility, visibility and circulation. These determine whose voice is believed, whose privacy is expendable and whose reputation becomes publicly negotiable. Maria is an unusually exact diagnosis of such arrangements, because Wollstonecraft writes the apparatus as well as the victim. The concept also travels. Beside the Lewinsky affair and the Sacco episode, it shows that platform shaming recombines older institutional functions rather than inventing a new humiliation, while differing in who holds power, how permanent the record is and whether the woman can exit. The argument moves from theory through Maria to the modern cases, and it ends by marking where the analogy fails.

Three Allocations: A Theory of Institutional Shame

A theory of institutional shame must explain how institutions produce shame, not only how shame feels. I assign each of three theorists a distinct function.

Foucault explains visibility. Disciplinary institutions make bodies observable and, in doing so, create the categories through which they are known, such as the delinquent, the madwoman and the adulteress (Foucault, 1975/1995). In his history of confinement, unreason becomes a social object only once institutions exist to hold and display it (Foucault, 1961/1988). The question this raises is whose privacy an arrangement treats as expendable.

Fricker explains credibility. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice deflates a speaker's credibility, and hermeneutical injustice occurs when a gap in shared interpretive resources leaves a person unable to make sense of her own experience (Fricker, 2007). Institutions matter because they convert such prejudices into procedure: rules of evidence, certificates of sanity, the right to be a party to a suit. The question here is whose word counts.

Ahmed explains circulation. Emotions move between bodies and signs, and in moving they stick to some bodies more than others (Ahmed, 2004). Shame accumulates where circulation is already patterned by gender, class and respectability. The question is whose reputation can be traded, and who bears the cost.

The three functions depend on one another. Visibility without credibility yields exposure with no reply, and credibility without visibility yields privacy. Circulation then converts both into reputational value that someone profits from. Institutional shame is the effect of an arrangement in which these allocations systematically favour the powerful.

Two modes follow. In the juridical mode, courts, inquiries and similar bodies produce the display. In the commercial mode, markets in attention produce it, and platform feedback that rewards outrage is one mechanism (Brady et al., 2021). Maria already contains both, since criminal conversation was litigated in court and sold in print (Clark, 2004; Stone, 1990).

Maria and the Arrangement of Scandal

Wollstonecraft's novel supplies the three allocations in a concrete sequence, which this section follows: confinement, testimony, law and print, and finally the form of female narration itself.

Confinement and the Gothic Rewritten

The novel opens by setting the invented horrors of Gothic romance against the actual confinement of a woman, announcing that real abodes of horror are institutions. Maria's madhouse is the apparatus of visibility Foucault describes: she is held, observed and classified, and her sanity becomes a matter for others to judge. Her husband need not accuse her of any act, because confinement does the accusing. To be confined is to be marked as someone whose speech requires no answer. The arrangement is also commercial. The keeper is paid, and the licensing introduced by the Madhouses Act of 1774 is described by historians as weakly enforced (Porter, 1987). Maria's privacy is expendable because the institution is arranged for the convenience of whoever pays.

Jemima and the Economy of Credibility

Jemima, Maria's warder, shows that credibility is allocated by class as well as sex. Born illegitimate, abused in service, dismissed when pregnant and driven into destitution, she has had no audience for her

story until Maria. Her narrative supplies what Fricker would call a hermeneutical resource: it names, in plain terms, an exploitation that no available category recognised. The structure matters. Maria's sentimental memoir, written for her daughter, relies on education and sensibility, resources that make her testimony intelligible to polite readers. Jemima's testimony has neither, and it is heard only inside an institution built to silence. The novel thus presents two registers of female narration and shows that institutions rank them: the lady's grievance may eventually reach a court, while the servant's reaches only another inmate.

Coverture, Criminal Conversation and the Printed Trial

Coverture completes the arrangement. A wife's legal personality was absorbed into her husband's, and with it her capacity to own, contract or sue (Blackstone, 1765/1979). Venables, in Maria's account, treats her as an asset to be traded against his debts, and when she flees, the law supplies the means to retrieve her and keep her child. Flight is classified as an offence, not an escape.

