

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects

Mary Wollstonecraft

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—If this work gets you interested in its author, read Claire Tomalin's fine *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1974).

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As society becomes more enlightened, therefore, it should be very careful not to establish bodies of men who are bound to be made foolish or vicious by the very constitution of their profession.

In society's infancy when men were just emerging out of barbarism, chiefs and priests must have had unlimited influence because they tapped into the most powerful springs of savage conduct—hope and fear. **Aristocracy** is of course, naturally the first form of government. But clashing interests soon get out of balance, there is a confusion of ambitious struggles, and what emerges is a **monarchy** and hierarchy. . . . This appears to be the origin of monarchical and priestly power, and the dawn of civilization. But such combustible materials can't be held down for long; and foreign wars and uprisings at home give the ·common· people a chance to acquire some power, which obliges their rulers to gloss over their oppression with a show of right. Thus as wars, agriculture, commerce, and literature expand the mind, despots are forced to use •hidden corruption to keep

the power that was initially snatched by open force.³ And this •lurking gangrene is spread most quickly by luxury and superstition, the sure dregs of ambition. The idle puppet of a ·royal· court first becomes a luxurious monster or fastidious pleasure-seeker, and the contagion that his unnatural state spreads becomes the instrument of tyranny. [In this context, 'luxury' and its cognates refer to *extreme and dissipated* pursuit and enjoyment of sensual pleasures.]

It is the plague-carrying purple ·of royalty· that makes the progress of civilization a curse, and warps the understanding until men of good sense doubt whether the expansion of intellect will bring more happiness or more misery. But the nature of the poison points out the antidote; if Rousseau had climbed one step higher in his investigation—or if his eye could have pierced the foggy atmosphere that he was hardly willing to breathe—his active mind would have darted forward to contemplate •the perfection of man in the establishment of true civilization, instead of taking his ferocious flight back to •the night of sensual ignorance.

Chapter 2: The prevailing opinion about sexual differences

To explain and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments have been presented to prove that in the acquiring of virtue the two sexes ought to have very different aims; or, to put it bluntly, women aren't thought to have enough

strength of mind to acquire virtue properly so-called. But it would seem that if they have souls there is only one way appointed by God to lead *mankind* to virtue or to happiness.

³ Men of abilities scatter seeds that grow and have a great influence on the development of •public opinion; and once •that gets the intellectual upper hand through the exertion of reason, the overthrow of arbitrary power is not very distant.

If then women are not a swarm of insignificant ephemera [inserts like mayflies, that live for only one day], why should they be kept in ignorance under the pretty label 'innocence'? Men complain, with reason, about the follies and whims of our sex, except when they sharply satirize our headstrong passions and groveling vices. I would answer: Behold the natural effect of ignorance! A mind that has only prejudices to rest on will always be unstable, 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 their mothers' example, that

- a little knowledge of human weakness (properly called 'cunning'),
- softness of temperament,
- outward* obedience, and
- scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety,

will obtain for them the protection of man; and if they are also beautiful, that's all they need for at least twenty years.

That is how Milton describes our first frail mother, 'Eve'; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace I don't understand him unless in true Moslem fashion he means to deprive us of souls, insinuating that all we were designed for was to use sweet attractive grace and docile blind obedience to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation.

Those who advise us only to turn ourselves into gentle domestic animals—how grossly they insult us! For instance, the 'winning softness' that is so warmly and frequently recommended, that 'governs by obeying'—what childish expressions! And a being who will sink to the level of governing by such underhand methods—what an insignificant being that must be! Can it be an immortal one? 'Certainly,' says Lord Bacon, 'man is of kin to the beasts by his body: and

if he be not of kin to God by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature!' Men, indeed, seem to me to act in a very unphilosophical manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by keeping them always in a state of childhood. Rousseau was more consistent when he wanted to stop the progress of reason in both sexes; for if men eat 'fruit' of the tree of knowledge, women will come in for a taste, but the imperfect cultivation that their understandings now receive will give them only a knowledge of evil.

Children, I agree, should be innocent; but when 'innocent' is applied to men or women it is merely a polite word for 'weak'. If it is granted that women were destined by Providence [= 'God'] to acquire human virtues, and to use their understandings to achieve the stability of character that is the firmest ground to rest our future hopes on, then they must be permitted to look to the fountain of light ('God') and not forced to steer by the twinkling of a mere satellite ('man'). Milton was of a very different opinion. . . ., but it would be hard to make consistent two passages that I am now going to contrast. But then great men often led by their senses into such inconsistencies. [In these lines Eve is speaking to Adam.]

To whom thus Eve with perfect beauty adorned:
My author and disposer, what thou bidst
Unargued I obey; so God ordains,
God is thy law, thou mine; to know no more
Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise.

