Mary Wollstonecraft

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

It has been said of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) that her personal history proved the need for a new interpretation of woman’s rights as much as anything she wrote. As a child in England, she saw her mother abused by a tyrannical husband who drank too much and squandered what little money the family had. Later she helped a sister escape from a similarly cruel husband. She herself attempted suicide when a man with whom she had had a love affair left her immediately following the birth of their child. Some time afterward she became the mistress of the anarchist-philosopher William Godwin. When she became pregnant, she and Godwin bowed to convention and married, but the two continued to maintain separate domiciles. A daughter was born (she later became Mary Shelley, author of Frankenstein). Mary Wollstonecraft died of complications following this childbirth, at the age of thirty-eight.

Brilliant and talented, Wollstonecraft first had to eke out a living at whatever work was then available to a young woman: sewing, teaching, taking care of youngsters as a governess. Finally she made her way as a writer. Her book-length works include nonfiction and fiction; translations from German, French and Dutch; an anthology; collected letters; and a children’s book.

Her major work, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, appeared in 1792 in London and in the United States; it was the most important of a number of feminist works published in the latter part of the eighteenth century. In the United States there was The Grammer by Judith Sargent Murray (who wrote under the pen name of "Constantia") and Charles Brockden Brown’s Alzina: A Dialogue. In France, Condorcet championed political equality for the female sex, and the playwright Olympe de Gouges proclaimed a Declaration of the Rights of Women.

Wollstonecraft concentrated on describing the state of ignorance and servility to which women were condemned by social custom and training. The passionate feeling with which her book is imbued gives it wide appeal and persuasive power. Four American and six English editions were published during the first hundred years of the book’s life. In the United States, in the late 1860’s, Susan B. Anthony’s feminist newspaper The Revolution serialized A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.

Wollstonecraft’s acute question—"How many generations may be necessary to give vigour to the virtue and talents of the freed posterity of abject slaves?"—still has pertinence.

The following excerpts are drawn from Chapters II, III and IV.

Men complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirize our headstrong passions and groveling vices. Behold, I should answer, the natural effect of ignorance! The mind will ever be unstable that has only prejudices to rest on, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force. Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives....

How grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes! For instance, the winning softness so warmly, and
frequently, recommended, that governs by obeying. What childish expressions, and how insignificant is the being—can it be an immortal one? Who will condescend to govern by such sinister methods?....

I may be accused of arrogance; still I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory,* have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society. I might have expressed this conviction in a lower key; but I am afraid it would have been the whine of affectation, and not the faithful expression of my feelings, of the clear result, which experience and reflection have led me to draw....[I]n the works of the authors I have just alluded to...my objection extends to the whole purport of those books, which tend, in my opinion, to degrade one half of the human species, and render women pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue.

Though, to reason on Rousseau’s ground, if man did attain a degree of perfection of mind when his body arrived at maturity, it might be proper, in order to make a man and his wife one, that she should rely entirely on his understanding; and the graceful ivy, clasping the oak that supported it, would form a whole in which strength and beauty would be equally conspicuous. But, alas! husbands, as well as their helpmates, are often only overgrown children; nay, thanks to early debauchery, scarcely men in their outward form—and if the blind lead the blind, one need not come from heaven to tell us the consequence....

Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a suitable companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself. He carries the arguments, which he pretends to draw from the indications of nature, still further, and insinuates that truth and fortitude, the corner stones of all human virtue, should be cultivated with certain restrictions, because, with respect to the female character, obedience is the grand lesson which ought to be impressed with unrelenting rigour.

What nonsense! when will a great man arise with sufficient strength of mind to puff away the fumes which pride and sensuality have thus spread over the subject! If women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea; consequently, their conduct should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim.

Connected with man as daughters, wives and mothers, their moral character may be estimated by their manner of fulfilling those simple duties; but the end, the grand end of their exertions should be to unfold their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue. They may try to render their road pleasant; but ought never to forget, in common with man, that life yields not the felicity which can satisfy an immortal soul. I do not mean to insinuate that either sex should be so lost in abstract reflections or distant views, as to forget the affections and duties that lie before them, and are, in truth, the means appointed to produce the fruit of life; on the contrary, I would warmly recommend them, even while I assert, that they afford most satisfaction when they are considered in their true, sober light.

Probably the prevailing opinion, that woman was created for man, may have taken its rise from Moses’s poetical story; yet, as very few, it is presumed, who have bestowed any serious thought on the subject, ever supposed that Eve was, literally speaking, one of Adam’s ribs, the deduction must be allowed to fall to the ground; or, only be so far admitted as it proves that man, from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion, and his invention to show that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke, because the whole creation was only created for his convenience or pleasure....

To speak disrespectfully of love is, I know, high treason against sentiment
and fine feelings; but I wish to speak the simple language of truth, and rather
to address the head than the heart. To endeavour to reason love out of the
world, would be to out-Quixote Cervantes, and equally offend against common
sense; but an endeavour to restrain this tumultuous passion, and to prove that
it should not be allowed to dethrone superior powers, or to usurp the sceptre
which the understanding should ever coolly wield, appears less wild.

