

## Mary Wollstonecraft

**NOTE:** I find Wollstonecraft difficult to excerpt which is why I've included this long intro. I think it also gives some insight into the "revolution controversy" which was the international discussion of the French Revolution. It was started by Richard Price, an English minister who gave a sermon making positive comparisons between the French Revolution and England's Glorious Revolution of 1688. (That was the one where Parliament invited the reigning king's daughter and son-in-law, William and Mary, to take over if they would cooperate with Parliament.) Burke's *Reflections*, that we read for last seminar, is actually a response to Price. After Burke published his reflections, Tom Paine responded with *The Rights of Man* and Wollstonecraft responded with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, both attacking Burke. The other reading for this seminar (Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*) was part of the same discussion. Malthus was considering the liberal claim that human society is perfectible, a key question in the debate over revolution.

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Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) was a moral and political philosopher whose analysis of the condition of women in modern society retains much of its original radicalism. One of the reasons her pronouncements on the subject remain challenging is that **her reflections on the status of the female sex were part of an attempt to come to a comprehensive understanding of human relations within a civilization increasingly governed by acquisitiveness and consumption.** Her first publication was on the education of daughters; she went on to write about politics, history and various aspects of philosophy in a number of different genres that included critical reviews, translations, pamphlets, and novels. Best known for her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), her influence went beyond the substantial contribution to feminism she is mostly remembered for and extended to shaping the art of travel writing as a literary genre and, through her account of her journey through Scandinavia, she had an impact on the Romantic movement. . .

Wollstonecraft's own somewhat haphazard education was, however, not entirely unusual for someone of her sex and position, nor was it particularly deficient. Her published writings show her to have acquired a true command of the Bible and a good knowledge of the works of several of the most famous Ancient philosophers. The latter is partly explained through her personal acquaintance with Thomas Taylor, famed for his translations of Plato. She also drew on a variety of early modern sources, such as Shakespeare and Milton's works. Through her own writing for the *Analytical Review* she was to become widely read in the literature of her period. Initially, the nature and extent of her reading was partly owed to the friendship shown to her in her youth by a retired clergyman and his wife. Nevertheless, as a woman from an impecunious family, her prospects were very limited. In relatively rapid succession, she was to enter the most likely occupations for someone of her sex and circumstances: a lady's companion, a schoolteacher, and a governess. . .

**Moral and Political Writings:** When Wollstonecraft began to engage in political commentary in reviewing [Richard] Price's *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, she praised him for his account of true patriotism as 'the result of reason, not the undirected impulse of nature, ever tending to selfish extremes' as well as his defence of Christianity's prescription of universal benevolence against those who argued such sentiment to be incompatible with the love of one's country. She endorsed his view of liberty of conscience as a sacred right . . . Finally, Wollstonecraft reproduced the passage in which Price linked the American and French revolutions and clamoured for the end of despotism throughout Europe.

When not so long thereafter she came to write her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), Wollstonecraft attacked Edmund Burke for having [criticized Price] in his *Reflections*. . . Far from

thinking that the events taking place in France gave grounds for rejoicing, Burke feared their consequences from the very start. The National Assembly's confiscation of the Church's property, he predicted, would lead to further confiscations, undermine the fundamental right to property, and result in anarchy, which only the rise of a charismatic figure could bring to an end.

Of the many disagreements between Price and Wollstonecraft, on the one hand, and Burke, on the other, one of the deepest was over their respective view of the nature of civil society and of political power in general. The two friends believed that government, the rule of law, and all human relations could be simplified, explicated, and rendered transparent, and both were convinced that this was the task ahead for all lovers of liberty. For Burke, on the contrary, civil society consisted of countless ineffable links between individuals. The latter's relationship to authority was for the most part no less ineffable; moreover, he believed sound political judgement to be the product of experience, and he cautioned prudence. To sweep away established practices and institutions and think of politics as a mere matter of administrating in accordance with a set of abstract rules or rights uninformed by the customs and culture, and hence the national character, of a people was, in his view, to demonstrate a crass disregard for the most obvious facts of human nature and history. Burke's argument led him to dwell on France's financial position in some detail, and he defended its royal family and its Church; he insisted, moreover, that it was already benefiting from a policy of gradual reform.

Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* was the first of many replies. . . Wollstonecraft's riposte is an interesting and rhetorically powerful work in its own right as well as a necessary introduction to the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It consists mostly of a sustained attack on Burke rather than a defence of the rights of man. This is partly because Wollstonecraft took for granted a Lockean conception of God-given rights discoverable by reason, except when the latter was warped by self-love. Wollstonecraft further believed that God made all things right and that the cause of all evil was man. In her view, Burke's *Reflections* showed its author to be blind to man-made poverty and injustice; this she attributed to his infatuation with rank, Queen Marie-Antoinette, and the English Constitution. Demonstrating her familiarity with Burke's other works and speeches, . . . she also argued that he was inconsistent, if only because of the impossibility, as she saw it, of reconciling his sympathy for the American cause with his reaction to events in France. In this, Wollstonecraft was far from alone and many who had followed Burke's parliamentary career and heard his Speeches to the House of Commons were astonished by what they thought was a radical and inexplicable change of position.

As she was to do in her next and more famous *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft did not simply clamour for rights, but emphasised that these entail duties; but she also insisted that none could be expected to perform duties whose natural rights were not respected. Furthermore, she used David Hume's *History of England* (1754–62) to contend that England's laws were the product of historical contingency and insisted that only those institutions that could withstand the scrutiny of reason and be shown to be in conformity with natural rights and God's justice merited respect and obedience. There was no question of blanket reverence for the past and its juridical legacy. As for civilization, she thought its progress very uneven and dismissed the culture of politeness and polish as nothing but a screen behind which hypocrisy, egotism and greed festered unchecked. . .

In the midst of her tirade she turned, rather unexpectedly, to the subject of family life and the limits of parental authority, especially in relation to arranged marriages. She condemned marriages of convenience together with late marriages: both fostered immorality in her view. Indeed, from her perspective, nearly every aspect of the prevailing culture had that consequence, for, in bringing girls up to be nothing but empty headed play-things, parents made for a morally bankrupt society. Such beings could never make dutiful mothers, as they took the horizon to be the eyes of the men they flirted with. The moral depravity of a society devoted to the acquisition of property and its conspicuous display rather than to the pursuit of reason and the protection of natural rights found the means of its reproduction in the family, she

contended. Here her dispute was not just with Burke, but implicitly also with Price. In his sermon, he had deplored the sexual depravity of the times that he saw embodied even in those he considered patriots. But to seek only to vindicate the rights of men, as Price had done, was insufficient and misconceived, according to Wollstonecraft. If one sought a truly moral society, the family had to be changed and this, in turn, required a complete change in the nature of the relationship between men and women before, and within, marriage. Only a sound upbringing of both the sexes could secure that. This was the nub of her attack on political theorists and educationalists alike.

When Wollstonecraft came to write *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which she did within a matter of months following the publication of her first overtly political work, the moral rejuvenation of society and the happiness of individual women were woven together. Women were ill-prepared for their duties as social beings and imprisoned in a web of false expectations that would inevitably make them miserable. She wanted women to be transformed into rational and independent beings whose sense of worth came, not from their appearance, but from their inner perception of self-command and knowledge. Women had to be educated; their minds and bodies had to be trained. This would make them good companions, wives, mothers and citizens. Above all it would make them fully human, that is, beings ruled by reason and characterised by self-command. Besides criticisms of existing pedagogical practices and theories, most notably Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), the *Vindication* contains many social and political proposals which range from a detailed outline of necessary changes in school curriculum to the suggestion that women be granted not only civil and political rights, but have elected representatives of their own. It argues that women should be taught skills so as to be able to support themselves and their children in widowhood, and never have to marry or remarry out of financial necessity. It seeks to reclaim midwifery for women, against the encroachment of men into this profession, and contends that women could be physicians just as well as nurses. It urges women to extend their interests to encompass politics and the concerns of the whole of humanity. . . Wollstonecraft wanted women to aspire to full citizenship, to be worthy of it, and this necessitated the development of reason. Rational women would perceive their real duties. They would forgo the world of mere appearances, the world of insatiable needs on which eighteenth-century society was based, as Adam Smith had explained more lucidly than anyone, and of which France was the embodiment, in Wollstonecraft's conception.

#### **from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792)**

II: To account for, and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments have been brought forward to prove, that the two sexes, in the acquirement of virtue, ought to aim at attaining a very different character: or, to speak explicitly, women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue. Yet it should seem, allowing them to have souls, that there is but one way appointed by Providence to lead mankind to either virtue or happiness.

If then women are not a swarm of ephemeron triflers, why should they be kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence? Men complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirize our headstrong passions and grovelling 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, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives. . .

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.

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III: Taught from infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.

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IV: Women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions which men think it manly to pay to the sex, when, in fact, men are insultingly supporting their own superiority.