These are *exactly* the arguments I have used to children! But then I have added: 'Your reason is now gaining strength. Until it arrives at some degree of maturity, you must look up to me for advice; but when it does arrive there, you ought to *think*, and rely only on God.'

Yet, in these next lines, Milton seems to agree with me, when he makes Adam protest to his Maker like this:

Hast thou not made me here thy substitute,
 And these inferior far beneath me set?
 Among unequals what society
 Can sort, what harmony or delight?
 Which must be mutual, in proportion due
 Given and received; but in disparity
 The one intense, the other still remiss
 Cannot well suit with either, but soon prove
 Tedious alike: of fellowship I speak
 Such as I seek, fit to participate
 All rational delight. . . .

In discussing the manners of women, therefore, let us set aside sensual arguments and work out what we should try to make women in order to co-operate, if the expression isn't too bold, with God.

The sense of the word 'education' isn't precisely defined, so I should explain: by 'individual education' I mean

The kind of attention to a child that will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temperament, regulate the passions as they begin to bubble up, and set the understanding to work before the body reaches maturity; so that the ·fully mature· man will only have to •continue the important task of learning to think and reason, rather than .having to •start it.

I don't believe that a private education can work the wonders that some optimistic writers have attributed to it. [This topic will be extensively discussed in chapter 12.] Men and women must be educated to a large extent 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 everything along with it, giving to that age a family character, so to speak. So it's reasonable to conclude that until society is differently constituted, not much can be expected from education. All

I need for my present purpose, however, is this: Whatever effect circumstances have on people's abilities, everyone *can* become virtuous by the exercise of his or her [see Glossary] own reason; for if just one being was *created* with vicious inclinations—i.e. was created positively bad—what could save us from atheism? or if we worshipped a god, wouldn't we be worshipping a devil?

So the most perfect education, in my opinion, is the use of the understanding in the way that is most likely to strengthen the body and form the heart—i.e. to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render him or her independent. To describe as 'virtuous' anyone whose virtues don't result from the exercise of his or her own reason is a farce. This was Rousseau's opinion regarding men: I extend it to women. . . . Still, the royal homage that •women receive is so intoxicating that, until manners in general come to be formed on more reasonable principles, it may be impossible to convince •them that

- the illegitimate power that they get by degrading themselves is a *curse*, and that
- if they want to enjoy the peaceful satisfaction that unsophisticated affections impart, they must return to nature and equality.

But for the present age we must wait until kings and nobles, enlightened by reason and preferring the real dignity of man to ·their present· childish state, throw off their gaudy hereditary trappings. If that happens and women still don't resign the arbitrary power of beauty, they'll be showing that they have *less* mind than man. At the risk of seeming arrogant, I must declare my firm belief that

Everyone who has have written about female education and manners, from Rousseau to Dr Gregory, has helped to make women •more artificial, weaker characters than they would otherwise have been; and

consequently •more useless members of society. I could have expressed this conviction in a lower key; but that would have been an insincere whine and not the faithful expression of my feelings—of the clear conclusion that experience and reflection have led me to draw. When I come to the right place for that I'll discuss the passages that I especially disapprove of in the works of the authors I have just mentioned [chapter 5]; but *this* is the right place to remark that I object not just to isolated passages but to the whole purport of those books, which I think tend to degrade one half of the human species, and make women pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue.

Reasoning on Rousseau's premises, we could say this:

If man did achieve a degree of perfection of mind when his body arrived at maturity, it might be proper—so as to make a man and his wife *one*—that she should rely entirely on his understanding. Then the graceful female ivy, clasping the male oak that supported it, would form a whole in which strength and beauty would be equally conspicuous.

But alas! husbands as well as their wives are often only overgrown children; indeed, thanks to early debauchery they are hardly grown men in their outward form. We don't need a messenger angel from heaven to tell us what happens when the blind lead the blind.

In the present corrupt state of society many causes collaborate to enslave women by cramping their understandings and sharpening their senses. One that silently does more harm than all the rest, perhaps, is their disregard of order.

Do everything in an orderly manner is a most important precept, but women, who in general; receive only a disorderly kind of education [see the account of education on page 14], seldom attend to it with as much exactness as men do, because men are from their infancy are broken into method. This negligent

kind of guesswork prevents women from generalizing matters of fact [the meaning of this will become clear in the next paragraph], so what they did yesterday they do again today, merely because they did it yesterday. Guesswork? Well, isn't that the right word for the random exertions of a sort of instinctive common sense, never brought to the test of reason?

