

6. A Vindication of the Rights of Men

refute sentence after sentence in which the latent spirit of tyranny appeared.

I perceive, from the whole tenor of your Reflections, that you have a mortal antipathy to reason; but, if there is any thing like argument, or first principles, in your wild declamation, behold the result: — that we are to reverence the rust of antiquity, and term the unnatural customs, which ignorance and mistaken self-interest have consolidated, the sage fruit of experience: nay, that, if we do discover some errors, our feelings should lead us to excuse, with blind love, or unprincipled filial affection, the venerable vestiges of ancient days. These are gothic notions of beauty — the ivy is beautiful, but, when it insidiously destroys the trunk from which it receives support, who would not grub it up?

Further, that we ought cautiously to remain for ever in frozen inactivity, because a thaw, whilst it nourishes the soil, spreads a temporary inundation; and the fear of risking any personal present convenience should prevent a struggle for the most estimable advantages. This is sound reasoning, I grant, in the mouth of the rich and short-sighted. . . .

The civilization which has taken place in Europe has been very partial, and, like every custom that an arbitrary point of honour has established, refines the manners at the expence of morals, by making sentiments and opinions current in conversation that have no root in the heart, or weight in the cooler resolves of the mind. — And what has stopped its progress? — hereditary property — hereditary honours. The man has been changed into an artificial monster by the station in which he was born, and the consequent homage that benumbed his faculties like the torpedo's touch; — or a being, with a capacity of reasoning, would not have failed to discover, as his faculties unfolded, that true happiness arose from the friendship and intimacy which can only be enjoyed by equals; and that charity is not a condescending distribution of alms, but an intercourse of good offices and mutual benefits, founded on respect for justice and humanity. . . .

It is necessary emphatically to repeat, that there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; and that, in receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights. *

A father may dissipate his property without his child having any right to complain; — but should he attempt to sell him for a slave, or fetter him with laws contrary to reason; nature, in enabling him to discern good from evil, teaches him to break the ignoble chain, and

Mary Wollstonecraft

(1729–1797)

6. A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Hon. Edmund Burke; occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790),

2nd edn, pp. 9–13, 22–7

Mary Wollstonecraft was christened in the Church of England, but she got her intellectual and political education from Dr Richard Price and other rational Dissenters in the London suburb of Newington Green, where she kept a school in the 1780s.¹ She was already an educationalist (*Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, 1787), a novelist (*Mary, a Fiction*, 1788), a writer for children (*Original Stories from Real Life*, 1788), and a reviewer for Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review* when Burke's *Reflections* appeared on 1 November 1790. Her speedy reply to Burke — she published the first edition anonymously on 29 November, the second, slightly enlarged and corrected, with her name on the title-page, on 18 December — probably reflects the views of her Dissenter friends and of the Johnson circle,² but it is also characteristic of Wollstonecraft herself. Though she accuses Burke of emotionalism rather than rationality, her own manner (in her words) glows with indignation. She does not construct an argument, or use freshly coined words or images (the 'torpedo' on p. 73 is a cliché), although, as James Boulton fairly observes, it may well be that her spontaneity and strong feelings, or 'eager warmth and positiveness' (*Monthly Review*) were good tactics in a quick reply.³ The range of her ideas, as illustrated here, already has a genuine radical force. She sees Burke as the defender of hierarchy in all its forms, the spokesman for a society founded on systematic oppression, in which heavy taxes, press-ganging and the game laws are characteristic impositions of the powerful upon the weak.

I glow with indignation when I attempt, methodically, to unravel your slavish paradoxes, in which I can find no fixed first principle to refute; I shall not, therefore, condescend to shew where you affirm in one page what you deny in another; and how frequently you draw conclusions without any previous premises: — it would be something like cowardice to fight with a man who had never exercised the weapons with which his opponent chose to combat, and irksome to

not to believe that bread becomes flesh, and wine blood, because his parents swallowed the Eucharist with this blind persuasion.

There is no end to this implicit submission to authority – some where it must stop, or we return to barbarism. . . .

Our penal laws punish with death the thief who steals a few pounds; but to take by violence, or trepan, a man, is no such heinous offence.⁴ – For who shall dare to complain of the venerable vestige of the law that rendered the life of a deer more sacred than that of a man? But it was the poor man with only his native dignity who was thus oppressed – and only metaphysical sophists and cold mathematicians can discern this insubstantial form; it is a work of abstraction – and a *gentleman* of lively imagination must borrow some drapery from fancy before he can love or pity a *man*. – Misery, to reach your heart, I perceive, must have its cap and bells; your tears are reserved, very *naturally* considering your character, for the declamation of the theatre, or for the downfall of queens, whose rank alters the nature of folly, and throws a graceful veil over vices that degrade humanity; whilst the distress of many industrious mothers, whose *helpmates* have been torn from them, and the hungry cry of helpless babes, were vulgar sorrows that could not move your commiseration, though they might extort an alms.

7. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792),

2nd corr. edn, pp. 36–8, 44–5, 50–3, 58–9, 67–9, 72–4; from ch. 2, 'The Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character Discussed'

Wollstonecraft's book is not always seen as strictly a part of the Revolution controversy, yet its arguments clearly relate to the egalitarian and radical case she had already advanced against Burke. *Rights of Woman* illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of the radical intellectuals. It applies to the subject of women the favourite Dissenter precepts of equality and natural rights, with the kind of conviction that arises from membership of an intellectual group which sustains rather than challenges its own opinions. In other senses, too, the book seems indifferent to, or myopic about, the effect it might have on readers outside London intellectual circles. Wollstonecraft scorns romantic love (then as now an important ideal for women, even if vulnerable to criticism), and rather too emphatically concedes the present inferiority of most women. Her approach is both tactless, and untactical: she does not put forward a platform of actual measures which could be campaigned for, such as changes to marriage and divorce laws, child benefits, schools, a new cur-

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riculum, job training, equal pay, public office, even the vote. Her radicalism, like that of her future husband William Godwin, thus has its impractical aspect – though the title and timing of *Rights of Woman*, issued as the campaign against Paine's *Rights of Man* built up, also conveys the author's flair.

Egalitarian arguments on women's behalf, as well as complaints at their legal, economic, and educational disabilities, were reasonably familiar in late-eighteenth-century England, as in France. Rousseau's propositum that women should be brought up to be passive had only one important English radical advocate, Thomas Day. Otherwise the dominant intellectual role of Protestantism within English radicalism is very apparent in the treatment of feminist topics: Wollstonecraft is in harmony with the ethos of Dissent when she stresses the equality before God of the souls of men and women, and represents sexuality as at best a weakness. In English liberal circles it had become usual to argue that girls and boys should all learn to reason, and to know the principles of science and mathematics in preference to fashionable 'accomplishments'. The Edgeworths' *Practical Education* (1798), which derives from the same tradition as the educational writing of the Dissenters Joseph Priestley⁵ and Anna Lactitia Barbauld,⁶ supposes that girls and boys in a family will be taught intellectual self-reliance together; the point is amplified in Maria Edgeworth's series of educational stories, *The Parent's Assistant* (from 1796) and *Early Lessons* (from 1801), and in her novels for adults, beginning with *Belinda* (1801).⁷

Mary Wollstonecraft's writings became notorious when her personal history was fully revealed in Godwin's *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* – a frank and moving book, and an injudicious one in the anti-radical persecution of 1798. Political capital could be made of her attempts at suicide, her liaisons outside marriage, and her illegitimate child, all of which were embarrassments to those subscribing to her own arguments for rationality, and against romantic love and sexuality. When *Rights of Woman* was first published, it could be praised temperately by moderates, and some of its propositions developed. The Norwich journal *The Cabinet*, which is made up of anonymous contributions, carries two articles in 1795 'On the Rights of Woman', which describe Mary Wollstonecraft, on the evidence of *Rights of Woman*, as 'a woman of strong understanding and good heart',⁸ and pursue further her 'hint' that women ought to be represented in Parliament.

In treating . . . of the manners of women, let us, disregarding sensual arguments, trace what we should endeavour to make them in order to co-operate, if the expression be not too bold, with the supreme Being.

By individual education, I mean, for the sense of the word is not precisely defined, such an attention to a child as will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temper, regulate the passions, as they begin to ferment, and set the understanding to work before the body arrives at

maturity; so that the man may only have to proceed, not to begin, the important task of learning to think and reason.

To prevent any misconception, I must add, that I do not believe that a private education can work the wonders which some sanguine writers have attributed to it. Men and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. In every age there has been a stream of popular opinion that has carried all before it, and given a family character, as it were, to the century. It may then fairly be inferred, that, till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education. . . .

Consequently the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau's opinion respecting men: I extend it to women, and confidently assert that they have been drawn out of their sphere by false refinement, and not by an endeavour to acquire masculine qualities. Still the regal homage which they receive is so intoxicating, that till the manners of the times are changed, and formed on more reasonable principles, it may be impossible to convince them that the illegitimate power, which they obtain, by degrading themselves, is a curse, and that they must return to nature and equality, if they wish to secure the placid satisfaction that unsophisticated affections impart. But for this epoch we must wait – wait, perhaps, till kings and nobles, enlightened by reason, and preferring the real dignity of man to childish state, throw off their gaudy hereditary trappings: and if then women do not resign the arbitrary power of beauty – they will prove that they have *less* mind than man.