The trial scenes in the surviving fragments show the third allocation. In an action for criminal conversation, a husband sued his wife's lover for damages for the loss of her, and the wife was not a party (Stone, 1990). The proceedings were printed and sold, so the circulation of a woman's intimate life was at once a legal step and a commercial product (Clark, 2004). Maria speaks anyway, arguing that the law enforces a marriage it has already emptied of meaning, but the court recognises only the husband's claim. Her reputation becomes publicly negotiable while his is protected as property. Wollstonecraft's own posthumous fate repeated the pattern: Godwin's candid memoir of her, published the same year, disclosed her relationship with Imlay and her suicide attempts, and her reputation suffered for decades (Poovey, 1984).

The Politics of Female Narration

The novel's form makes the same point. Maria writes her memoirs for her daughter, creating a female line of testimony outside the institutions that discredit her. Yet the text itself ends in fragments, and Godwin arranged alternative conclusions for the posthumous edition (Wollstonecraft, 1798). Even the book's incompleteness shows how a woman's story is finished by others. Wollstonecraft's response is to expose the arrangement rather than plead innocence: Maria does not argue that its heroine is blameless but that no fair blame could be assigned by a court so arranged. That move is what turns institutional shame from a description into a critical concept.

From the Printed Trial to the Platform

Applying the three allocations to modern cases sharpens the comparison and also limits it. The two cases below represent the two modes: one juridical, one commercial.

The Juridical Mode: Lewinsky

In 1998 the independent counsel's report on the president's conduct was released by Congress and spread rapidly online. A legal process designed to investigate an official turned a young woman's private communications into public evidence. Visibility was allocated by statute and procedure, circulation by press and internet, and credibility by a political contest in which her account served mostly as an instrument. Lewinsky (2015) places her experience at the point where a new online public met an

apparatus ready to profit from it. Her shame was institutional in the juridical mode: produced, as in the criminal conversation trial, by a legal process that exposed her and a market that sold the exposure.

The Commercial Mode: Sacco

Justine Sacco's case differs. In December 2013 she posted a tweet that many found offensive and then boarded a long flight. Ronson (2015) reconstructs the sequence: a journalist with a far larger audience amplified the tweet, a hashtag about her flight trended while she was offline, and her employer dismissed her within a day. No state apparatus intervened. Visibility came from a platform's trending function, credibility was set by volume, so that her own account of her intent had no standing in the feed, and her reputation was priced by an employer managing brand risk. Experimental evidence that likes and shares reward outrage (Brady et al., 2021) suggests why such chains escalate, though whether feeds widen the reach of such content varies by platform. Sacco performed an act and Maria did not, but in both cases the act, or its absence, explains little about the scale of the consequence. Institutions fixed the scale.

What Changes, and What Does Not

Table 1

Allocations of Institutional Shame Across Three Cases

Allocation	Maria (1798)	Lewinsky (1998)	Sacco (2013)
Credibility	Voided by confinement; wife not a party to the suit	Subordinated to a political contest	Set by volume; intent unheard
Visibility	Madhouse and court	Report released by Congress	Platform trending function
Circulation	Printed trial reports	Press and early internet	Feed feedback and news cycle
Controlling institution	Court, madhouse, family	Independent counsel, Congress, press	Employer, platform, press

The comparison shows a shift in the dominant mode, from juridical toward commercial, not a replacement of structure. Three differences resist equation. The first is coercion: a husband could confine his wife, whereas no platform confines anyone. The second is law: coverture was dismantled by the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, so no modern woman is legally absorbed into another person (Stone, 1990). The third is permanence: print decays, but the digital archive does not. What persists is the allocation itself. Someone still decides whom to believe, whom to expose and whose name to trade.

Conclusion

Maria is not only a protest novel about one woman's wrongs. It is an early theory of how scandal is made. Wollstonecraft shows that a woman can be shamed by arrangements that decide whose testimony counts, whose privacy is spent and whose name circulates, long before any act of hers could justify the label. Foucault, Fricker and Ahmed each illuminate one allocation, and the novel shows the three operating together.

The concept of institutional shame has three uses. For literary study, it reads fiction as a diagnosis of apparatus and not only a representation of victims. For digital culture, it moves attention from crowds to the arrangements that assemble them, including employers, platforms and legal processes. For feminist theory, it explains why individual vindication so rarely ends shame: the remedy lies in changing the arrangement, whether through rules of evidence, limits on the release of private material or rights of erasure. The argument excuses neither audiences nor actors. It claims that the size and shape of shame are decided before the crowd gathers, and that reform must begin where the decision is made.

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