This off-hand neglect of the understanding in early life has worse consequences than is commonly supposed. The little knowledge acquired by women with strong minds is, for various reasons, more random and episodic than the knowledge of men; it is acquired more by •sheer observations of real life than from •relating individual observations to the results of experience generalized by theorizing. . . . What women learn they learn by snatches; and—because learning for them is in general only a secondary thing—they don't pursue any one branch of learning with the persevering eagerness that is needed to give vigour to the faculties and clarity to the judgment. In the present state of society, a little learning is required to support the character of a gentleman; and boys are obliged to submit to a few years of intellectual discipline. But in the education of women the development of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquiring of some physical accomplishment; [and yet, MW continues, on the physical side women don't acquire the best kind of grace and beauty, being barred from it by 'confinement and false notions of modesty'. She seems to be thinking of something like the grace and beauty of an accomplished female athlete.]. . . . Having no serious scientific study, if women have natural soundness of judgment it is turned too soon onto life and manners. They dwell on effects. . . .without tracing them back to causes; and complicated rules to adjust behaviour are a weak substitute for simple principles.

As a proof that education gives females this appearance of weakness, consider the example of military men, who are

(as women are) sent into the world before their minds have been stored with knowledge or strengthened by principles. The results are similar:

Soldiers acquire a little superficial knowledge, snatched from the muddy current of conversation; and by continually mixing with society they gain what is termed 'knowledge of the world'.

(This acquaintance with manners and customs has often been confused with •knowledge of the human heart. But that •honourable label can't be deserved by the crude fruit of casual observation, never brought to the test of judgment based on combining experience with theory.) When the education has been the same, where is the difference between the sexes? The only difference I can see comes from the fact that soldiers are free to see more of life than women are. . . .

Standing armies can never consist of resolute, robust men; they may be well disciplined machines but they will seldom contain men moved by strong passions or with very vigorous faculties. And depth of understanding isn't found in an army more often than it is found among women; and the cause is the same. Furthermore, officers are also particularly attentive to their persons [see Glossary], and fond of dancing, crowded rooms, adventures, and mockery. As with the 'fair' sex, the business of their lives is *gallantry*. They were taught to please, and they only live to please. Yet they. . . .are still regarded as superior to women, though it is hard to discover what their superiority consists in other than what I have just mentioned.

The great misfortune is that they both acquire •manners before •morals, and •a knowledge of life before reflection gives them •an acquaintance with the grand ideal outline of human nature. It naturally follows that they, satisfied with common nature, become a prey to prejudices, and blindly submit to authority, simply believing what they are told. If

they have any sense, it is a kind of instinctive fast uptake of social situations; but this fails when opinions are to be analysed or arguments are to be pursued below the surface.

. . . .Riches and hereditary honours have made cyphers of women. . . .and idleness has produced a mixture of gallantry and despotism in society, which leads men who are slaves of their mistresses to tyrannize over their sisters, wives, and daughters. . . . Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it and that will bring an end to blind obedience; but because blind obedience is always sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are right to try to keep women in the dark: the tyrants only want slaves, and the sensualists only want toys. In fact, sensualists have been the most dangerous tyrants, and women have been duped by their lovers, as princes are by their ministers, while dreaming that they reigned over them!

I am principally thinking of Rousseau, •and specifically of his work on education entitled *Émile*. His character Sophie •in that book• is a captivating one, no doubt, though it strikes me as grossly unnatural; but what I am planning to attack is not the superstructure but the foundation of her character, the principles on which her education was built. Warmly as I admire the genius [see Glossary] of that able writer. . . ., indignation always takes place of admiration when I read his voluptuous [see Glossary] day-dreams. Is *this* the man who in his ardour for virtue wants to banish all the soft arts of peace and almost carry us back to Spartan discipline? Is *this* the man who loves to portray the useful struggles of passion, the triumphs of good dispositions, and the heroic flights that carry the glowing soul out of itself? How are these mighty sentiments lowered when he describes the prettyfoot and enticing airs of his little favourite! [That sentence is verbatim MW.] But I'll set that aside for just now, and. . . .merely remark that whoever has cast a benevolent eye on society must

often have been gratified by the sight of humble mutual love, not dignified by sentiment or strengthened by a union in intellectual pursuits. The domestic trifles of the day have provided material for cheerful conversation, and innocent caresses have softened toils which didn't require great exercise of mind or stretch of thought. But hasn't the sight of this middling happiness aroused more tenderness than respect? It is an emotion like what we feel when we see children are playing;⁴ whereas the contemplation of the noble struggles of suffering merit has created admiration and carried our thoughts to that world where sensation will give place to reason.

So women are to be considered either as •moral beings or as •so weak that they must be entirely subjected to the superior faculties of men.