In the middle rank of life, to continue the comparison, men, in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties. It is not business, extensive plans, or any of the excursive flights of ambition, that engross their attention; no, their thoughts are not employed in rearing such noble structures. To rise in the world, and have the liberty of running from pleasure to pleasure, they must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted.

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VIII: Another instance of that feminine weakness of character, often produced by a confined education, is a romantic twist of the mind, which has been very properly termed sentimental.

Women subjected by ignorance to their sensations, and only taught to look for happiness in love, refine on sensual feelings, and adopt metaphysical notions respecting that passion, which lead them shamefully to neglect the duties of life, and frequently in the midst of these sublime refinements they plump into actual vice.

These are the women who are amused by the reveries of the stupid novelists, who, knowing little of human nature, work up stale tales, and describe meretricious scenes, all retailed in a sentimental jargon, which equally tend to corrupt the taste, and draw the heart aside from its daily duties. I do not mention the understanding, because never having been exercised, its slumbering energies rest inactive, like the lurking particles of fire which are supposed universally to pervade matter.

Females, in fact, denied all political privileges, and not allowed, as married women, excepting in criminal cases, a civil existence, have their attention naturally drawn from the interest of the whole community to that of the minute parts, though the private duty of any member of society must be very imperfectly performed when not connected with the general good. The mighty business of female life is to please, and restrained from entering into more important concerns by political and civil oppression, sentiments become events, and reflection deepens what it should, and would have effaced, if the understanding had been allowed to take a wider range.

But, confined to trifling employments, they naturally imbibe opinions which the only kind of reading calculated to interest an innocent frivolous mind, inspires. Unable to grasp any thing great, is it surprising that they find the reading of history a very dry task, and disquisitions addressed to the understanding intolerably tedious, and almost unintelligible? Thus are they necessarily dependent on the novelist for

amusement. Yet, when I exclaim against novels, I mean when contrasted with those works which exercise the understanding and regulate the imagination.—For any kind of reading I think better than leaving a blank still a blank, because the mind must receive a degree of enlargement and obtain a little strength by a slight exertion of its thinking powers; besides even the productions that are only addressed to the imagination, raise the reader a little above the gross gratification of appetites, to which the mind has not given a shade of delicacy. . .

The best method, I believe, that can be adopted to correct a fondness for novels is to ridicule them: not indiscriminately, for then it would have little effect; but, if a judicious person, with some turn for humour, would read several to a young girl, and point out both by tones, and apt comparisons with pathetic incidents and heroic characters in history, how foolishly and ridiculously they caricatured human nature, just opinions might be substituted instead of romantic sentiments.

### **Two more passages from other Wollstonecraft works:**

#### **from *A Vindication of the Rights of Man***

But on what principle Mr. Burke could defend American independence, I cannot conceive: for the whole tenor of his plausible arguments settles slavery on an everlasting foundation. Allowing his servile reverence for antiquity, and prudent attention to self-interest, to have the force which he insists on, the slave trade ought never to be abolished; and, because our ignorant forefathers, not understanding the native dignity of man, sanctioned a traffic that outrages every suggestion of reason and religion, we are to submit to the inhuman custom, and term an atrocious insult to humanity the love of our country, and a proper submission to the laws by which our property is secured.—Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty. And to this selfish principle every nobler one is sacrificed. . . But softly—it is only property of the rich that is secure; the man who lives by the sweat of his brow has no asylum [protection] from oppression; the strong many may enter—when was the castle of the poor sacred?

#### **from *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect it Has Produced in Europe (1795)***

The deprivation of natural, equal, civil and political rights, reduced the most cunning of the lower orders to practice fraud, and the rest to habits of stealing, audacious robberies, and murders. And why? Because the rich and poor were separated into bands of tyrants and slaves, and the retaliation of slaves is always terrible. In short, every sacred feeling, moral and divine, has been obliterated, and the dignity of man sullied, by a system of policy and jurisprudence as repugnant to reason, as at variance with humanity.

The only excuse that can be made for the ferocity of the Parisians is then simply to observe, that they had not any confidence in the laws, which they had always found to be merely cobwebs to catch small flies. Accustomed to be punished themselves for every trifle, and often for only being in the way of the rich, or their parasites; when in fact, had the Parisian seen the execution of a noble, or priest, though convicted of crimes beyond the daring of vulgar minds? —When justice, or law, is so partial, the day of retribution will come with the red sky of vengeance, to confound the innocent with the guilty. The mob were barbarous beyond the tiger's cruelty: for how could they trust a court that had so often deceived them, or expect to see its agents punished, when the same measures were pursuing?