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. . . .

Riches and hereditary honours have made cyphers of women to give consequence to the numerical figure; and idleness has produced a mixture of gallantry and despotism into society, which leads the very men who are the slaves of their mistresses to tyrannize over their sisters, wives, and daughters. This is only keeping them in rank and file, it is true. Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there

will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing. ~~The sensualist, indeed, has been the most dangerous of tyrants, and women have been duped by their lovers, as princes by their ministers, whilst dreaming that they reigned over them.~~

I now principally allude to Rousseau,⁹ for his character of Sophia is, undoubtedly, a captivating one, though it appears to me grossly unnatural; however, it is not the superstructure, but the foundation of her character, the principles on which her education was built, that I mean to attack; nay, warmly as I admire the genius of that able writer, whose opinions I shall often have occasion to cite, indignation always takes place of admiration, and the rigid frown of insulted virtue effaces the smile of complacency, which his eloquent periods are wont to raise, when I read his voluptuous reveries. Is this the man, who, in his ardour for virtue, would banish all the soft arts of peace, and almost carry us back to Spartan discipline? . . .

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 habitude 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? . . .

The worthy Dr. Gregory fell into a similar error. I respect his heart; but entirely disapprove of his celebrated Legacy to his Daughters.¹⁰

He advises them to cultivate a fondness for dress, because a fondness for dress, he asserts, is natural to them. I am unable to comprehend what either he or Rousseau mean, when they frequently use this indefinite term. If they told us that in a pre-existent state the soul was fond of dress, and brought this inclination with it into a new body, I should listen to them with a half smile, as I often do when I hear a rant about innate elegance. – But if he only meant to say that the exercise of the faculties will produce this fondness – I deny it. – It is not natural; but arises, like false ambition in men, from a love of power. . . .

In order to fulfil the duties of life, and to be able to pursue with vigour the various employments which form the moral character, a master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion. I mean to say, that they ought not to indulge those emotions which disturb the order of society, and engross the thoughts that should be otherwise employed. The mind that has never been engrossed by one object wants vigour – if it can long be so, it is weak.

A mistaken education, a narrow, uncultivated mind, and many sexual prejudices, tend to make women more constant than men; but, for the present, I shall not touch on this branch of the subject. I will go still further, and advance, without dreaming of a paradox, that an unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and that the neglected wife is, in general, the best mother.¹¹ And this would almost always be the consequence if the female mind were more enlarged: for, it seems to be the common dispensation of Providence, that what we gain in present enjoyment should be deducted from the treasure of life, experience; and that when we are gathering the flowers of the day and revelling in pleasure, the solid fruit of toil and wisdom should not be caught at the same time. . . .

As a philosopher, I read with indignation the plausible epithets which men use to soften their insults; and, as a moralist, I ask what is meant by such heterogeneous associations, as fair defects, amiable weaknesses, &c.? If there is but one criterion of morals, but one archetype for man, women appear to be suspended by destiny, according to the vulgar tale of Mahomet's coffin; they have neither the unerring instinct of brutes, nor are allowed to fix the eye of reason on a perfect model. They were made to be loved, and must not aim at respect, lest they should be hunted out of society as masculine. . . .

Avoiding, as I have hitherto done, any direct comparison of the two sexes collectively, or frankly acknowledging the inferiority of woman, according to the present appearance of things, I shall only insist that

men have increased that inferiority till women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures. Let their faculties have room to unfold, and their virtues to gain strength, and then determine where the whole sex must stand in the intellectual scale. . . .

I love man as my fellow; but his scepter, 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? . . .

As to the argument respecting the subjection in which the sex has ever been held, it retorts on man. The many have always been enthralled by the few; and monsters, who scarcely have shewn any discernment of human excellence, have tyrannized over thousands of their fellow creatures. Why have men of superiour endowments submitted to such degradation? For, is it not universally acknowledged that kings, viewed collectively, have ever been inferior, in abilities and virtue, to the same number of men taken from the common mass of mankind – yet, have they not, and are they not still treated with a degree of reverence that is an insult to reason? China is not the only country where a living man has been made a God. *Men* have submitted to superiour strength to enjoy with impunity the pleasure of the moment – *women* have only done the same, and therefore till it is proved that the courtier, who servilely resigns the birthright of a man, is not a moral agent, it cannot be demonstrated that woman is essentially inferior to man because she has always been subjugated.

Brutal force has hitherto governed the world, and that the science of politics is in its infancy, is evident from philosophers scrupling to give the knowledge most useful to man that determinate distinction.

I shall not pursue this argument any further than to establish an obvious inference, that as sound politics diffuse liberty, mankind, including woman, will become more wise and virtuous.