Let us examine this question. Rousseau declares that a woman should never for a moment feel herself to be independent, that she should be •governed by fear to exercise her 'natural' cunning, and •made a coquettish slave in order to make her a more alluring object of desire, a 'sweeter' companion to man whenever he chooses to relax himself. He carries his arguments (which he claims to infer from the indications of *nature*) still further, and indicates 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 great lesson which ought to be impressed •on the woman• with unrelenting rigour.

What nonsense! When will a great man arise with enough strength of mind to puff away the fumes that pride and sensuality have thus spread over the subject? If women are by nature *inferior* to men, their virtues must be •comparable

with men's, meaning that they must be the same in quality if not in degree. . . .; so their conduct should be based on the same principles as men's conduct, and should have the same aim.

Connected with man as daughters, wives, and mothers, the moral character of women may be judged by how they fulfill those simple duties; but the great *end* of their exertions should be to develop their own faculties and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue. They may try to make their road pleasant; but they should never forget, as men do, that *life* doesn't yield the happiness that can satisfy an immortal soul. I don't mean to imply 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 indeed the means appointed to produce the fruit of life; on the contrary, I warmly recommend them even while I say that they give most satisfaction when they are considered in their true subordinate light. [These 'affections and duties' are presumably ones relating to sexual intercourse, the 'appointed means' to continuing the species.]

The dominant opinion that woman was created for man may have been inferred from Moses's poetical story; but presumably very few who have *thought* about the subject ever believed that Eve was literally one of Adam's ribs; so that inference must be dropped—or be admitted only as proving from the remotest antiquity man 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 she as well as the lower animals was created to do his pleasure.

Don't think I that I want to invert the order of things. I have already conceded that the constitution of men's bodies

⁴ Milton's pleasing picture of •paradisiacal happiness has always raised similar feelings in me; but instead of envying the lovely pair, I have with conscious dignity (or satanic pride!) turned to •hell for more sublime things to think about. . . .

(I'm speaking collectively of the whole sex) seem to indicate that God designed them to attain a greater degree of virtue [see Glossary] than women. But I don't see the faintest reason to conclude that their virtues are different *in kind* from women's. How *could* they be. if virtue has only one eternal standard? If I am to be consistent in my reasoning, therefore, I must put as much energy into maintaining with regard to male virtue and female virtue that they have the same simple direction as I put into maintaining that there is a God.

It follows from this that I mustn't set up a contrast between

- female cunning and male wisdom,
- little female cares and great male exertions, or
- insipid female softness (varnished over with the label 'gentleness') and the male fortitude that can only be inspired by grand views.

I shall be told that if women aimed at the same virtues as men, woman would then lose many of her special graces; and the line I am taking here might be attacked by quoting from a well-known poet—Alexander Pope, who has said on behalf of the whole male sex:

Yet ne'er so sure our passions to create,
As when she touch'd the brink of all we hate.

I'll leave it to you to decide in what light this joke places men and women; and in the meanwhile I'll content myself with remarking that I can't discover why females should always be degraded by being made subservient to love or lust, unless they are mortal [see Glossary].

Yes, yes—speaking disrespectfully of love is committing high treason against sentiment and fine feelings! But I want to speak the simple language of truth, addressing the head rather than the heart. To try to reason love out of the

world would be pointless and contrary to common sense; but it appears less wild to try—as I shall—to restrain this tumultuous passion, and to prove that it shouldn't be allowed to dethrone superior powers or grab the sceptre [see Glossary] that should always be wielded, coolly, by the understanding.

Youth is the season for love in both sexes; but in those days of thoughtless enjoyment one should prepare for the more important years of life when reflection takes place of sensation. [MW was 33 years old when this was published.] But Rousseau and most of his male followers have strongly maintained that the whole tendency of female education ought to be directed towards one goal—to make women pleasing.

If you support that opinion, let me reason with you. Do you imagine that marriage can eradicate the habits of life? The woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her charms are oblique sun-beams, and that they can't have much effect on her husband's heart when he sees them every day and when the summer of her physical beauty is past and gone. When that happens, she may

have enough energy to look into herself for comfort,
and cultivate the faculties she has idled;
or she may instead
try to please other men, and try in the emotions raised
by the expectation of new conquests to forget how her
love or pride has been humiliated.

Which do you think is more likely? When the husband has stopped being a lover—and that time will inevitably come—her desire to please will weaken, or become a spring of bitterness; and love, perhaps the least durable of all the passions, will give place to jealousy or vanity.