Youth is the season for love in both sexes; but in those days of
thoughtless enjoyment provision should be made for the more important years of
life, when reflection takes place of sensation. But Rousseau, and most of the
male writers who have followed his steps, have warmly inculcated that the whole
tendency of female education ought to be directed to one point:—to render them
pleasing.

Let me reason with the supporters of this opinion who have any knowledge
of human nature, do they imagine that marriage can eradicate the habitue of
life? The woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her
charms are oblique sunbeams, and that they cannot have much effect on her
husband's heart when they are seen every day, when the summer is passed and gone.
Will she then have sufficient native energy to look into herself for comfort, and
cultivate her dormant faculties? or, is it not more rational to expect that she
will try to please other men; and, in the emotions raised by the expectation of
new conquests, endeavour to forget the mortification her love or pride has
received? When the husband ceases to be a lover—and the time will inevitably
come, her desire of pleasing will then grow languid, or become a spring of
bitterness; and love, perhaps, the most evanescent of all passions, gives place
to jealousy or vanity.

I now speak of women who are restrained by principle or prejudice; such
women, though they would shrink from an intrigue with real abhorrence, yet,
nevertheless, wish to be convinced by the homage of gallantry that they are
cruelly neglected by their husbands; or, days and weeks are spent in dreaming of
the happiness enjoyed by congenial souls till their health is undermined and
their spirits broken by discontent. How then can the great art of pleasing be
such a necessary study? it is only useful to a mistress; the chaste wife, and
serious mother, should only consider her power to please as the polish of her
virtues, and the affection of her husband as one of the comforts that render her
task less difficult and her life happier. But, whether she be loved or
neglected, her first wish should be to make herself respectable, and not to rely
for all her happiness on being subject to like infirmities with herself.

The worthy Dr. Gregory fell into a similar error. I respect his heart; but
entirely disapprove of his celebrated Legacy to his Daughters...

Dr. Gregory...actually recommends dissimulation, and advises an innocent
girl to give the lie to her feelings, and not dance with spirit, when gaiety of
heart would make her feet eloquent without making her gestures immodest. In the
name of truth and common sense, why should not one woman acknowledge that she can
take more exercise than another? or, in other words, that she has a sound
constitution; and why, to damp innocent vivacity, is she darkly to be told that
men will draw conclusions which she little thinks of?—Let the libertine draw
what inference he pleases; but, I hope, that no sensible mother will restrain the
natural frankness of youth by instilling such indecent cautions....

Of the same complexion is Dr. Gregory's advice respecting delicacy of
sentiment, which he advises a woman not to acquire, if she have determined to
marry....

If all the faculties of woman's mind are only to be cultivated as they
respect her dependence on man; if, when a husband be obtained, she have arrived
at her goal, and meanly proud rests satisfied with such a paltry crown, let her
grovel contentedly, scarcely raised by her employments above the animal kingdom;
but, if, struggling for the prize of her high calling, she look beyond the
present scene, let her cultivate her understanding without stopping to consider
what character the husband may have whom she is destined to marry. Let her only
determine, without being too anxious about present happiness, to acquire the
qualities that enoble a rational being, and a rough inelegant husband may shock
her taste without destroying her peace of mind. She will not model her soul to
suit the frailties of her companion, but to bear with them: his character may
be a trial, but not an impediment to virtue....

That a proper education; or, to speak with more precision, a well-stored
mind, would enable a woman to support a single life with dignity, I grant; but
that she should avoid cultivating her taste, lest her husband should occasionally
shock it, is quitting a substance for a shadow. To say the truth, I do not know
of what use is an improved taste, if the individual be not rendered more
independent of the casualties of life; if new sources of enjoyment, only
dependent of the solitary operations of the mind, are not opened....

The question is, whether it procures most pain or pleasure? The answer
will decide the propriety of Dr. Gregory's advice, and show how absurd and
tyrannic it is thus to lay down a system of slavery; or, to attempt to educate
moral beings by any other rules than those deduced from pure reason, which apply
to the whole species.

Gentleness of manners, forbearance and long-suffering, are such amiable
God-like qualities.... but what a different aspect it assumes when [gentleness]
is the submissive demeanour of dependence, the support of weakness that loves,
because it wants protection; and is forebearing, because it must silently endure
injuries; smiling under the lash at which it dare not snarl....

How women are to exist in that state where there is to be neither marrying
or giving in marriage, we are not told. For though moralists have agreed that
the tenor of life seems to prove that is prepared by various circumstances
for a future state, they constantly concur in advising only to provide for
the present. Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are, on this
ground, consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex; and,
disregarding the arbitrary economy of nature, one writer has declared that it is
masculine for a woman to be melancholy. She was created to be the toy of man,
his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he
chooses to be amused....

If...[women] be really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them
not be treated like slaves; or, like the brutes who are dependent on the reason
of man, when they associate with him; but cultivate their minds, give them the
salutary, sublime curb of principle, and let them attain unconscious dignity by
feeling themselves only dependent on God. Teach them, in common with man, to
submit to necessity, instead of giving, to render them more pleasing, a sex to
morals....