Now think about women who are restrained by principle or prejudice. *They* would shrink from an intrigue [= 'an

extra-marital affair'] with real abhorrence, but play with the idea because they want to be convinced by the homage of gallantry that they are cruelly neglected by their husbands; or they spend days and weeks dreaming of the happiness enjoyed by souls in harmony, until their health is undermined and their spirits broken by discontent. If that is right, then how can it have been so necessary for them to study the great art of pleasing? It is useful only to a mistress; the chaste wife and serious mother should regard her power to please as merely the polish of her virtues, and the affection of her husband as merely one of the comforts that make her task less difficult and her life happier. But whether she is loved or neglected, her first wish should be to make herself worthy of respect, and not rely for all her happiness on a being who is subject to infirmities like her own!

The amiable Dr. Gregory fell into a similar error. I respect his heart, but entirely disapprove of his celebrated *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*.

He advises them to develop a fondness for dress, because this, he says, is 'natural' to them. I can't understand what he or Rousseau mean in their frequent uses of the vague word 'natural'. If they told us that the soul before birth was fond of dress and brought this inclination with it into a new body, I would listen to them with a half smile, as I often do when I hear someone pontificating about 'innate elegance'. But if Gregory meant to say only that using one's faculties will give one this fondness for dress, I deny it. It is not natural: it arises, like false ambition in men, from a love of power.

[MW reports and scornfully rejects Gregory's recommendation to his daughters that they be careful to hold down any feeling that might lead them to be too vigorous in dancing, because that might give men a wrong impression. She concludes:] I hope that no sensible mother will restrain

the natural frankness of youth by instilling such indecent cautions. . . .

Women ought to try to purify their hearts; but can they do so when their undeveloped understandings make them entirely dependent on their senses for occupation and amusement [see Glossary], when no noble undertaking raises them above the day's little vanities or enables them to curb the wild emotions that agitate a reed over which every passing breeze has power?

To gain the affections of a virtuous man, is affectation necessary? [In that sentence 'affectation' means 'pretence about what one's actual feelings are'.] Nature has given woman a weaker body than man; but to ensure her husband's affections must a wife lower herself to pretending to be sickly and delicate, in order to secure her husband's affection? It very often really is pretending, on the part of a wife who, by the exercise of her mind and body while she was discharging the duties of a daughter, wife, and mother, has allowed her constitution to retain its natural strength and her nerves a healthy tone.

Weakness may excite tenderness, and gratify the arrogant pride of man; but the lordly caresses of a protector won't please a noble mind that is panting for respect and deserves to have it. Fondness is a poor substitute for friendship!

In a seraglio, I admit, all these arts are necessary [and she develops this thought through a paragraph that doesn't add to the content of the chapter. It repeats that someone who could settle for such a life cannot be one who 'has an immortal soul'.]

Besides, the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practising various virtues, become the friend, and not the humble dependent, of her husband; and if she deserves his respect by having such solid qualities, she won't find that she needs to conceal her affection or pretend to an unnatural coldness

of constitution [meaning 'pretend to have little interest in sex'] to excite her husband's passions. Look at history and you'll find that the women who have distinguished themselves haven't been the most beautiful or the most gentle of their sex.

Nature—or, to speak more accurately, God—has made all things right; but man has devised many inventions to spoil God's work. I'm referring to the part of Dr. Gregory's book where he advises a wife never to let her husband know the extent of her sensibility or affection. . . . That is as ineffectual as it is absurd! By its very nature love must be transitory. Searching for a secret that would make it constant is as wild as searching for the philosopher's stone ·that can turn lead into gold· or the grand panacea [that can cure every disease]; and if the search succeeded ·and something was discovered that would make love constant·, that would be useless, or rather *pernicious*, to mankind. The most holy tie of society is friendship. The shrewd satirist ·La Rochefoucauld· was right when he said that 'rare as true love is, true friendship is still rarer'.

This is an obvious truth, and the reason for it is easy to find, because it doesn't lie deep.

Love, the common passion, in which
 chance replaces choice, and
 sensation replaces reason,
 is felt to some degree by everyone. (I am not talking here about emotions that rise above love, or ones that sink below it.) This passion, naturally increased by suspense and difficulties, draws the mind out of its usual state and exalts the affections; but the fever of love is allowed to subside by the security of marriage—its release from the kinds of suspense and difficulties that occur in a love affair·. The only people who find a healthy temperature insipid are ones who don't have enough intellect to substitute

- the calm tenderness of friendship for blind admiration, and
- the confidence of respect for the emotions of foolish sensuality.

This is the course of nature; it *has* to be; love is inevitably followed by either friendship or indifference. And this state of affairs seems to harmonize perfectly with the way things go generally in the moral world. Passions are spurs to action, and open the mind; but when the object has been gained and the satisfied mind relaxes in enjoyment, the passions sink to the level of mere appetites, a matter of momentary personal gratification. The man who had some virtue while he was struggling for a crown often becomes a voluptuous tyrant when he is wearing it; and when the lover continues to exist in the husband the result is a foolish old man who

- is a prey to childish whims and foolish jealousies, and
- neglects the serious duties of life, and by whom
- the caresses that should arouse confidence in his children are lavished on the overgrown child, his wife.

In order to fulfil the duties of life, and to be able to pursue with vigour the various employments that form the moral character, a master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with passion. I mean that they ought not to indulge emotions that disturb the order of society and engross the thoughts that should be otherwise employed. A mind that has never been absorbed by one object lacks vigour; a mind that can be thus obsessed for a long time is ·downright· weak.

. . . I haven't the faintest thought of producing a paradox when I say: An unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and a neglected wife is in general the best mother. This would almost always be the case if the female mind were more enlarged; ·let me explain why·.

God's plans seem to have ruled that, in most cases, what we gain in present enjoyment is to be deducted from our experience, which is the ·true· treasure of life; and that when we are gathering the flowers of the day and revelling in pleasure, the solid fruit of toil and wisdom is not to be caught at the same time. The road forks here; we must go to the right or to the left; and someone who spends his life bounding from one pleasure to another mustn't complain if he acquires neither wisdom nor a character worthy of respect.

* * * * *

[The preparer of this version is defeated by the following paragraph—not by its individual episodes but by how it meant to hang together. So it is passed on to you exactly as Mary Wollstonecraft wrote it. Good Luck!]

Supposing, for a moment, that the soul is not immortal, and that man was only created for the present scene,—I think we should have reason to complain that love, infantine fondness, ever grew insipid and palled upon the sense. Let us eat, drink, and love, for to-morrow we die, would be, in fact, the language of reason, the morality of life; and who but a fool would part with a reality for a fleeting shadow? But, if awed by observing the improvable powers of the mind, we disdain to confine our wishes or thoughts to such a comparatively mean field of action, that only appears grand and important, as it is connected with a boundless prospect and sublime hopes, what necessity is there for falsehood in conduct, and why must the sacred majesty of truth be violated to detain a deceitful good that saps the very foundation of virtue? Why must the female mind be tainted by coquettish arts to gratify the sensualist, and prevent love from subsiding into friendship, or compassionate tenderness, when there are not qualities on which friendship can be built? Let the honest heart show itself, and *reason* teach passion to submit to

necessity; or, let the dignified pursuit of virtue and knowledge raise the mind above those emotions which rather embitter than sweeten the cup of life, when they are not restrained within due bounds.

* * * * *

I'm not talking about the romantic passion that is the concomitant of genius. Who can clip its wings? But that grand passion is out of proportion to the little enjoyments of life; what it is true to is only *itself*, what it feeds on is only itself. The passions that have been celebrated for their durability have always been unfortunate. They have been strengthened by absence and by constitutional melancholy. The imagination has hovered round a dimly seen form of beauty; familiarity with it might have turned admiration into disgust—or at least into indifference—and freed the imagination to start fresh game [= 'flush out new foxes or deer or hares to hunt']. According to this view of things, it is perfectly proper for Rousseau to make the heroine of his novel *Julie* love her tutor when life was fading before her; but this is no proof of the immortality of the passion.

Of the same sort is Gregory's advice regarding delicacy of sentiment. He advises a woman not to acquire sentiment if she intends to marry. This intention is perfectly consistent with his former advice, but here he calls sentiment 'indelicate' and earnestly persuades his daughters to conceal it even if it governs their conduct—as if it were *indelicate* to have the common appetites of human nature!

Noble morality! and consistent with the cautious prudence of a little soul that can't look further than the present tiny fraction of ·our· existence [i.e. the part that concerns life before death, whose extent is tiny compared with the eternal life that awaits us after death]. •If all the faculties of woman's mind are to be cultivated only with respect to her dependence on man; if

when she gets a husband she has reached her goal and. . . is satisfied with such a trivial crown, let her contentedly grovel in the dirt, scarcely raised by her employments above the lower animals. But •if she is struggling for the prize of her high calling [presumably meaning God's giving her the task of becoming as virtuous as possible], let her look beyond the present scene, let her develop her understanding without stopping to consider what the husband she is going to marry will be like. If she resolves to acquire the qualities that ennoble a rational being, without being too anxious about present happiness, a rough, inelegant husband may shock her taste but he won't destroy her peace of mind. She will model her soul not •to make it fit with her companion's frailties but • to enable it to put up with them. His character may be a trial, but it won't be an impediment to virtue.

If Gregory meant to be talking only about romantic expectations of constant love and congenial feelings, he should have remembered that •such expectations exist only when the imagination is kept alive at the expense of reason, that •advice can never make them go away, but that •experience can do so.