These may be termed Utopian dreams. Thanks to that Being who impressed
them on my soul, and gave me sufficient strength of mind to dare to exert my own
reason, till, becoming dependent only on him for the support of my virtue, I
view, with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex.

I love man as my fellow; but his sceptre, real, or usurped, extends not to
me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the
submission is to reason, and not to man. In fact, the conduct of an accountable
being must be regulated by the operations of its own reason; or on what
foundation rests the throne of God?

It appears to me necessary to dwell on these obvious truths, because
females have been insulated, as it were; and, while they have been stripped of
the virtues that should clothe humanity, they have been decked with artificial
graces that enable them to exercise a short-lived tyranny. Love, in their
bosoms, taking place of every nobler passion, their sole ambition is to be fair,
to raise emotion instead of inspiring respect; and this ignoble desire, like the
servility in absolute monarchies, destroys all strength of character. Liberty
is the mother of virtue, and if women be, by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish like exotics, and be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature....

If strength of body be, with some show of reason, the boast of men, why are women so infatuated as to be proud of a defect? Rousseau has furnished them with a plausible excuse, which could only have occurred to a man, whose imagination had been allowed to run wild...that they might, forsooth, have a pretext for yielding to a natural appetite without violating a romantic species of modesty, which gratifies the pride and libertinism of man.

Women, deluded by these sentiments, sometimes boast of their weakness, cunningly obtaining power by playing on the weakness of men; and they may well glory in their illicit sway, for, like Turkish bashaws, they have more real power than their masters: but virtue is sacrificed to temporary gratifications, and the respectability of life to the triumph of an hour....

And if it be granted that woman was not created merely to gratify the appetite of man, or to be the upper servant, who provides his meals and takes care of his linen, it must follow, that the first care of those mothers or fathers, who really attend to the education of females, should be, if not to strengthen the body, at least, not to destroy the constitution by mistaken notions of beauty and female excellence....

To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory! the limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves. As for Rousseau's remarks...that they have naturally, that is from their birth, independent of education, a fondness for dolls, dressing, and talking—they are so puerile as not to merit a serious refutation...,

I have, probably, had an opportunity of observing more girls in their infancy than J.J. Rousseau—I can recollect my own feelings, and I have looked steadily around me; yet, so far from coinciding with him in opinion respecting the first dawn of the female character, I will venture to affirm, that a girl, whose spirits have not been damped by inactivity, or innocence tainted by false shame, will always be a romp, and the doll will never excite attention unless confinement allows her no alternative. Girls and boys, in short, would play harmlessly together, if the distinction of sex was not inculcated long before nature makes any difference. I will go further, and affirm, as an indisputable fact, that most of the women, in the circle of my observation, who have acted like rational creatures, or shown any vigour of intellect, have accidentally been allowed to run wild....

Ah! why do women, I write with affectionate solicitude, condescend to receive a degree of attention and respect from strangers, different from that reciprocation of civility which the dictates of humanity and the politeness of civilization authorize between man and man? And, why do they not discover, when "in the noon of beauty’s power," that they are treated like queens only to be deluded by hollow respect, till they are led to resign, or not assume, their natural prerogatives? Confined then in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch. It is true they are provided with food and raiment, for which they neither toil nor spin; but health, liberty, and virtue, are given in exchange....

I lament that women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions, which men think it manly to pay to the sex, when, in fact, they are insultingy supporting their own superiority. It is not condescension to bow to an inferior. So ludicrous, in fact, do these ceremonies appear to me, that I scarcely am able to govern my muscles, when I see a man start with eager, and serious solicitude, to lift a handkerchief, or shut a door, when the lady could have done it herself, had she only moved a pace or two.
A wild wish has just flown from my heart to my head, and I will not stifle it though it may excite a horse-laugh. I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society, unless where love animates the behaviour. For this distinction is, I am firmly persuaded, the foundation of the weakness of character ascribed to woman; is the cause why the understanding is neglected, whilst accomplishments are acquired with sedulous care; and the same cause accounts for their preferring the graceful before the heroic virtues...

Women have seldom sufficient serious employment to silence their feelings; a round of little cares, or vain pursuits frittering away all strength of mind and organs, they become naturally only objects of sense. In short, the whole tenor of female education (the education of society) tends to render the best disposed romantic and inconstant; and the remainder vain and mean. In the present state of society this evil can scarcely be remedied, I am afraid, in the slightest degree; should a more laudable ambition ever gain ground they may be brought nearer to nature and reason, and become more virtuous and useful as they grow more respectable....

With respect to virtue, to use the word in a comprehensive sense, I have seen most in low life. Many poor women maintain their children by the sweat of their brow, and keep together families that the vices of the fathers would have scattered abroad; but gentlewomen are too indolent to be actively virtuous, and are softened rather than refined by civilization. Indeed, the good sense which I have met with, among the poor women who have had few advantages of education, and yet have acted heroically, strongly confirmed me in the opinion that trifling employments have rendered woman a trifle. Man, taking her body, the mind is left to rust; so that while physical love enervates man, as being his favourite recreation, he will endeavour to enslave woman:—and, who can tell, how many generations may be necessary to give vigour to the virtue and talents of the freed posterity of abject slaves?