I admit that many women who have developed in themselves a romantic unnatural delicacy of feeling have wasted their lives in *imagining* how happy they would have been with a husband who could love them with intense and increasing affection all day every day. But they might as well lament married as lament single; they wouldn't be a jot more unhappy with a bad husband than they are longing for a good one. I agree that a proper education—or, more accurately, a well-stocked mind—would enable a woman to live unmarried with dignity; but what if she avoids cultivating her taste in case her future husband if she comes to have one should occasionally shock it? That is quitting a substance for a shadow! The fact is that I don't know what use an improved

taste is if it's not to make the individual more independent of life's disasters, and to open up new sources of enjoyment that depend only on the solitary operations of the mind.

People of taste (whether married or single, it makes no difference) will always be disgusted by various things that have no effect on less observant minds; but that fact on its own mustn't be allowed to disqualify taste. The question is: *in the whole sum of enjoyment* is taste to be counted as a blessing? Does taste procure more pain or more pleasure? The answer will settle whether Gregory's advice was good, and will show how absurd and tyrannical it is to lay down a system of slavery as he does, or to try to educate moral beings by any rules other than those deduced from pure reason, which apply to the whole species.

Gentleness of manners, forbearance, and long-suffering are such lovable godlike qualities that high-flying poetry has attributed them to God; and there may be no representation of his goodness that fastens on the human affections as strongly as those that represent him abundant in mercy and willing to pardon. Looked at this point of view, gentleness has all the marks of grandeur combined with the winning graces of kindness towards subordinates; but how different gentleness looks when it is the submissive manner of a dependent, the support of weakness that loves because it needs protection, and is forbearing because it must silently endure injuries, smiling under the lash at which it doesn't dare to snarl! This picture of degradation is the portrait of an accomplished [see Glossary] woman, according to the received opinion of female excellence as something different. . . .from human excellence. Or they (for example Rousseau and Swedenborg) kindly give Adam back his rib, making one moral being of a man and woman, and not forgetting to give her all the 'submissive charms' [that is a phrase from Milton].

We aren't told how women are to exist in a state of affairs where there is no marriage. Moralists have agreed that the tenor of life seems to prove that *man* is prepared by various circumstances for a future state, but they are unanimous in advising *woman* to provide only for the present. Gentleness, docility [see Glossary], and spaniel-like affection are consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex; and one writer. . . . has declared that it is 'masculine' for a woman to be sad. She was created to be the man's toy, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever he dismisses reason and chooses to be amused.

It is absolutely correct to recommend gentleness in a general way. A frail being—and all humans *are* frail—should try to be gentle. But when forbearance confuses right with wrong, it stops being a virtue. It may be found agreeable in a companion, but that companion will always be regarded as an inferior, and will inspire only a flat and lifeless tenderness which easily degenerates into contempt. Still, if advice really could make gentle a being to whom such a fine polish isn't natural, that would move things on a little in the direction of true morality; but it's easy to show that what such advice actually produces is affectation, pretence, which puts a stumbling block in the way of personal improvement, so that the *female* sex gets little benefit from sacrificing solid virtues to the acquiring of superficial graces, even if for a few years these graces give the individual a great deal of power.

As a philosopher, I read with indignation the nice-sounding descriptions that men use to soften their insults; and as a moralist, I ask what they mean by such oxymorons as 'fair defects', 'amiable weaknesses' and so on. [In *Paradise Lost* Eve is called a 'fair defect'.] If there is only one criterion of morals for men, only one model for them to follow, women seem to be suspended by destiny. . . .: they don't have the

unerring instinct of the lower animals, but nor are they 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'.

Look at this topic now from a different angle. Do passive idle women make the best wives? ·Never mind the after-life just now·; let us confine our discussion to the present moment of existence, and ask: How well do such weak creatures perform their part? Do the women who by attaining a few superficial accomplishments have strengthened the common prejudice ·regarding women· contribute only to the happiness of ·their husbands? Do they display their charms merely to entertain themselves? And do women who were brought up on notions of passive obedience have enough character to manage a family or educate children? So far from it that after surveying the history of woman I can't help agreeing with the severest satirist who regards the *female* sex as the weaker as well as the more oppressed half of the species. What does history reveal except marks of inferiority? How many women have freed themselves from the humiliating yoke of sovereign man? So few that the exceptions remind me of the ingenious conjecture that Newton was probably a being of a superior order, accidentally caged in a human body! Following that line of thought I have been led to imagine that the few extraordinary women who have rushed in various directions out of the orbit prescribed to their sex were *male* ·spirits confined by mistake in a female body. But if it isn't philosophical to think of sex when the ·soul is mentioned, the inferiority ·of women· must depend on the organs, or else the heavenly fire that makes the clay develop isn't distributed in equal portions.

I am continuing to avoid any direct comparison between the two sexes collectively; I do frankly acknowledge the inferiority of woman according to the present appearance of

things. And I insist that men have increased that inferiority until 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. But don't forget that for a small number of distinguished women I do not ask for a place [= 'a place on that scale'].

It's hard for us dim-sighted mortals to say what height human discoveries and improvements may arrive at when we are freed from the gloom of despotism that makes us stumble at every step. But there's one prediction I am willing to make without being gifted with a prophetic spirit: it is that when morality is settled on a more solid basis, woman will be either man's friend or his slave. There will be no question, as there is now, as to whether she is a moral agent or ·rather· the link that unites man with the lower animals. And if it does then turn out that like the lower animals women were principally created for the use of man, he will let them patiently bite the bridle [= 'leave them to *put up with* their servitude] and not mock them with empty praise; and if ·on the other hand· their rationality comes to be proved, man won't impede their improvement merely to gratify his sensual appetites. He won't use all the graces of rhetoric to persuade them to submit their understandings uncritically to the guidance of man. He won't, when discussing the education of women, assert that they ought never to have the free use of reason. . . .

Surely there can be only one rule of right, if morality has an eternal foundation; and whoever sacrifices virtue—strictly so-called—to present convenience. . . . lives only for the passing day and can't be an accountable [= 'morally responsible'] creature.

·If that is the category into which women belong·, then the poet ·Matthew Prior· should have dropped his sneer when

he wrote 'If weak women go astray, / The stars are more in fault than they.' Why? Because ·if women are like that, then what he says about them is simply *true* and not a fit topic for sneering sarcasm·. If it comes to be proved that women will never

- exercise their own reason,
- be independent,
- rise above opinion,
- feel the dignity of a rational will that •bows only to God and •often forgets that the universe contains any being but itself and God

then quite certainly they *are* bound by the unbreakable chain of destiny. [Let it be confessed that the final 'God' in the above indented passage replaces 'the model of perfection to which its ardent gaze is turned, to adore attributes that, softened into virtues, may be imitated in kind, though the degree overwhelms the enraptured mind'.]

I am proceeding by argument. I'm not willing to impress by rhetoric when reason offers her sober light. [This is the first time in this work that MW has treated reason as female. There are two others, on pages 32 and 65.] If women are really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves, or like lower animals who depend on the reason of man when they associate with him. Instead, develop their minds, give them the salutary, sublime curb of *principle*, and let them attain conscious dignity by feeling that they depend only on God. Teach them in common with man to submit to necessity, instead of trying to make them more pleasing by giving a sex [see Glossary] to morals.

And if it turns out that they can't reach the same degree of strength of mind, perseverance and fortitude ·as men can·, let their virtues be the same in •kind ·as men's· although they can't be the same in degree. And man's superiority will be equally clear, if not clearer; and truth. . . . would be common to both. This wouldn't invert the order of society

as it is now. because woman would then have only the rank that reason assigned to her, and she couldn't employ her skills to level the balance, let alone to make it swing the other way.

These may be called 'utopian' dreams, but I shan't be deterred by that. I give thanks to the Being who impressed them on my soul, and gave me enough strength of mind to dare to employ my own reason until—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 doesn't reign over me unless I owe homage to the reason of an individual; and even if I do, what I am submitting to is •reason, not to •man. In fact, the behaviour of a •morally• accountable being must be regulated by the operations of his or her own reason—if that is wrong, what foundation does the throne of God rest on?

It seems to me that I have to dwell on these obvious truths because females have been insulted, as it were; stripped of the virtues that should clothe humanity, they have been decked out with artificial graces that enable them to be tyrants for a little time. Because in them love takes the place every nobler passion, their sole ambition is to be beautiful, 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 are slaves by their very constitution, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must always languish like exotics, and be regarded as beautiful flaws in nature.

The argument about the subjection in which the sex has always been held can be turned back on man. [She means the argument from 'prescription'; see Glossary, and see also the end of this paragraph.] The many have always been subject to the few; and monsters who have shown almost no perception of human excellence, have tyrannized over thousands of their fellow creatures. Why have men with superior gifts submitted to such degradation? Doesn't everyone know that kings, taken as a whole, have always been inferior in abilities and virtue to the same number of men taken from the common mass of mankind? Yet haven't they been—and aren't they still—treated with a degree of reverence that is an insult to reason? China isn't the only country where a living man has been made a God. *Men* have submitted to superior strength so as to enjoy with impunity the pleasure of the moment, and *women* have only done the same. Therefore until it is proved that the courtier who servilely gives up his birthright as a man is not a moral agent, it can't be argued that woman is essentially inferior to man because she has always been subjugated. . . .